

Have you ever heard of a man named Mitsuo Fuchida? Fuchida was born in 1902 in Katsuragi, Japan, and as a child he dreamed of being a hero, like the mighty samurai warriors of old. Fuchida had a burning love for his country and an equally burning hatred for Americans and the way they had treated Asians in the early 1900s.

He graduated from the military academy at the age of 21 and became a pilot in Japan’s Air Force. By 1941, he had become the most experienced pilot in Japan. So, when the Japanese government hatched the plan to attack Pearl Harbor, they chose Fuchida to lead it. It was his voice that radioed the battle cry, "Tora! Tora! Tora!" (‘Tora’ meaning tiger). He wrote later, *"Like a hurricane out of nowhere, my torpedo planes, dive bombers and fighters struck suddenly with indescribable fury. As smoke began to billow and the proud battleships, one by one, started tilting, my heart was almost ablaze with joy."* Fuchida was elated at the success, but when he returned to base, he learned that of the 70 officers who were involved in the battle, he was the only one to survive.

He saw much more action, but at the Battle of Midway he was confined to the sick bay with a bout of appendicitis. He could hear the battle raging around the ship and left his bed to help up on deck. He later found out that the sick bay had taken a direct hit and everyone there was killed.

In 1945 he was attending a military conference in Hiroshima but was called back to Navy headquarters in Tokyo. Only hours later the atomic bomb was dropped and everyone in the military complex died. He wrote, "When the war ended several days later, my country was defeated and I was devastated. Bitterness and hatred filled my heart. Once a proud warrior, I now had to turn to farming to make a living." He was discouraged and disillusioned.

One day as Fuchida got off the train in a Tokyo Station, he saw an American distributing literature. He took one of the leaflets entitled *'I Was a Prisoner of Japan'* - it was printed by a Christian organization. The leaflet was written by Jake DeShazer, an American pilot whose life had also been filled with hatred because of the war. He admitted he had enjoyed taking revenge on the Japanese as he bombed Tokyo.

After the air raid he had to bail out and ended up a prisoner of war. He was treated with intense cruelty, and this only fueled his hatred of the Japanese. After two years of confinement his captors allowed one Bible to enter the POW camp. The Bible circulated around the camp and after six months a guard brought it to his cell, telling him he could have it for three weeks. He read and read and eventually came to understand that the book was more than an historical classic. Its message came alive to DeShazer right there in his cell, and he realized that the Jesus of the Bible was his Savior. When his three weeks were almost up, he read again Romans 10:9—*'If you confess with your mouth, "Jesus is Lord," and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved.'*

‘I do believe!’ DeShazer declared. He prayed, ‘Lord, though I am far from home and though I am in prison, I must have forgiveness.’ He continued to pray until he was filled with inner peace

and joy. His dirty cell and the abuse no longer held any horror. Death held no threat. Though a prisoner, he was a free man.

Fuchida read about this man's experience and wanted to know more. He came from a traditional Buddhist background and had always thought of Christianity as a western religion. Fuchida recalls, 'A few days later again at the train station, a Japanese man was handing out books. I couldn't believe it when he cried, 'Get your Bible - food for the soul!' I took one, and as I read, I was struck by Jesus' words in Luke 23:34, '*Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing.*' Jesus had died so I could be forgiven!" Fuchida describes the moment when he realized that Jesus had prayed for him on that Friday – Jesus did that for him even though he was responsible for the deaths of thousands of people during the war. 'On that day', Fuchida said, 'I became a new person. My complete view on life was changed by the intervention of the Christ I had always hated and ignored before.'

At this point, Jake DeShazer had returned to Japan, not as a pilot, but as a missionary. He spent much of his time telling how Jesus had turned his hatred and anger into love and compassion. He established a Christian Church in the same area that years before he had bombed.

And so, Fuchida knew what he needed to do. He located the church and paid a visit. Fuchida writes, 'I stood at the door trembling with anticipation. Jake DeShazer had been sharing the love of Jesus with the Japanese for several years now, but would he be able to forgive the one who had led the charge on Pearl Harbor? It was partly my fault that Jake had spent years as Japan's prisoner. Finally, I reached up and knocked on the door.

"Yes?" asked a kind-looking man.

"I have desired to meet you, Mr. DeShazer. My name is Mitsuo Fuchida."

'It took only a moment for him to recognize my name, and to my relief, a smile spread across his face. "Come in, come in." Through the love of Jesus, we former enemies embraced as brothers in Christ's love. God had brought peace not only to a war-weary world, but to the souls of two mortal enemies who had fought in it.'

