

An Apostle for the Gentiles

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[0 : 00] they say the night is darkest just before dawn. And certainly the wait for light is longest by that time.

And here as we resume our series in Acts, where we left off last year, and looking at the early church, we might think that they have found themselves in the same situation.

Persecution had broken out. But intensified even with Stephen's martyrdom. And now the church, apart from the apostles, has been scattered across Judea, Samaria, and beyond.

Things look bleak. Chapter 8 did offer a glimmer of hope. We saw the Ethiopian eunuch converted from Philip's preaching.

But now here as we resume in chapter 9, we find Saul, the one who stood by, who approved of Stephen's killing, stepping up his efforts to hunt down Jesus' disciples.

[1 : 06] So if you look with me again at the start of chapter 9, in verse 1, Saul was still breathing out murderous threats against the Lord's disciples. I don't know whether you think of a cartoon, he's sort of the nostrils, that's what I think, the murderous threats coming out through the nostrils.

And asking the high priest for letters to the synagogues in Damascus, so that if he found any there who belonged to the way, that is the way of Jesus, whether men or women, he might take them as prisoners to Jerusalem.

These were effectively arrest warrants from the high priest. Now Saul must have been really motivated to go as far as Damascus. And if you look at the map there, Damascus is actually not that close to Jerusalem.

It's about 150 miles, so if you try to walk that, it would take you a bit more than a week, maybe two. We also know from Saul's letters that he's not motivated by power or greed, but religious zeal.

You see, as a devoted Jew, a Pharisee, he really thought that he was serving God by stopping what he thought were apostates of the Jewish faith. So sure and adamant was he that it took a dramatic revelation from the Lord to turn him around.

[2 : 25] And so as he came near to Damascus, this is what we see. Suddenly a light from heaven flashed around him. He fell to the ground and heard a voice say to him, Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?

Who are you, Lord? Saul asked. And so as I said before, the thing that surprised Saul was that he thought that all this time he had been on the Lord's mission and yet this voice from heaven, presumably divine from the Lord, is asking why he was persecuting him.

And so Saul blurted out almost, who are you, Lord? It's not adding up. If this was the Lord, then why is he saying, I'm persecuting him when I've been trying to serve him?

And then he hears the reply, I am Jesus, the one you are persecuting. And so the penny finally drops.

Jesus is the Lord. And what's more, Jesus now tells him that he identifies deeply with his followers' suffering.

[3 : 37] When his disciples suffer, so does Jesus. To persecute any member of Christ's body is to persecute Jesus himself. If you like, it's very personal for Jesus.

Deeply personal. And yet at the same time, without asking Saul for permission, Jesus claims lordship over him. And there's a bit of an incongruous reality here, isn't it?

That Saul has been persecuting his master. Think about it. But now the master speaks. Get up. Go into the city. And you will be told what you must do.

Here's then when we discover that Saul isn't traveling alone. That he actually has an arresting party with him to help him drag all these people back to Jerusalem. So verse 7, we're told, those with him heard the sound but did not see anyone.

They were left speechless. Still, they were going to be witnesses, weren't they, that this really happened to Saul. And so Saul got up from the ground, but when he opened his eyes, he could see nothing.

[4 : 47] So they led him by the hand into Damascus. For three days, he was blind and did not eat or drink anything. Even in this short section, I think we see a lot of parallels here with other New Testament stories and accounts.

So for example, remember that when Jesus was on earth, he often told people to get up, didn't he? So did Peter and John earlier in Acts. But usually, it was in the context of miraculous healings.

But now, the exact opposite was happening, isn't it? Saul got up and when he opened his eyes, instead of healing, he had physical blindness. Further, Paul had come to Damascus to lead prisoners back to Jerusalem.

But here he was, the helpless one, leading, being led by the hand to Damascus. And finally, you might have already picked this, but just as Jesus spent three days in the dark of death, so now, Saul spends three days as well, blind, without food or drink.

Now it's during this time of soul searching that Jesus then provides to Saul an encourager in the person of Ananias. So verse 10, in Damascus, there was a disciple named Ananias.

[6 : 12] The Lord called to him in a vision. Ananias, yes, Lord, he answered. The Lord told him, go to the house of Judas on Straight Street and ask for a man from Tarsus named Saul for he is praying.

