

Paul - Persecutor Turned Preacher

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- [0 : 00] Amen. Let's turn again to the chapter we read, Acts chapter 9, looking at verse 15 and 16.
- But the Lord said to him, that was to Ananias, go, for he is a chosen instrument of mine to carry my name before the Gentiles and kings and the children of Israel.
- For I will show him how much he must suffer for the sake of my name. We've been looking at different Bible characters, and as in the case of all the ones, or most of the ones we've looked at, it's impossible to do justice in one sermon.
- You'd almost need a series on each person, but we're just having a wee glance at different Bible characters, we've been going through it alphabetically. And certainly of this man, Paul, we could do, you could almost do a year preaching simply on the life of the Apostle Paul.
- Paul, as we know, was one of the greatest trophies of grace. He went from being number one persecutor to becoming number one missionary. There were few people who had such zeal and hatred for the cause of Christ.
- [1 : 25] They were just, there was, his whole purpose in life was to destroy the followers of Jesus Christ. It was to wipe out the Christian faith.
- That was his great mission in life. And as he went in a blinded fury down to Damascus to capture more men and women and to take them, take them back to Jerusalem and to arrest them, he in turn was arrested by the Lord Jesus Christ.
- And Paul, of course, like a lot of people, thought he was doing God's work. Saul, at that time, was infuriated by the claims that were being made by the followers of Jesus, that Jesus was still alive.
- Paul was livid that they were making statements of this kind. He, like so many, believed that Jesus was an imposter, that he wasn't truly the Messiah, that he wasn't truly the Son of God.
- And one of the, and particularly the way it all ended, because their thinking was there is no way on earth that God would have allowed the Messiah to die on a tree.
- [2 : 47] Because the Bible itself said, Cursed is every one that hangeth on a tree. And so there is no way that God, the Father, would have made his Son a cursed.
- But of course, what Saul at that time and all the others didn't realize is that this was the only way that salvation could be made.
- Jesus Christ had to become a curse. He had to take our curse. He had to take our punishment. He had to stand in our place. And of course, this is something that Paul, or Saul at that time, didn't understand.
- And so he was determined that he would wipe out every follower of Jesus Christ. Because his thinking, and it was with so many of the Jewish leaders, is that if this, he looked on them as a kind of a cult or a sect, if they got a foothold in, and if people began to follow them, it would do incredible damage to the traditions and to the way of all the Jewish faith down throughout the years.

And so, Saul was on a mission. And it's still the same today that so many people do, just like Saul back then, they do not realize how central the cross of Jesus Christ is.

[4 : 11] Paul, later on, when he was preaching, he was saying that the cross is, to many people, it's foolishness. To some people, it was a stumbling block.

To other people, it was foolishness. Still the same today. What Paul preached back then is still the same today. For so many people, the cross of Jesus Christ and all that the cross involves, a lot of people stumble over it.

They just can't figure it out. They can't work it out. And to a lot of other people, it just seems so foolish. They just don't understand. They say, this is absurd. Do you mean that God would send his son into this world to die in that way?

That doesn't make sense. But unless we come to understand what sin is, the nature of sin, and of how God has to deal with sin, or he would cease to be God, the only way that God can deal with sin is that somebody who is altogether holy and righteous, and indeed was God himself, could stand in our place, but could only do so by taking our nature.

And that's what Jesus did. So many people today, they take umbrage at the fact that they're told by the Bible and from pulpits and from books they read that they're sinners and that they're not right with God.

[5 : 40] A lot of people take offense at that. And they say, what do you mean, I'm not right with God? I'm as good as anybody else. And the problem is that people do a kind of a measuring.

They measure up things in life. They measure themselves against others. And they say, well, I'm as good as him or I'm as good as her. I've lived a decent life. I've never really done anything really bad.

I put my hand up and say I'm not perfect. But I'm a reasonable person. And surely at the end of the day, God is going to say, look, I know your life wasn't altogether right and perfect, but you lived a fairly decent life.