Fuchida died in 1976. He said that he wanted to be remembered for his service to Jesus more than anything. He wrote, '*I can say today, without hesitation, that God's amazing grace has been set upon me.*'

Today's epistle lesson was written by a man who the earliest Christians would have thought of as a Mitsuo Fuchida-level villain. Before his dramatic conversion experience, Saul actively persecuted any Christians he could find. After his conversion, this was a real issue, which is something the apostle openly admits in many of his letters, spelling it out in Galatians 1, where he writes, "For you have heard of my former manner of life in Judaism, how I used to persecute the church of God beyond measure and tried to destroy it...I was still unknown by sight to the churches of Judea which were in Christ, but only, they kept hearing, "He who once persecuted us is now preaching the faith which he once tried to destroy." (Galatians 1: 13-23).

That story plays out also in Acts chapter 9, and it's quite understandable. Verse 21 says, "All who heard [Saul] were amazed and said, "is this not the man who made havoc in Jerusalem of

those who called upon [the name of Jesus]?” It wasn’t until an influential Christian named Barnabas vouched for Saul before the other apostles that the Christian community began to accept his conversion was real. Here was a man, like Fuchida and DeShazer, who had been aggressively militant, now acting as an agent of peace. A name he had once cursed was now a name he spoke in blessing. The people who heard him preach, “Jesus is the Son of God,” had a lot of questions. Rightly so.

None of this was lost on the man whose name shifted to Paul, in part to indicate the great change that had taken place in him. In his first letter to Timothy, he is in a reflective mood, telling his personal story once again. He writes, ¹² *I thank him who has given me strength, Christ Jesus our Lord, because he judged me faithful, appointing me to his service,* ¹³ *though formerly I was a blasphemer, persecutor, and insolent opponent. But I received mercy because I had acted ignorantly in unbelief,* ¹⁴ *and the grace of our Lord overflowed for me with the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus.*’

The change in Paul was met with suspicion at first by the early Christians. Even Fuchida’s friends could not believe that such a dramatic change could happen in a person’s life. But notice: people did see incredible change in the lives of these men – they had been changed from people filled with hate to advocates for the grace of God.

What created this total turnaround? Paul tells us, when he says, “I received mercy.” To receive mercy is to be released from a debt that you owed. It’s to know that you ought to face punishment, only to be told you’re free to go. How could Paul receive mercy? Because someone else was punished in his place. Someone switched places with Paul. That someone was Jesus. Likewise, Paul writes, ‘the grace of our Lord overflowed for me with the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus.’ If mercy is being released from a negative consequence, grace is being given a positive gift that you did not deserve--and could not earn. Paul was abundantly aware that his status as servant of Jesus was pure gift, made possible only by what His Savior had done for him on the cross. And so Paul continues, ¹⁵ *The saying is trustworthy and deserving of full acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, of whom I am the foremost.* The King James Version translates that last phrase as “...to save sinners, of whom I am chief.” This is the source of the hymn, “Chief of Sinners though I be, Jesus shed his blood for me.” Here we see the deep humility of faith. Paul wasn’t having a bad day or struggling with self-esteem. He was just being candid. He was willing to say that his attitudes and actions had created a wide chasm between Him and God, and that Jesus bridged the gap with His cross. God had closed the distance and had come and grabbed hold of Paul. And that was the only reason He had a new life to live. He was willing to talk about that with anyone.

Paul’s story—DeShazer’s story—Fuchida’s story—are true stories of the good news of Jesus in action. If you believe in the good news of Jesus, you will be encouraged and inspired by their stories. But there’s another story I really haven’t talked about yet, and that’s yours. When you hear Mitsuo Fuchida say, “Jesus prayed for me on Good Friday,” can you say, “me too”? When you hear Jake DeShazer say, “I do believe Jesus is the risen Lord,” and “I need his forgiveness,” do you join him in that confession? When Paul says, “Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, of whom I am the worst,” do you say, I don’t know Paul, I might give you a run for your money?” And if you answered yes to these questions, will you talk about how the enormous

sacrifice of Jesus is changing you, even now? There are people in your life who need to hear your story. Soon.

And if you answered “no” to those questions about Fuchida and DeShazer and Paul, I have a challenge and an invitation. The challenge is to reconsider what you think about Christian faith. You see, the good news about Jesus, the gospel, is not advice to make good people a little better. It is news that Jesus paid off your sin debt and came back to life for you. Jesus has not arrived in your life to make a few tweaks. He’s come to renovate; to tear out the old and replace it; to demolish the things that lead to death and destruction, and to build into you the things that are from Him. Faith. Wholeness. Sacrificial Love. The invitation is to see the need and to let God go to work.

This saying is trustworthy, and deserves your full acceptance: Jesus came to save sinners.