In a vision, he has seen a man named Ananias come and place his hands on him to restore his sight. Lord, Ananias answered, I've heard many reports about this man and all the harm he has done to your holy people in Jerusalem.

And he has come here with authority from the chief priests to arrest all who call on your name. Sorry, did I just say Ananias was an encourager to Saul?

Not just yet. But Jesus had anticipated Ananias' hesitation, which is why he gives Ananias a vision telling him about Saul's vision to Jerusalem, of Ananias.

You could say Jesus is a bit over-communicating here, isn't he? Two-way sort of authentication to verify that this meeting was about to take place or needed to take place.

[7 : 21] And you know, sometimes, me included, as parents, we often do that, don't we, as the responsible adult in the family. We over-communicate to our children, like sending messages to both children, telling them each what we've just told the other.

Right? So Sarah, clean the toilet this week, and by the way, I'm telling Jane that I've told you to clean the toilet this week so that you know I've told, and so there's no fighting, no confusion.

Have you had that one before? Yeah. But still, Ananias is hesitant despite this, because he says, Lord, this man is the one making us suffer for your name.

To which Jesus now replies in verse 15, Go! This man is my chosen instrument to proclaim my name to the Gentiles and their kings and to the people of Israel. I will show him how much he must suffer for my name.

In other words, Jesus is saying, yes, he made you suffer for my name, but go to him now because he will now suffer for my name too. And here too, Jesus reveals his choice of Paul as the apostle to the Gentiles.

[8 : 32] But not only that, is it? Because we often think of Paul as the apostle to the Gentiles, which is right, but note that Jesus also says that he will proclaim his name to the people of Israel.

And not just to the common people, but kings as well, which by the time you get to the end of Acts, you will see Paul doing just that. So Ananias goes to Saul in verse 17 and placing his hands on Saul, he said, Brother Saul.

So finally, he recognizes that. Brother Saul, the Lord Jesus who appeared to you on the road as you were coming here has sent me so that you may see again and be filled with the Holy Spirit.

Immediately, something like scales fell from Saul's eyes and he could see again. He got up, was baptized, and after taking some food, he regained his strength. Saul spent several days with the disciples in Damascus.

This now completes, if you like, Saul's conversion. He's physically healed, baptized, filled with the Holy Spirit and then finally enters into fellowship with Jesus' disciples in Damascus.

[9 : 42] And immediately, we see a change in Paul. For verse 20 then begins with the words, at once. At once, he began to preach in the synagogues that Jesus is the Son of God.

All those who heard him were astonished and asked, isn't he the man who raised havoc in Jerusalem among those who call on this name? And hasn't he come here to take them as prisoners to the chief priests?

Yet Saul grew more and more powerful and baffled the Jews living in Damascus by proving that Jesus is the Messiah. And so here, at once, Paul begins his work, doesn't he, as Jesus' chosen instrument.

If previously he was spurred on by misguided zeal, now he's motivated by the truth revealed to him. And so Paul goes straight from being a persecutor to a preacher and a passionate preacher at that.

Now, there are two things I think that causes this to happen immediately. First, Jesus' dramatic revelation would have done that. Saul was so convicted by the truth that it compels him to repent even though it was humbling.

[10 : 53] And, you know, he writes himself in Philippians that all that he once held dear, the very things that he treasured, he repented of in order to follow Christ.

And so on the next slide, if someone else thinks, he says, there are reasons to put confidence in the flesh, well, I have more as a Pharisee, circumcised on the eighth day of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews, in regard to the law, a Pharisee, as for zeal, persecuting the church, as for righteousness based on the law, faultless.

So, basically, he was first in the class, best. No one could keep competing in it. But whatever were gains to me, I now consider loss for the sake of Christ. What is more, I consider everything a loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus, my Lord, for whose sake I have lost all things.

I consider them garbage that I may gain Christ. Now that he's seen the surpassing worth of knowing Christ, everything else is garbage, he says.

And what's more, it compels me to want to share it and let others know about it. So that's the first thing that I think causes him to at once begin to preach. But secondly, on a very practical level, I think Saul, being a Pharisee, had the foundational knowledge to be able to immediately preach the good news because he's able to join the dots between who Jesus is and God's promise to Israel.

[12 : 28] And so if you go back to the passage in Acts again, we see two things that Paul was preaching and proving. So verse 20, he was preaching that Jesus is the Son of God.

