

# New Career

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[ 0 : 00 ] I wonder if you would open up your Bibles to the reading Jane just read for us in Acts chapter 9, page 121. And just to let you know, we usually pray before a sermon. It's not a perfunctory thing that we do.

But when we turn to God's Word, we are asking God Himself to meet with us. And I hope you prayed with me this morning as we did that. And if you missed last week, I'm sorry. I'm sorry for you actually because we came across one of the most remarkable and important events in all the book of Acts, the conversion of Saul.

He's very important for a number of different reasons. Partly because he represents the most religious, most educated, most successful, most articulate of his generation.

But he hated Jesus and he hated Christians. And he was completely committed to annihilating the name of Christ and crushing the Christian church.

So he chases Christians out of Jerusalem to Damascus where he wants to bind them in chains, drag them back to Jerusalem where they may be executed. But as so often happens, things do not go according to plan.

[ 1 : 17 ] And on the way to Damascus, the risen Christ appears to him in a flash of light. And Jesus addresses him by name, Saul, Saul, and reveals his own name to him.

And Saul is changed forever. He rises from the ground in complete darkness. He's blind, led to Damascus by the hand. Three days later, Ananias welcomes him into the body of the disciples. And we pick up the story today halfway through verse 19. And our temptation, I think, is to wonder whether he's still really a Christian. You know when high profile people become Christians? We think, hmm, well, we're not the only ones. Look at verse 20. In the synagogues immediately he proclaimed Jesus saying, He is the Son of God.

And all who heard him were amazed and said, This is not right. Is not this the man who made havoc in Jerusalem of those who called on this name? And here he has come for this purpose, to bring them bound before the chief priests.

[ 2 : 24 ] Only a couple of days before he met Christ on the road. Now he's joined the group that he wanted to exterminate and people smell a rat. But what they don't realise is that everything has changed for Saul.

Because he has met Jesus Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away. The new has come. Everything's different.

Used to be the law was the pinnacle of God's revelation. And now he sees the law as a shadow pointing to Christ. Used to be that the Torah was God's final word.

Now the apostle believes it too points to the person of Jesus Christ. Used to be he believed there was one Lord. And now he realises there is one Lord, but in three persons.

And that the purpose of that Lord is not to exterminate the name of Christ, but to extol the name of Christ. And there is no other explanation for such a radical transformation than that he had met the true and living Jesus Christ.

[ 3 : 31 ] And when he met Christ, he received from Christ the forgiveness of his sins and the gift of the Holy Spirit and the new life of being a disciple.

He was converted. And as we saw last week, none of us perhaps are souls, but all of us who have turned from sin and placed our faith in Jesus Christ have met the same Jesus Christ, have received exactly the same forgiveness of our sins, the same spirit and the same hope of glory.

It's one of the wonders of belonging to a congregation, that there are people around us who are having this experience. But the point of Acts 9 is not a private transformation of one person.

There's a much bigger transformation going on. Acts chapters 9 and 10 are the fulcrum of the entire book of Acts.

They are the transition from the gospel being something that is just belonged to a group of Jews to being something that is available for Gentiles.

[ 4 : 37 ] And you and I can be very thankful for this. You remember in chapter 1, the risen Jesus made very clear his desire is that the gospel go out, Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria and even to the ends of the earth.

But it's now taken till chapter 9 and still the Christians don't get it. And it's going to take till chapter 15 until they accept this reality.

It's very difficult for us, I think, as mostly Gentile believers to imagine that anyone had a problem with the gospel going outside of Judaism. I mean, we know since creation, God's desire has been to bless all the world.

We know from the day when he called Abraham, God wanted to bless all the families of the earth. We know the reason God gave the law to Israel was so there'd be a light to the Gentiles.

And when the nations round about Jerusalem would look at Israel and see them relating to the God of Israel, they would say to each other, come, let us go up to the mountain of the Lord and we will enter the house of the God of Jacob so that he will teach us his ways and that we may walk in his paths.

[ 5 : 51 ] But Israel never fulfilled God's purposes for them. By the time of Jesus, they had not heard a word from God through a prophet for several hundred years. They were under Roman occupation and the great energy in Israel was about protecting the structures of Judaism and defending themselves from outside influences.