You're a good neighbor. You're a good family person. You did a lot of good things along the way. And yes, of course, I will accept you. It doesn't work like that. That's the way we think. That's our logic.

That's our way of looking at it. That's the way we assess things. It's not the way that God assesses things. God says in his word, my ways are not your ways.

[6 : 42] My thoughts are not your thoughts. In fact, the distance between my ways and my thoughts are as great as a distance between heaven and earth.

That's a distance. God doesn't think like us at all. And God is showing us, and if it weren't for the word, we couldn't understand it. And that is why people have to come to the Bible and have to read and understand what God says.

God says, all have sinned and come short of the glory of God. All our righteousness, in other words, all our own good efforts, all that we are in, they're as filthy rags.

God says, your own goodness isn't good enough for me. And that's why I sent my son. God would never have sent a son into this world to die on the cross if we could be right with God.

It would be the most awful thing that God could ever have done, would be to send a son if we could save ourselves, if we could be right with God. But because of his great love for us and to us, and because we were incapable of being right with God, he sent his son, Jesus Christ, into this world to die for sinners.

[8 : 04] And so, Saul, as a proud, legalistic Jew, he believed, because he was of the people, that he was born into the place of privilege and that God couldn't but accept him.

And so, he refused to believe that Jesus was the son of God until, on the way down, Jesus met Saul. And Jesus interrupted Saul's life and Jesus said to him, Saul, why are you persecuting me?

And in that one moment, Saul of Tarsus saw his whole world changing upside down. Everything that he had believed before, just, it was like taking a huge pane of glass and just throwing it on the ground and shattering it into a hundred pieces or a thousand pieces.

Well, that's what happened to Saul. That's what he felt because everything he believed, everything he held to, everything he was passionate about, his whole future, his past, his present, everything was tied up and was taken and smashed to the ground.

And at that moment, Saul just wouldn't have known who he was or where he was or what was what. Everything he believed was dashed into pieces because Jesus, the Jesus he refused to believe in, the Jesus he was persuaded was still dead because he was put into a tomb.

[9 : 43] He didn't believe what these disciples were going around telling people that he was risen and that he had appeared to them. And he was saying, nonsense, Jesus is dead and he is not the son of God.

But at that moment, it all changed. because Jesus, in a blinding flash of light, addressed Saul and said, Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?

Everything changed. And Saul was brought to see at that moment that by persecuting the followers of Jesus, he was actually persecuting Jesus. Remember, Jesus is the head and the church is the body.

And when you get hurt, if you, if you get a real bad knock, your whole body feels it.

Yes, you feel it particularly in the one place that's it, but everything feels it. It registers everywhere. And it's the same with Jesus Christ. Every blow that is aimed at the church, every blow that is aimed at a believer because they follow Jesus Christ is felt by Christ.

[10 : 54] every Christian that's been persecuted because they're a Christian, that persecution is felt by Christ. And that's what Jesus was saying to Saul. You're persecuting of my people as you are actually persecuting me.

And so at that moment, there was great discovery made by Paul. He discovered at that moment, as we said, that Jesus was very, very much alive. And you know, Jesus is alive today.

It was C.S. Lewis, I cannot remember exactly the way he put it, but he put it in his own inimitable way. He said, there are only three possibilities with regard to the Lord Jesus Christ.

You read, go and read the Gospels. Read the claims that Jesus makes. Either it could only be someone who was mad and completely deluded, or else somebody who set out to be the greatest imposter ever.

And actually, when you read right through the Gospels, you realize it can't be either of these. The only other possibility is that Jesus is exactly who he says he is.

[12 : 10] And if that is true, which it is, then we have to waken up and look at this absolutely seriously, because it leaves every person without any form of excuse.

Jesus is making the most extraordinary claims, and if these claims are true, then you and I and every person has to fall before him and acknowledge him as Lord and King.

