

New Message, New Community

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 29 July 2018

Preacher: James Ross

[0 : 00] A number of months ago, we looked in the mornings at the opening nine, well, eight and a bit chapters of Acts. So we're going to pick up for the next little while in the evening on the continuing story of Jesus building his church through the apostles.

But just to catch us up, if we were to summarize the first nine chapters, just in three words, we could maybe talk about the Spirit.

Because when you look at those early chapters, you see the Spirit on every page, in every important moment, the Spirit comes just like Jesus promised. And he comes and he empowers the witnesses, the disciples.

He enables them to speak of Jesus, to remember the things that Jesus taught. It's the Spirit that causes the gospel to spread. It's the Spirit that comes to people's hearts and points people to Jesus as Lord.

And so we see as the church begins to spread, the Spirit is central to that as promised by Jesus. So there's Spirit. There's also opposition that you can trace really clearly through the opening chapters of Acts.

[1 : 15] It's really soon after them receiving the Spirit and preaching at Pentecost that they are beginning to be imprisoned for their faith by the Jewish authorities.

Stephen becomes the first martyr, the deacon of the church, becomes the first martyr of the church. And what we see is that persecution and opposition is what ultimately pushes the church out beyond Jerusalem to Samaria and to the ends of the earth, which again is what Jesus said was to happen.

So there's the Spirit, there's the opposition, but also, we've said this already, there's kingdom.

There's kingdom growth. Whenever Jesus as Savior is preached, people are responding that the Spirit is active in drawing people to Jesus as Lord.

We saw that at Pentecost where 3,000 come to faith in one day. We see the kingdom expanding beyond the borders of Israel. And one of the things that the church in Jerusalem has to do is to figure out how they're going to deal with this new reality.

And we'll see that again in the coming weeks. And then we get to chapter 9 and Saul's conversion, which is really a huge moment in the book of Acts, because whereas I guess Peter was taking center stage, but with the conversion of Saul, he becomes central, as Roddy was praying, to the spread of the church, particularly to the non-Jewish world.

[2 : 43] But we saw the last time we were looking at it, the first half of chapter 9, he's a very surprising, to put it mildly, surprising convert to the Jewish faith, who becomes this spokesman of the church that he had previously been persecuting.

So Saul's story becomes evidence of the powerful grace of God that he's trying to communicate, that his words and his transformed life, they match.

We're actually going to see that next week in the story of Jonah. Paul would write to Timothy in 1 Timothy that God was pleased to show mercy to him as the chief of sinners.

And he really did believe that was true of him because he'd been persecuting the church of Jesus Christ. But now his life and message becomes hope for the world.

And so how does life change for him as a new Christian? It is something that's really interesting to see the kind of transformation that takes place. And that's where we find ourselves in Acts chapter 9, verse 20 to 31.

[3 : 53] We see a couple of things that change in Saul's life. Things that are true for any believer, new believer, mature Christian, things that are true for us.

That Saul all of a sudden is now living by a new message. And he also lives with and in a new community.

The community of the church. So we're going to think about those two things briefly together. First of all, let's think about this new message that Saul begins to communicate. So until a few days prior to what we've just read, Saul's life was controlled by hating Jesus, hating Jesus' church.

Determined to destroy the church of Jesus while it was still young before it had the chance to get going. But now, in the first part of Acts chapter 9, he meets with the risen Lord Jesus.

He has ascended to heaven and then come to him, revealed himself in all his glory. And Saul straight away acknowledges, recognizes that Jesus is Lord. And we see how that changes the way he communicates with the world.

[5 : 01] So in verse 20 of Acts chapter 9, it says, At once he began to preach in the synagogues that Jesus is the Son of God. Now, this is a huge statement for anyone to make.

It's a huge statement for a Jewish person to make. He would have grown up every day reciting this reality that the Lord is one, that there's only one God.

And now he worships Jesus as God. And it's even more shocking that Saul is instantly preaching Jesus as the Son of God.

Because before meeting Jesus for himself, he would have called Jesus a blasphemer. Someone who was making false claims about himself.

When Jesus claimed to be equal with God, when he claimed to be Savior, Saul would have considered him to be dishonoring God by making those kinds of claims. He would have called Jesus a liar.

[6 : 05] When he came claiming to be the only way to God and the Savior of the world. In fact, when Saul thought about the cross, he would have seen Jesus rightly dying under God's curse.

Because of the claims that he was making about himself. He would call the cross justice against a fake, against a dangerous pretender, leading people away from the true faith, from the Jewish faith. But then once Jesus reveals himself, once he comes face to face with Jesus, everything changes. It made me think of a quote that's fairly famous from C.S. Lewis.

