

## LESSONS FROM THE LIFE OF PAUL

### God, the Gospel, and You

Acts 7:54-58; 9:1-18

#### Notes

Often in life we look for those radical, marvelous transformations.

We love when someone accomplishes the impossible; when an abusive parent repents and is reconciled to his children; when a drug addict conquers the addiction; when an adulterer ceases her infidelity and is reunited with her husband; when the person lost at sea is found; when the medical miracle takes place; when the broken is restored and the spurned learns to forgive.

We love to hear and see stories of people being transformed.

Why? Why do we love to see transformation, to see the unthinkable happen?

When we observe transformation, it gives us hope. When we see the impossible take place, the miracle happen, the unlikely life changed, we have hope of some small transformation in our own lives.

The greatest transformation that can ever take place is the transformation of a dead sinner brought to new life by the life-giving power of Jesus through the gospel message of his great tender mercies toward us.

Tender mercies-that is what God uses to change our lives.

The mechanism by which God shows us his mercies is the gospel.

God loves you so much that he sent his Son to die for your sin that you may not suffer from the penalty of those sins.

God wants to give you the gospel. He has gone to great lengths to share his gospel with you.

And many of us except this wonderful message and many of us never do.

Many of us except this message, but never allow it to affect our lives.

As we walk into Chapter 9 of our Acts series, I want us to talk about God, the gospel, and us.

God has a plan with his gospel and his plan is to save us, change us, and use us to share that gospel and minister to others.

Imagine your life right now. What would transformation look like? What area, if you could, would you transform in your life? Is it the same area God would transform?

What could God do with your life if you allowed him to transform you through the gospel?

May we be willing to be transformed by the marvelous power of the gospel.

Our story of Acts 9 actually begins in Acts 7:57.

*<sup>57</sup> But they cried out with a loud voice, and covered their ears and rushed at him with one impulse. <sup>58</sup> When they had driven him out of the city, they began stoning him; and the witnesses laid aside their robes at the feet of a young man named Saul.*

The Jewish leaders are in the middle of killing Stephen for sharing the gospel and challenging them. Stephen was the first martyr for the gospel.

As Stephen was being murdered the man giving the approving nod was a guy named Saul.

Chapter 8 shows how God uses Philip to share the gospel and how the gospel left Jerusalem and traveled to Samaria and beyond, even to Ethiopia.

We pick back up on our story of Paul in 9:1

*Now Saul, still breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord, went to the high priest, <sup>2</sup> and asked for letters from him to the synagogues at Damascus, so that if he found any belonging to the Way, both men and women, he might bring them bound to Jerusalem.<sup>3</sup> As he was traveling, it happened that he was approaching Damascus, and suddenly a light from heaven flashed around him; <sup>4</sup> and he fell to the ground and heard a voice saying to him, "Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting Me?" <sup>5</sup> And he said, "Who are You, Lord?" And He said, "I am Jesus whom you are persecuting, <sup>6</sup> but get up and enter the city, and it will be told you what you must do." <sup>7</sup> The men who traveled with him stood speechless, hearing the voice but seeing no one. <sup>8</sup> Saul got up from the ground, and though his eyes were open, he could see nothing; and leading him by the hand, they brought him into Damascus.<sup>9</sup> And he was three days without sight, and neither ate nor drank.*

*<sup>10</sup> Now there was a disciple at Damascus named Ananias; and the Lord said to him in a vision, "Ananias." And he said, "Here I am, Lord." <sup>11</sup> And the Lord said to him, "Get up and go to the street called Straight, and inquire at the house of Judas for a man from Tarsus named Saul, for he is praying, <sup>12</sup> and he has seen in a vision a man named Ananias come in and lay his hands on him, so that he might regain his sight." <sup>13</sup> But Ananias answered, "Lord, I have heard from many about this man, how much harm he did to Your saints at Jerusalem; <sup>14</sup> and here he has authority from the chief priests to bind all who call on Your name." <sup>15</sup> But the Lord said to him, "Go, for he is a chosen instrument of Mine, to bear My name before the Gentiles and kings and the sons of Israel; <sup>16</sup> for I will show him how much he must suffer for My name's sake." <sup>17</sup> So Ananias departed and entered the house, and after laying his hands on him said, "Brother Saul, the Lord Jesus, who appeared to you on the road by which you were coming, has sent me so that you may regain your sight and be filled with the Holy Spirit." <sup>18</sup> And immediately there fell from his eyes something like scales, and he regained his sight, and he got up and was baptized; <sup>19</sup> and he took food and was strengthened.*

Several things to notice in this story.

**THE WORLD WILL PERSECUTE THE GOSPEL AND THE CHURCH.  
DON'T LET IT STOP YOU FROM DOING WHAT GOD HAS CALLED YOU TO DO  
(vv. 7:57-58)**

Stephen is martyred following his sermon to the Jews. He gave them a history of their incompetence in obeying God and recognizing his grace, culminating in the death of the Son of God-Jesus.