And then verse 22, the second thing is that he was proving that Jesus is the Messiah. That proving bit is about going back to the Old Testament to show that the Messiah was God's promised king, the one who descended from Abraham and David.

All the way back to Genesis, God had already promised Abraham, as Jillian read today, I will bless those who bless you, Abraham. Whoever curses you, I will curse. And all peoples on earth, that is, including the Gentiles, will be blessed through you.

And it was through this seed of Abraham, this offspring, that the promised Messiah would come, that God would bless not just Israel, but the Gentiles as well.

So for Paul, who was a Pharisee who knew the law back to front, immediately he knew, he could see that once he knew Jesus is the promised Messiah, he could see how everything sort of fitted in with the Old Testament.

[13 : 37] But he also had the revelation just from Jesus, didn't he? From heaven. So that he knew this promised Messiah wasn't just human, but the divine son of God as well.

That God sent his own son to be the Messiah. And having risen from the dead and now ascended into heaven, Jesus is ruling from heaven. His was the voice that was calling out to Saul from heaven.

He appeared to Saul in the vision. Now, all this was made plain to Saul through the wisdom given to him as a result of the anointing of the Holy Spirit.

Because, you know, it's not like Paul didn't know or Saul didn't know the Old Testament, did he? All this while, he knew everything that was in the Old Testament. The only reason why he was able to now know that Jesus is the Messiah is because God opened his eyes through the Spirit.

And that's important, isn't it? Because the next thing you see is that despite Saul's Spirit-filled preaching, right, so Saul didn't do anything wrong in his preaching because he was Spirit-filled, what was the effect on the listeners?

[14 : 57] They were left baffled, right? Why? Again, not because Saul's preaching was deficient, but because without God working in their heart as well, their response wasn't belief, but bafflement, right?

And then bafflement turned to persecution. You see, Saul became such an immovable rock for these baffled Jews, maybe even a nuisance that they couldn't argue away or silence because Paul kept wanting to preach that the only way to shut out the truth was to try and get rid of him, that is, try and kill him.

And so, verse 23, after many days had gone by, which many think it's as much as three years, there was a conspiracy among the Jews to kill him, but Saul learned of their plan.

Day and night they kept close watch on the city gates in order to kill him, but his followers took him by night and lowered him in a basket through an opening in the wall. They kept watch of the gates because that's the point of escape, right?

And as we can see here, this is really the start of a very common pattern that will now occur in Saul's life, right? From now on you'll see him preaching, you'll see opposition, and then you'll see people plotting to kill him.

[16 : 25] It's ironic in a way because what he once did to others is now going to start happening to him. But the comforting thing is that although it's not explicitly acknowledged, you can tell that God is watching over Saul's life, can't you?

He's the one that reveals the plan to Saul somehow, gives him time to escape, and then he provides the help of followers to lower him via a basket through an opening in the wall, and then of course to lead him finally to Jerusalem, where we see in verse 26 things happening the same way again.

When he came to Jerusalem, he tried to join the disciples, but they were all afraid of him, not believing that he really was a disciple, but Barnabas took him and brought him to the apostles. He told them how Saul on his journey had seen the Lord and that the Lord had spoken to him and how in Damascus he had preached fearlessly in the name of Jesus.

So Saul stayed with them and moved about freely in Jerusalem, speaking boldly in the name of the Lord. So you begin to get that sense of déjà vu, yeah?

What happened in Damascus is happening all over again. First, like Ananias, the Jerusalem disciples were afraid of Saul. They may have heard of Saul's conversion, but if this is someone that used to come after your lives, better to be saved rather than sorry.

[17 : 49] And again, just as in Damascus, God has to raise up a go-between, this time the son of encouragement, Barnabas, who brings Saul to meet the apostles.

Now, the thing here is that since Paul has already been preaching before arriving at Jerusalem, this meeting with the apostles wasn't really to authorize Saul or commission him for ministry.

As Saul would later say, his authority comes directly from Jesus himself. Nevertheless, I think what's happening here is that as one united body in Christ, all of them serving the Lord, it made sense for Saul to meet the apostles to express this unity, to establish a partnership which they shared in the gospel, after which we see then that Saul moved freely about Jerusalem to preach.

And as occurred in Damascus, he preached fearlessly, speaking boldly in the name of the Lord. And I want to pause now for us to notice this word or this phrase, name of the Lord, because it happens a lot in the rest of Acts, that there is frequent mention of calling on the name of the Lord, suffering in the name of the Lord, preaching in the name of the Lord.