So this is what happened at that particular moment in the life of the Apostle Paul. and he also discovered at that moment that he was a sinner, because at that, as we say, the shattering of everything, he saw that all his Jewishness and all his legalism and all that he believed in, it was gone, and he had nothing.

As he stood, or as he fell before the glory of Christ, as it says of the Isaiah, when he saw the glory of Christ, he began to unravel. That's what the actual word means.

That's why he cried out, Oh, woe is me, I am undone. Same as John on the Isle of Patmos, when he got a vision of Jesus Christ, he fell at his feet as one dead.

[13 : 30] We cannot stand against the glory of Christ, and so that's what's happened to the Apostle. And Saul also discovered at that moment that God had a plan for him.

God has a plan for all of us, but particularly for all who follow him. And we always need to be open to what God's plans are for us.

And sometimes God's plans change for us. The very fact that we might be in one particular role or doing one particular thing doesn't mean that's the way it's to be for the rest of our life.

Because God is full of surprises for our lives. So we've always got to be open and say, Lord, what will you have me to do? And so, here's the Apostle, or he was soon to be, he was to become an Apostle.

He was going to be sent out. God had a great plan and a great purpose. And that was for this man who was a Jew of all Jews, who hated Gentiles, who would have no dealings with them.

[14 : 36] He was going to become the great missionary to the Gentile world. And he was going to be preaching to kings and to queens. And he was going to be preaching in palaces and in prisons.

And he was going to be preaching in the marketplace. And he was going to be embracing Greeks and Romans and people of all tribes and all cultures and all races.

Something that a wee while before would have been abhorrent to him. And that's what the transforming power of God's grace does. It changes us.

Nothing but God's grace can do that. It can do a right all the way around so that we become what we never believed we could. We do things that we thought were impossible.

God changes our thinking. He changes our perspective. He changes our aims. He changes our likes. He changes everything about us. That's what grace does. But it was also going to cost the apostle.

[15 : 40] That's what the Lord told him. That it was going to cost him. He was going to have to suffer. And there's often suffering in following the Lord Jesus Christ. You know a lot of people will say you know my life wasn't too difficult until I started following Jesus.

You know it's amazing how many difficulties have come into my life. How many problems how many conflicts how many things. We shouldn't be surprised. because there are forces and powers that are now against us that were never there before.

And so the Lord is telling us all this is how it's going to be. Some of the most radiant you know the apostle Paul experienced through that suffering blessings that few people have ever known.

He was given insights and understanding that were quite remarkable. and the amazing thing is that through the suffering he came to a greater understanding and a greater knowledge of the Lord Jesus Christ.

And you know it's true not just of the apostle it's true of ourselves as well. And you'll often find people who have had to go through difficult things in life. Sometimes people who have had to suffer a lot.

[16 : 58] And you'll find sometimes the most radiant of Christians. They might not think themselves that they are. Indeed they might think the very opposite. But other people will see it.

And it is because in and through these problems and difficulties and trials and suffering they've been given an even greater insight to the Lord Jesus Christ.

But chapter 9 as we see is full of Saul of Tarsus. And we see him straight away he's ministering in Damascus he starts preaching in Damascus goes back to Jerusalem preaching in Jerusalem and then you'd think chapter 10 will be full of Saul.

Chapter 11 will be full but you know when you go there that's not the case. It's not until the very end of chapter 11 that we find Barnabas searching to find Saul again.