As he wrote about the identity of Jesus. He said, A man who was merely a man and said the sort of things Jesus said would not be a great moral teacher.

He would either be a lunatic on the level with the man who says he is a poached egg. Or else he would be the devil of hell. You must make your choice. Yes, either this man was and is the son of God.

[7 : 13] Or else a madman or something worse. Now if we'd have spoken to Saul before meeting Jesus on the Damascus road, he would have agreed with C.S. Lewis. Saying, yes, Jesus is a liar.

Jesus is deluded. And that's why he hated Jesus at first. But that's also why after meeting Jesus on the Damascus road, he worships him as the son of God.

He recognizes this isn't someone you can be neutral to. He's either the most dangerous man who ever lived or the most glorious. And so now he worships Jesus as son of God.

Because now he can see the cross of Jesus as it really is. So he can look at it and say, yes, Jesus dies under God's curse. But it's not because he has done anything wrong.

That he is going there as a substitute in love for his people. Taking our sin, our punishment. Facing the curse. Absorbing the wrath of God.

[8 : 10] So that we might be free of that. That he faces the wrath of God. The penalty for sin on our behalf. In an act of great love.

As our substitute. That he is the Lamb of God who was slain before the foundation of the world. The Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world, as John described him.

So at once, Saul announces that Jesus is the son of God. He's got this new message. And further, verse 22, it says, Saul grew more and more powerful and baffled the Jews living in Damascus by proving that Jesus is the Christ.

Proving that Jesus is God's anointed one. God's promised one who was chosen for the task of saving his people from their sin. So how would Saul go about proving Jesus is the Christ?

Well, powerfully, he can now speak as an eyewitness of the resurrection. In fact, nothing other than meeting the risen Lord Jesus would have persuaded him that what Jesus claimed and who Jesus was is true.

[9 : 30] But now he can speak as an eyewitness that Jesus really did win a victory over the devil and sin and death on behalf of his people. That he really was risen from the dead on the third day, vindicated by God.

Now in all the power and glory that he had from all eternity. So he can speak as an eyewitness. And that's a really powerful thing. But he would also, and we see this as Acts goes on and in his letters, that he understands that the Old Testament prophecies speaking of the Christ are fulfilled in Jesus. So he'd go back to the Old Testament scriptures, pointing out how what was promised and predicted there is fulfilled in Jesus. So perhaps most famously in Isaiah 53, which speaks of the lamb who was led to the slaughter.

The one who it was the Lord's will to crush. The one who would see the light of life and be satisfied. The one through whose wounds we are healed.

Where it says, We all like sheep have gone astray. Each of us has turned to his own way and the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all. Saul and the apostles now read these messages and they understand they're speaking to us of Jesus.

[11 : 01] And that's how they would then communicate to both Jews and Gentiles, proving that Jesus is the Christ. So Saul and the church lives by this gospel message.

Understanding that Jesus has died for his people. That as we remember this evening, the body and blood of Jesus is given so that we might know forgiveness.

That we might enjoy acceptance by God, access to God, eternal life with God. So for Saul, there was no other message now to live by.

For us as a Christian church, there ought to be no other message for us to live by other than recognizing that Jesus is the Son of God and that he is God's Christ, God's Savior, who came into the world to save us.

So Saul now lives by a new message, but he also lives as part of a new community. I remember a number of years ago watching a documentary about a black Christian author in the States.

[12 : 25] He was such an interesting guy because he made it his life's mission, essentially, to deliberately seek out members of the KKK and other white supremacist groups in order to try and befriend them, to talk to them about their background, about the reason behind their hate.

And it was fascinating to see how many people, once they'd had a conversation with this guy, would leave those orders, would change the way that they thought about life and about race.

But, you know, when you think about unlikely friendships, a black man and a white supremacist seems kind of unlikely. But that's no less true when it comes to thinking about Saul and the church. It seems so unlikely that these two groups would ever come together, except for Saul trying to arrest, imprison, and persecute. But instantly, as he comes to faith in the Lord Jesus, he changes who he would call family.

So we see at the very beginning of our reading, the second part of verse 19, Saul spent several days with the disciples in Damascus. The very same people that he'd come to arrest, that he's now spending time with them.

[13 : 46] And that tells us something really powerful about the gospel, the gospel that brings peace, the gospel that speaks of reconciliation, that not only does it mean reconciliation with God, because Jesus has dealt with that barrier of sin, but it also makes it possible for us to call people brothers and sisters who are very different to us, people who perhaps culturally would be considered enemies.