And doing all these in the name of the Lord is actually very important because as Christians, our task is not just to proclaim that God exists.

[19 : 14] That's the, you know, we are theists, yes, but that's only half the job, right? That's only half the truth. Instead, we are also called to proclaim that Jesus is the Son of God, the promised Messiah.

We're called to say to others, to share with others, that it is only by calling on the name of Jesus that people can be saved. It's not enough for people to know that God exists.

They need to know that Jesus is the Son who saves. And that's what exactly Peter says in his sermon, Acts 2, quoting from Joel. Well, lo and behold, the result in verse 29 again is that Saul talked and debated with the Hellenistic Jews, but they tried to kill him.

When the believers learned of this, they took him down to Caesarea and sent him off to Tarsus. Now, the mention here of Hellenistic Jews, I think is the fact that, you know, back in Damascus, I think Saul would have also debated with the Hellenistic Jews, right?

But that was because most Jews that were outside of Judea were Hellenistic, speaking Greek. Here in Jerusalem, this distinction is made because in Jerusalem there were the Hebrew Jews, those who spoke Aramaic, not Greek, or tended to do that, and who likely were receiving preaching from the other apostles, and the Hellenistic Jews, which Paul paid more attention to.

[20 : 44] And interestingly, I think, because if you go back to chapter 7, these were the same Hellenistic Jews that Stephen was debating, who actually got him killed.

So, for all you know, I think these were Saul's old mates, used to be his friends, that he thought, maybe I'll go back and try and preach to them the gospel.

But as we can tell, instead of welcoming him, attempts were actually made on his life. And so instead, it was left to the fellow believers to help him to escape, and sent him on his way to his home city of Tarsus, which is a long way away.

If you look at the slide again, another map, Tarsus is actually in modern-day Turkey. So, quite a long way away. Well, that's a pretty dramatic start to the ministry of Saul, don't you think?

And yet, if you look at verse 31, at the very end, we have a surprising statement, isn't it? That despite opposition to Saul's preaching, despite persecution, the impact of the church, on the church, under God's sovereignty is this.

[21 : 59] The church throughout Judea, Galilee, and Samaria, enjoyed a time of peace, and was strengthened. Living in the fear of the Lord and encouraged by the Holy Spirit, it increased in numbers.

Now, so you know, if you're trying to understand the structure of Acts, here marks another milestone for God's gospel plan. If you look back in chapter 6 and verse 7, we would have read that the church there was another statement like this, the church grew rapidly in Jerusalem through the apostles preaching.

Here, as well as numerical increase, we now read that the church grew geographically in Judea, Galilee, and Samaria. And the Lord's hand is also in all of this because we read that they've lived not in fear of persecution, but fear of the Lord.

And they were being encouraged by his spirit. And that for us is a really good reminder, isn't it? That when faced with persecution, instead of dying, the church actually grows.

That actually God uses persecution, he allows persecution to grow his church. That should encourage us not to be afraid during times of persecution and hardship, even as we hear of our brothers and sisters who are under persecution overseas as well.

[23 : 29] And what's more, here too we see that Jesus continues to fulfill his promise to the church. Because if you go back all the way again, as we refresh our memory, Acts chapter 1 verse 8, this is what Jesus promised.

You will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem. So that was chapter 6 verse 7, in all Judea and Samaria, that's here, Acts chapter 9 verse 31, and to the ends of the earth.

So Luke now has almost as it were finished his survey of the promised Judea and Samaria phase. And so guess what the next phase would be?

Ends of the earth. Right? And even here we get an inkling that that's about to occur. How? Well, because look who Jesus has just chosen.

His instrument to be the apostles to the Gentiles, right? So even here in appointing Saul, Luke is already telling us that God is already planning for the next phase to occur.

[24 : 37] And guess what? Where is Saul at the moment? We might think he's being banished to Tarsus, but actually we ought to think that no, he's actually being sent there in readiness.

Tarsus is not quite the ends of the earth, but it's sort of outside of Judea and Samaria, isn't it? But he's being sent there ready for the next phase, isn't it? His ministry to the Gentiles.

All of this is really indicating that everything that is occurring is occurring in accordance to God's plan. God's gospel plan is unfolding in Acts as we start, and we are meant and encouraged to see God's sovereignty in it.