So you see, for the early Christians, Jesus was a Jewish prophet, a Jewish Messiah who came to fulfil the law. Jesus worshipped in the synagogue. Jesus spoke about the God of Israel.

And it's very difficult, I think, for us to understand how unimaginable it is that this good news should go out and include the Gentiles. Jews had one religion, Gentiles had their religion.

And if you have been with us through the book of Acts, you'll know the early Christians continued to go up to the temple and they continued to go to the prayers. And when they shared the good news of the gospel, they shared it mostly with Jews in terms of the fulfilment of the Old Testament.

The idea that the gospel should go beyond the Jewish community was met with scepticism and hostility and opposition by the Christians. That is why when we come to chapters 9 and 10, they form a fulcrum.

[ 7 : 10 ] You know, at the end of chapter 8, the gospel had gone into Judea and Samaria and even to Ethiopia. But now Jesus changes the direction of the church.

And in chapter 9, he appears in a vision to Saul and in chapter 10, he appears in a vision to Peter and in both of these instances, his wish is to drive them to the Gentiles.

I say it again, the main resistance to the gospel going to the Gentiles didn't come from the Gentiles. It came from the apostles and from the early Christians. That's why when you read through the New Testament, this issue is never far from the surface.

And I think for us this morning, we should be very grateful that Jesus did not allow the church to settle into its prejudice, but he revealed his will for our inclusion.

That's why the big transformation here in chapter 9 is not just Saul, but that through Saul, but that through Saul, Jesus will reach others from heaven.

[ 8 : 17 ] So the heart of the chapter is the call of Jesus to Saul in verses 15 and 16. And Jesus reveals a twofold purpose for the apostle. Let's look at those verses.

I know they're not in our passage today, but they cast a light over our passage. Verse 15, There is the twofold purpose of Jesus.

that Saul will carry his name to the Gentiles and Saul will suffer for the name. And those are the two tracks for the rest of the book of Acts, carrying the name and suffering for the name.

And they are the two organizing issues for the rest of our passage this morning. So let's just look quickly at those two things. What does Jesus mean that Saul will carry his name?

Well, if you look down in verse 19 and 20, the obvious answer is that it only takes Saul a couple of days after he has met Christ to begin boldly proclaiming and preaching.

[ 9 : 41 ] But before we look at what that means, I need to stop and we need to look at how important this idea of the name of Jesus really is. One of the terrible things about preaching through

a book in the New Testament is that as you work through it, you start to realize all the things you should have said but you didn't say.

And this is one of those things. You can't work through the book of Acts without seeing how important this idea of the name of Jesus is. And I wonder if I could just show you one little passage. Back in chapter 2, if you would turn back there and verse 21, on the day of Pentecost, when Peter was preaching to the crowd, he quotes the prophet Joel from verses 17 to 21.

And at the end of the quote we hear, Joel of course meant the name of the God of Israel.

But look at verse 22. Peter identifies that name with Jesus of Nazareth. The whole point of this sermon is that since the death and resurrection of Jesus, God has put forward one name through who we can be saved, the person of Jesus Christ.

[11:03] So if you turn down to verse 38, when the crowd says, what shall we do about this? Peter says, repent and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ.

For the forgiveness of your sins and you shall receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. Not only do we call upon the name of Jesus, but we are baptized into his name.

So calling on the name of the Lord now means recognizing that Jesus is the Messiah of God.

Acknowledging that I have rebelled against him and that I need his forgiveness.

To call on the name of the Lord means to turn aside from sin, to ask him for his forgiveness and the gift of the Holy Spirit. It's entering a new life. It is salvation.

And that's why if we turn back to chapter 9, when we find the apostle Saul, Paul, carrying the name of Jesus, he does not do this in a detached and academic fashion.

[12:10] There's nothing take it or leave it. He begins by proclaiming in verse 20, which is a word that describes the ministry of the town crier. He's announcing it to anyone who's going to listen.

And not everyone wants to listen. Verse 22. Saul increased all the more in strength and confounded the Jews who lived in Damascus by proving that Jesus was the Christ.

He confounded people. He proved. This is a very strong word. Prove means literally he lays a series of things together so that they might come to a conclusion.