So what has happened? Well these are the hidden years of Paul. Paul refers to them in Galatians he refers to them in 2nd Corinthians that there was this gap he doesn't mention it here in Acts but that's why Paul as it were disappears for a while because God is beginning to work in the apostle and these were the years this was a period where Paul was waiting upon God and he was learning to wait here's this man and he's bursting with enthusiasm he's longing to get out and to preach the gospel but the Lord takes him aside and you read about it as we say in Galatians and 2nd Corinthians and he's there and the Lord is dealing with him one to one and he's learning to wait and to wait and to wait and to wait upon the Lord and waiting is difficult because we're always in a hurry do you know something you can't hurry God we're always saying right Lord time to work

[19 : 03] Lord when and the Lord says I'm going to wait in order that I may be gracious and you're saying to the Lord but this doesn't feel gracious I've been waiting I've been waiting years Lord says oh you've got a few more years to wait see the Lord has a perfect time for everything and we don't understand that Jesus said to the disciples your time is always now and God is prepared to wait and to wait you find loads of examples in the Bible Moses for example who was to be God's great leader in taking the people of Israel out of Egypt you know when Moses was 40 he was ready for that remember when he killed the Egyptian he was siding although and you know the amazing thing is God had prepared Moses wonderfully for the first 40 years of his life he grew up getting the best education he was being trained in leadership he was being trained in all the best ways of Egypt

God had a plan but it was going to be a long time Moses was going to have to learn to wait but at the age of 40 Moses was ready he was in a hurry but then he had to run away God left him how long 40 years for 40 years Moses was a shepherd in the wilderness isn't that amazing and you would say oh come on Lord surely I mean one year one year time to get the people out two years five years ten years Lord what are you doing 20 years Lord 40 years later God appears to Moses and he says right Moses I want you to take my people out by that time it's a totally different Moses it's a broken Moses Moses becomes the reluctant hero oh no not me Lord I can't 40 years ago he was ready yep I'll do the work 40 years later oh no

I'm not fit send my brother send somebody else not me it was the same with Elijah God wanted Elijah to break the powers of Ahab and Jezebel and overturn the Baal worship so what did he do with Elijah he took him into the wilderness and he left him beside a little brook hidden away where he was fed by the ravens that was his teaching that was his school he was being broken and finally when he was ready when the Lord had him ready then it was time to come back onto the scene again same with Joseph languishing in the prison year after year but God was breaking him in order that he would become second only to the Pharaoh in the land same with David David you're going to be king David kills Goliath you could almost think David was ready no the

Lord says I've got to break you for seven years you're going to be hunted like a wild beast in the mountain Saul and his army is going to chase you for seven years broken broken broken then finally he's ready to be God's man God has to break our self will God has to break our ego because God doesn't use people who are full of ego and full of self because that gets in the way of his work it's people who are people who are dependent on the Lord people who are ready to do God's will and God's bidding and that's now how Saul is he is he's he's people would say these were wasted years no they weren't these were the most important years of Saul's preparation because you know when Saul started to preach then when

Saul came back onto as it were the stage beforehand Paul would have said I'm strong I'm full of zeal and full of energy I will go in my strength the apostle Paul would have boasted in his strength you know when he came back he began to boast in his weakness isn't that amazing can you imagine do we boast in our weakness why did the apostle boast in his weakness because he said it's in my weakness that God's grace is shown God's strength is shown it was difficult for the apostle you know we mustn't think that the apostle Paul was just some superhero and he just went out every day right let's go he was somebody who had been broken and he was dependent upon the Lord he had a horrendous time you read some of his testimonies of him being beaten up and broken and bothered and there was all terrible things happening to him and yet he says

[24 : 16] I have learned he said in whatever state I am to be content it's not incredible he was content in prison he was content in the shipwrecks he was content he had learned wherever he was I am where God wants me to be God has a purpose for me here I am waiting for God to show me I am waiting for him to open the door the door of opportunity the door of service see his own ego was gone his self was gone Lord I'm you and so he was able to boast he had a thorn in the flesh we don't know exactly what it was he wanted rid of it Lord I would be far far far better servant if you take away but what I'm going to do instead is give you my grace and you will find that my grace is sufficient for you and so the way of the