Now, I don't know whether you realize, but every major world event in history also impacts the individuals that live through it. I mean, it makes sense now that I've said it, but we look at World War II and we think about, we concentrate on Churchill and Stalin and all these things, but actually millions and billions of people lived through the war, didn't they, in Europe?

They were personally impacted. And so for some of us, in fact for all of us, we live, how we live today, what's happened to us, is a direct result of all these events that have happened.

[25 : 55] World War II led to the Cold War and all that kind of stuff, to communism and all that kind of stuff, and we're actually at the tail end of all these events, isn't it? So big picture world events actually impact us directly, don't they?

And so I think too that what happens here in Acts, in this very chapter, has a direct impact on you and me. And you might think, well, how so?

Well, to start with, I believe that none of us will be sitting here today were it not for Acts chapter 9, right? Because God chose Saul to preach to the Gentiles, and it is true, those who then believe that the gospel has come to us.

So we're sitting here because of what Saul did in his ministry. Even though this might be thousands and thousands of miles and years away, Acts chapter 9 has a direct bearing on all of us, doesn't it?

So I think the first thing to do is really to thank God for choosing Saul. But also, I think, let's thank God for the ministry of Ananias and Barnabas and all these unnamed believers in this story.

[27 : 11] because, guess what? They too played a part in God's gospel plan. Without those believers letting him down in the basket, we might not have a soul, and we might not be here today.

Without their help, the gospel might not have got to us. And I know for us, it's not unusual for our attention to be given to the likes of Saul and some of the giants of our faith, like, you know, to thank God for Tim Keller, for John Stott, for C.S.

Lewis, people like that. But, you know, for each Tim Keller in this world, there are also hundreds and thousands of people that made Tim Keller's ministry possible, that supported him, didn't they?

That prayed for him, that encouraged him. So God used them as well. We don't know their names, God, only God knows, but God used them, didn't they, to fulfill his gospel plan through each and every one of these so-called giants of the faith.

And that's the same for you and me as well, isn't it? We may not be supporting a big-name preacher, but we're called to play our part too, aren't we? Pray for others, support missionaries, show welcome to new people that come to church, extend hospitality to strangers, invite them to come along to Christianity Explore.

[28 : 35] All these things are just adding up, isn't it, to God's global gospel plan. When we read about Acts chapter 9 and the rest of Acts, we read about not just a plan that you and I benefit from, but also that you and I are being called to be a partner of as well.

So let me encourage you, as some of you are already doing, keep going. But for others, let's get on board and play our part in God's global gospel plan that is unfolding even as we speak.

And if here today and you're not yet a Christian and you're not quite convinced yet about God's gospel plan, well, let me leave you with this one thing to consider. Because Luke, the author of Acts, actually wrote this book for you.

Like his gospel, Luke went about setting out a faithful record of the events so that you and I can be convinced of its truth. You know, he carefully investigated what happened.

He interviewed witnesses to show that really, Jesus is who the apostles said he was. So even in our story today, right, did you find it odd that actually Luke chose to recount Saul's vision, not from Saul's perspective, but from Ananias' perspective, right?

[30 : 02] Why is he doing that? Because he's trying to show us that actually these events did occur because I've got two independent accounts of what this vision was all about.

That he didn't just tell Saul and appear to him in a vision, he actually, you know, Jesus actually took the effort to appear to Ananias as well to tell him that I've given Saul a vision.

And if you think about it, these two are strangers, aren't they? These two would not have met. Any other way. And in fact, they were enemies, right? And yet, somehow, we have these accounts.

So, for someone to say, this didn't happen, I'm not sure who would bother to make up a story like that. There is just a ring of truth about it, isn't it? And so, as you read through the book of Acts, I would encourage you to consider this, just to consider the ring of truth about these events, and to know really that it is true, and therefore the message in it is true as well, that Jesus is the Son of God, and he is the Messiah that God sent, so that we can be saved.

Let's pray. Father, we thank you for your gospel plan. We thank you that for many of us, most of us probably as Gentiles, we have now been included in it, that you chose Saul as your instrument to proclaim to us.

[31 : 30] Father, help us to play our part in your gospel plan. Give us great encouragement to see, even now, as we read it unfolding according to your will, that it is also unfolding according to your perfect will for us.

In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.