Certainly for Saul, these Christians would have been enemies on a religious basis because of their faith. But now, through faith in Jesus, they are reconciled and they're friends.

And we see how this impacts on the wider community in verse 21. All those who heard him were astonished and asked, isn't this the man who caused havoc in Jerusalem among those who call on his name?

And hasn't he come here to take them as prisoners to the chief priests? And so there's that initial shock at the change, but that very quickly becomes hostility.

So just as Saul had tried to persecute and destroy the church, now he becomes a target for killing. Verses 23 to 25, we discover some Jews in Damascus who conspire to kill Saul.

[15 : 14] Former friends now label Saul an enemy, that he had previously taken that tough stance on Christianity, and now he finds himself a wanted man having to escape by being lowered in a basket.

And the same thing we see in verses 29 and 30, as he talks and debates with Grecian Jews. Again, they try to kill him and he has to be sent away to safety. And we remember that Jesus predicted this would happen.

He said this to his disciples. Well, listen, if they hated me, then inevitably they will hate you too. And Saul very early discovers this, this fact that our faith will certainly cause some people to oppose us or to marginalize us.

And that's part of the cost of discipleship, recognizing that it will not be the route to popularity and necessarily an easy progression through life.

[16:21] So into this kind of situation where his former friends have isolated, hated, wanted to kill him, where does Saul go? To find his sense of belonging and community.

And what we see again and again is that he goes to seek out brothers and sisters in the church. So there he is in Damascus, in the church. When he comes to Jerusalem in verse 26, he wants to join the disciples.

But then we see that there is suspicion in Jerusalem. They are more than aware of what he has been doing. And so there is a suspicion, perhaps wondering if he's on some kind of undercover mission to destroy the church from the inside.

And so they're reluctant to welcome him until Barnabas steps in. Barnabas, whose real name is Joseph. Barnabas is his nickname, which means son of encouragement.

And here we see him encouraging unity. Because in verse 27, it says, Barnabas took him and brought him to the apostles. He told them how Saul in his journey had seen the Lord and that the Lord had spoken to him and how in Damascus, he preached fearlessly in the name of Jesus.

[17:42] Barnabas doesn't leave him to get on with it. He stands with Saul. He vouches for Saul. He took him to the disciples and he spoke of the change that had happened.

He spoke of the preaching that Saul had been doing in Damascus. Evidence of God's grace at work in his life. Evidence of why they should accept him despite their fear.

Barnabas wants to preserve the unity of the church. He recognizes that the power of this reality of former enemies being able to function together in the same church, calling Jesus Lord, calling on the same Father in heaven.

So that welcoming Saul into the community of believers there in Jerusalem becomes an opportunity for people to see the power of the gospel. It's always a wonderful thing to see churches that are diverse and are able to welcome all kinds of people.

It speaks to the power of the gospel and here it speaks to enemies becoming friends through meeting Jesus. But we're reminded in the example of Saul that as Christians we need other Christians.

[18:55] He understood that almost instinctively that he goes to be where God's people are. And we need that. We need one another to have that strength to persevere, to gain support if we feel isolated, and for the ability to witness together to the difference that Jesus makes in communities and in societies.

You know, Jesus said, well, they'll know your disciples by the way that you love one another. So that necessarily requires a community of people who are meeting together so as to love one another.

And so Saul recognizes this. He recognizes that gift that God gives us one another. And we see that all through his missionary life that he would connect with churches and he loved churches. You look at the end of all his letters, you see this huge list of people that he's thankful for, people that he's praying for. He understands the power of this new gospel community.

And when we think about what we have, the freedom that we have, the privileges that we have, it encourages us, I think, to remember those that don't have this ability to gather together openly for worship, to remember the persecuted church, to remember those Christians who are so afraid for their lives that they are simply unable to share their faith with somebody else.

[20:31] So what we have is something special and it's something that we need to work hard to preserve. So as we sit together and share the Lord's Supper, for those of us who have faith in the Lord Jesus, it is for us a family meal where not only do we remember that Jesus comes to be with us, to feed us by faith, to encourage us, to give us strength, but we're also reminded that we're brothers and sisters in the same family.

And we remember that it's Jesus that binds us together. It's this gospel message that strengthens us, that makes us a community. So what we see from the early days of Saul's Christian faith is that Christians, and therefore a church, lives with the gospel message as central, and with a gospel community around us for help and support.

This is our identity. These are the fundamental building blocks for a faith that will persevere to the end. If we walk away from the gospel message, we won't persevere.

If we walk away from a gospel church, we won't persevere. So these are realities that are gifts to us from the Lord Jesus that we need to value for ourselves and to commit to, and not just for our own sake, but also for the sake of one another.