He's not interested in a neutral dialogue here. He wants people to come to a conclusion. And he grows in strength, not physical stamina, but in using the Old Testament and all the training that he'd received as a Pharisee now starts to be used for the purpose for which God gave it to him.

Can you imagine debating this man Saul? I mean, what a formidable evangelist he must have been. You can see him, can't you, in the synagogue and someone saying to him, well, of course I believe all the law and the prophets, but I just don't accept Jesus as the Messiah.

[13:21] How do you expect me to accept the fact that a crucified man from Nazareth can be the Messiah of God? And Saul would patiently take the law and the prophets and as he does in some of his books, explain line by line and verse by verse how Jesus Christ is the fulfilment of all the Old Testament law and that if you believe the law and the prophets, you will come to bow the knee to Jesus Christ.

Or you can hear another person saying, I'm a religious person, I go to the synagogue, I tithe, I pay my taxes, why do I need to bother with Jesus? And the apostle says, let me tell you about my religious achievements and he would pile them all up in a heap and he would say, you know what they're worth?

They're worth nothing next to the righteousness of Jesus Christ. So later in verse 29 in Jerusalem, we read these words.

He preaches boldly in the name of the Lord. He spoke and disputed against the Hellenists who are seeking to kill him. He's arguing forcefully.

He's seeking to convince people. He's wanting to draw them to a conclusion. It is not a value neutral exercise. He does not present Jesus in a casual, careless, disinterested fashion.

[14:47] He presents Jesus in a way where the choice is to either accept the fact that he is God's Messiah or to reject the fact that he is God's Messiah.

There is no sense to sit on when it comes to Jesus. It's very important for us, you see, because the good news of Jesus Christ is not a package of information.

It is Christ himself comes to us through the good news and he offers himself to us as the fulfilment of God's purposes and our saving Lord.

And every one of these words that describes carrying the name of Jesus Christ assumes that there is resistance to the Gospel. There's always resistance in our hearts and in the hearts of others.

That is why carrying the name of the Lord is only the first half of Jesus' commission to him. There is a second half and it's in verse 16 of chapter 9.

[15:45] I will show him how much he must suffer for the sake of my name. To carry my name secondly means to suffer for my name and I realise how impossibly difficult it is for us to think about this because we live in a culture where we have convinced ourselves that it is my right not to suffer and it is my right to live a life of maximum peace, comfort and joy.

And we coach ourselves very carefully on how to navigate life so as to avoid conflict and opposition and difficulty and suffering. From the start of Saul's Christian life from the very moment he identifies with the Christian community in Damascus and announces Jesus as the Son of God he begins to suffer.

He knew he would. He remembers his own opposition to Jesus Christ. And it's not just that he's identified with Christ. Now that he proclaims Jesus as the Son of God he lands in hot water.

If only he had retired to the countryside and written some books about his experience he could have avoided so much suffering. But he would not have been carrying the name of Jesus to the Gentiles. It is always in carrying the name of Jesus forward that the most vicious and bitter opposition arises. This has been the experience of the Christian church throughout all the generations.

[17:16] I mean Satan doesn't have to worry about those who call themselves Christians but whose lives are no different than the world around them. Who never raise the suspicion that they're serving a different Lord.

He doesn't have to worry about people who call themselves Christians but when they get an opportunity to go the extra mile or an opportunity to speak about Jesus Christ they would rather not inconvenience themselves or embarrass themselves.

In just the same way Satan doesn't have to worry about churches that are turned inward on themselves just trying to meet their own needs and not focused on carrying the name of Jesus outwards. I mean why on earth would Satan be opposed to those churches?

But you see when a group of disciples come together and experience for themselves the glory of Jesus Christ and begin to see the salvation of God being worked out in their own life and see their friends and the people they love as being lost without him and they know of the possibility of praying and spreading and living for him then there will be opposition.

Three times we're told people tried to kill Saul. In Damascus the Christians gather him at night and let him over the wall and he becomes the first Christian basket case.

[18:38] That was original. You can tell, can't you? I think it's perhaps even more hurtful when he escapes from Damascus and runs up to Jerusalem the Christians in Jerusalem don't want to have anything to do with him.

Verse 26 When he come to Jerusalem he attempted to join the disciples they were all afraid of him. They did not believe that he was a disciple but Barnabas, thank God took him brought him to the apostles declared to them how on the road he had seen the Lord and spoke to him.

