

## **Sunday School Notes: Saul discovers that God forgives**

Little children have lots to learn. Among them is learning to use the word “Sorry”. At first they don’t know what it means – and will just say it as a habit. Then at some stage they will discover that it needs to be said when they do something rude or wrong.

Sometimes though what has been done is so horrible that people say they will never forgive another person. Fortunately that is never true of God. Even when people killed his Son, he forgave/ pardoned them. God never stopped loving them, even though they hurt him and made him angry.

Today’s friend discovered that because he made some pretty bad decisions.

The first time he was noticed by the Christians was when he was part of a mob! True, he wasn’t one of the howling maniacs; he wasn’t a stone-thrower; he didn’t actually help to murder. But he was there, making it easy for the mob to get on with the hot work of throwing stones. He looked after their coats while they got on with the dirty work of killing a young man (Stephen) whose only crime was that he loved Jesus. And this man went home, pleased with the day’s work!

So pleased, in fact, that he wanted to see more Christians killed. In the following weeks he used his contacts to get letters which gave him permission to capture and lock up the Christians in different towns. When Christians heard that he was coming to their town, they knew that things were going to get tough.

On the day this man was on his way to Damascus, God stopped him in his tracks. Suddenly he was surrounded by a bright light. He fell down and heard a voice asking, “Why are you persecuting me, Saul?” All at once Saul knew that this was real; this was no dream or hallucination. Lying there with his eyes covered, he realised that this was Jesus speaking to him. When he tried to get up he couldn’t see anything.

Everything had changed. Instead of entering Damascus arrogantly, he staggered in led by his companions! Instead of spending his days rounding up Christians, he spent 3 days fasting! Instead of patting himself on the back for being such a good servant of God, he discovered that he had made a terrible mistake. The people he had been persecuting had been right after all! Ironically, they had seen the Light without seeing a light! Now that he was blind, he could see it all clearly!! He had met the risen Christ.

He was so convinced that, after he had been healed by one of the leading Christians, Ananias, he argued powerfully in the synagogue that Jesus was God. Imagine how furious the leaders there must have been. They’d been looking forward to his helping them to arrest Christians and now he was the biggest pain of the lot! He even changed his name from Saul to Paul!

The Christians learnt that God had pardoned him and, in time, he would become one of the most important leaders of the new church. In fact, he wrote a huge chunk of the Bible. But Paul never forgot that God had ‘pardoned’ him. That’s why he often talks about God’s grace. ‘Grace’ means to be given something we don’t deserve.

I picture Paul, shaking his head utterly amazed (see Acts 22:17-20) as he talked about what had happened to him. He called himself “the least of the saints” (Eph 3:8) and marvelled that God had pardoned his terrible actions.

Like every other friends of God, he was not perfect. Yet God offered him pardon and friendship.

We will never be able to understand how it is that God demands perfection and yet that he loves to pardon. It sounds weird! But we aren’t God, so we can’t think like he does. Wonderfully that needn’t stop us knowing that God forgives sin, over and over again.

There is only one problem. If we don’t learn to say sorry, we probably won’t be forgiven. The Bible reminds us that we have to ‘confess our sin’ so that he can ‘forgive us our sin’. (1 John 1:9)

This is pretty serious stuff. We can’t just say “Oh well, God will always forgive me or God always loves everybody.” We can only experience God’s love when we admit that we have messed up and ask God to forgive us.