Christian is so different to the way of the world and of the flesh time is going just very briefly there's so many things we could say about the apostle Paul but if we went to give one example of how Paul's life then went as a missionary for the Lord if we went to Acts chapter 16 and the well known part with the Philippian jailer that's just an example and remember how Paul he wanted to go he was on a journey and he was visiting all the churches he had established be a great time and then he says self and Silas they thought let's go to Asia minor we're going to the way so they're then wondering where do we go and then Paul had this dream this vision where he saw this man from Macedonia beckoning and the apostle realized this is the way we're going we're not going to go to

Asia minor just now we're going to Macedonia and one of the things I love about this is here is this chosen servant of God probably as great a missionary has ever been and he didn't know the way except step by step by step God didn't reveal a big plan and unfold a map as it were and send out this huge diary filled to the apostle and say right Paul this is your agenda for the next year Paul didn't know he had to pray he had to ask the Lord where now what do I do now where do I go now it was the same as the father of the faithful Abraham when he left God told him get out from out of the colonies and I'll show you where to go he went out and said not knowing where he was going that's faith and that's a journey you and I are on following the

Lord day by day trusting and the owners were incensed they went to the authorities and Paul and Silas remember were beaten up terribly and put in the maximum security wing of the prison and do we find Paul and Silas saying oh Lord what on earth is going on here you directed us you sent us here we came in obedience to you and now look on my back it's pouring blood my feet

I'm in chains here Lord this is not fair you see that's why I was saying ego and self has to disappear why were they in the prison because God was going to save somebody in that prison the jailer you see we we have to be open and that's why we have to be broken by the Lord in order that we can be used and God as jailer who was suicidal and he says Paul I've got you in here because this man is going to be saved and remember when Paul and Silas are there and they're full of joy and they're singing praises to God not complaining that faith is vibrant and at midnight remember the earthquake the prison doors opened and the Philippian jailer called out in the darkness what must I do to be saved and supposing Paul had never uttered any words other than these believe in the

[29 : 31] Lord Jesus Christ and you shall be saved and he was saved and that is the same message today and Paul preached that message wherever he went he spent a long time in prison he preached it there and people were saved he ended up in palaces and before emperors and before kings and before queens and he preached it there he preached in the synagogues you must believe in the Lord Jesus Christ he preached in the marketplace it didn't matter where the apostle Paul went the message was the same he was on fire for the Lord Jesus Christ his message was believe in the Lord Jesus Christ question is have you that's the all important question we're looking at the apostle but the apostle wants us to look at Jesus you believe in your mind in accepting the truth of the word and you believe in your heart by receiving

Jesus by accepting him as a person you say today if you have never asked Jesus say Lord Jesus please come into my heart into my life now I want you to be my Lord and King remember what the Bible says whoever calls upon the name of the Lord shall be saved let us pray Lord we pray to bless us giving thanks for every good thing that you do for us and every good thing you give to us we pray that you will take us home safely bless a cup of tea coffee in the hall after and forgive us our sin in Jesus name amen we conclude singing in Psalm 130 from Sing Psalms Psalm 130 from Sing Psalms it's on page 173 and the tune is land of rest

Lord from the depths I call to you Lord hear me from on high and give attention to my voice when I for mercy cry Lord in your presence who can stand if your sins record but yet forgiveness is with you that we may fear the Lord I wait my soul waits for the Lord my hope is in his word more than the watchman waits for dawn my soul waits for the Lord and so on these four verses Psalm 130 Lord from the depths I call to you Lord from the depths I call to you Lord hear me from on I and give attention to my voice when

I for mercy cry Lord in your presence you can stand if you are sins record but yet forgiveness is with you and you may hear your Lord I wait my soul waits for the Lord my hope is his word more than the watchman waits for dawn my soul waits for the Lord O

Israel put your hope in God for mercy is with him and for redemption from their sins his people he will redeem now may the grace and peace of God the Father Son and Holy Spirit rest and abide upon each one of you now and forever more amen to know never to man so you I Thank you.