Damascus had preached boldly in the name of Jesus so he went in and out amongst them and in verse 30 after they knew he was in danger they sent him off to Tarsus. Interesting, in the book of Galatians when Paul is relating this time of his ministry he tells us that it's three years between when he has first met Jesus Christ and he goes up to Jerusalem and in that time he preaches the gospel that's the point of verse 20 he immediately begins preaching the gospel I don't know where it's come from but there's a myth that's grown up that Saul went out into the desert in Arabia and had a kind of lengthy sabbatical receiving visions it's a sentimental idea there's no evidence for it in the New Testament he began preaching from a couple of days after his conversion in Arabia and in Damascus and after the plot to kill him is found he goes up to Jerusalem and the Christians there are so afraid and so suspicious of him they won't welcome him into the fellowship he's between a rock and a hard place

I mean his own Jewish people think he's a deserter the Christians don't think he's genuine all he wants to do is to identify with the Christian church and they won't let him I think it's a wonderful picture in a way I mean what preparation could you have for an apostle to the Gentiles he's experienced first hand the cold shoulder and rejection of the Christian community this is going to become the issue for the next six chapters in Acts can the church that's been accepted by Jesus Christ accept all those who've been accepted by Jesus Christ I wonder how we are at this I wonder if we are open to the possibility of God working in the hearts of those people we've completely written off those people who we feel have treated us as enemies and have opposed us and abused

us would it surprise you to know that God may be working in their hearts working in the hearts who you are most of the people you're most afraid of or who have made life most difficult for us how would we treat them differently if we knew that Jesus was well able to reveal himself to them is it possible to believe and trust that God is working in the hearts of others that would have been very difficult for Saul and it would have been a temptation for him to say that's it that's enough but God teaches him patience and it's a wonderful evidence of the genuineness of his transformation and the fact that he's a new man and it takes someone with the courage of a Barnabas to take the massive risk of reaching out to this guy who was formerly an enemy and embracing him and bringing him in and it always takes a risk to embrace people who are different than ourselves or who have formerly been enemies it's interesting isn't it you know it's easy for us I think to slap one another on the back or to shake hands and smile but true encouragement and true welcoming in the Christian sense means putting ourselves on the line for the other person who we see God at work in it is a risk and so the great Pharisee who met Jesus on the road now willingly takes the lowest place among the disciples at Jerusalem and the passage finishes and I will finish with this little verse it's a beautiful verse in verse 31 another summary we read so the church throughout all Judea and Galilee and Samaria

Galilee and Samaria had peace and was built up and that's very important because both peace and persecution come from the hand of God and we know that in persecution the church grows can it grow in a time of peace yes it is built up which literally means both externally in numbers and internally in devotion and godliness and what is the picture of the church being built up the second half of the verse two things walking in the fear of the Lord and in the comfort of the Holy Spirit it's multiplied and these are two very wonderful phrases for us to take away this morning walking in the fear of the Lord is literally going moving in the fear of the Lord it's the word command go that God gave to Philip in the last chapter and that he's going to give to Peter in the next chapter this is how the church grows this is how the church has peace it's as we move it's as we go and carry the name of Jesus with us and going in the fear of the Lord means this it means taking everything else that we are afraid of and everything else we respect and exposing it to the glory of Jesus Christ and realizing that Jesus is utterly beyond comparison and wonder there is nothing that can compare with him and multiplying in the comfort of the Holy Spirit if we are going and if we are carrying the name of Christ here is the promise that the risen Christ will be with us he will be present with us in the circumstances as we go it's a beautiful word comfort it means alongside to call

[ 25 : 06 ] Jesus himself comes alongside us and he braces us and embraces us and strengthens us and comforts us this is why in the middle of our service we say hear the comfortable words so friends as we carry the name of Jesus forward and as we suffer for his name we need to go in the fear of the Lord and ask God that he will multiply the comfort of his Holy Spirit because from beginning to end our lives and our ministries demonstrate the amazing grace of God and show behalf of our holy Spirit and the tribute gift that he will enjoy and he will look forward and we give some to the Lord and pray very much as well how in the center He will try or pray the one since he has he will bring His head with Hisgrave and his Zamani inolog

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