Following Stephen's sermon, the men rushed him and threw him off a cliff and began stoning him to death.

The man who gave the approval was named Saul.

Those believers watching Stephen's death would have many questions.

Why would God let this happen? What is God going to do about this? Doesn't God know what they are doing? Doesn't he know how bad our situation is right now?

God is aware of what is going on in your life.

God's goal is working toward the gospel in the world and in your life.

God is using your situation, just like he did Stephen's to expand the gospel to the lost, to draw his children closer to him, and to give them an even greater faith for the advancement of his gospel.

Just as with Stephen we know the world will fight the gospel and use whatever means it can to shut the gospel impact down.

But know this, no matter the pushback, the gospel will not stop.

The Jewish leaders thought killing Stephen would snuff out the gospel. What happened is that Christians fled to other towns and countries and began to share the gospel there!

God will often times use defeat and disappointment to draw you closer to him. And as you draw closer to him to realize more and more his magnificent power and love for you.

As you spend time with God, even in the midst of trials, your soul is strengthened so it may break down walls you never thought possible.

It is the world and the devil pushing you down that often makes you stronger. How? Because when we are low, we realize that our only strength is in Christ.

See, there is this saying we often attribute to the Bible, but it is not only not in the Bible, it is unbiblical.

We often say, "God won't give you more than you can handle."

Look at our text. Did God give Stephen more than he could handle? Did he give the believers who were being thrown in jail more than they could handle?

Absolutely!

God intentionally gives us more than we can handle so we can give him the load we are carrying.

God uses these times of excess load to display his glorious power in our lives.

God is concerned about the world hearing the gospel and he is concerned about you hearing the gospel.

We cannot allow the world, or even our own flesh to keep us from doing what God has called us to do.

What kind of believer has God called you to be? The kind who ministers to others, loves others, and shares the gospel?

How might God be using a difficult time in your life to actually teach or strengthen you?

Do not allow the world to cause you to cower to their demands.

Do not allow Satan to use God's plan to grow you, to actually tear you down.

The lost world will demean you for living, speaking, and standing on a biblical morality.

The lost world will try to shut you up.

The world thinks that if it pushes hard enough, gets enough regulations and laws passed, makes it hard enough the gospel will fade away.

Well, the world does not know the God we serve. For no person, group, or agenda will foil his plans.

**GOD MAY USE EXTREME MEANS TO GET YOUR ATTENTION AND GET THE GOSPEL TO YOU.**

**RESPOND QUICKLY IN HUMILITY AND REPENTANCE (9:1-9)**

Here is Saul. He is so mad that these Christians are worshipping a cursed man, who died on a tree, and are trying to worship God by worshipping this false king that he goes to the Jewish leaders and gets permission to travel to Damascus-140 miles away and bring them back to Jerusalem to face trial.

As he was about a day away from Samaria, he saw a great light, brighter than the noonday sun. Within this light was a voice, asking why he was persecuting him.

*“Everyone eventually surrenders to something or someone. If not to God, you will surrender to the opinions or expectations of others, to money, to resentment, to fear, or to your own pride, lusts, or ego. You were designed to worship God—and if you fail to worship him, you will create other things to give your life to. You are free to choose what you surrender to, but you are not free from the consequences of that choice.”* Rick Warren

The consequences of Paul's choice was not persecuting random Christians committing blasphemy, but persecuting Jesus himself.

- Notice Jesus' words, “Why are you persecuting me?”

One commentator says, “It would be hard to imagine how these words must have struck Paul. They were a complete refutation of all he had been... From this point on, Paul said nothing. He was completely broken.” (Polhill, *Acts*, 234).

To sin against the church is to sin against Christ himself for the church is his bride.

To persecute the church is to persecute Jesus

Paul is persecuting Jesus and Jesus lets him know that:

- He is not cursed
- He is not dead
- He is alive
- He is the head of the new covenant
- He is Lord

Jesus blinds Saul and the man who was going head strong into Damascus now has to be led in by someone else.

Jesus takes the number one enemy of the church and reaches out to him for salvation.

It was the certainty of the resurrected Jesus that got Paul.

Jesus says that he has plans to use Saul in ways Saul cannot begin to comprehend.

And to let Saul in on his plan, Jesus goes to the extreme.

God may use many means to get our attention. He may have to go to the extreme.

Do not be shocked as a believer or an unbeliever if God does something dramatic in your life to draw you to him.

God may have to blind you; he may bring physical illness on you; he may cause you financial hardship; relationship troubles; he may take drastic measures.

And know this. We will need many of these lessons throughout our lives, because we, just like Israel in the Old Testament, have an enormous potential to forget what God teaches us.

The reason God may take drastic measures is not that he is trying to be mean to you, but that your soul is more valuable than anything on this earth.

And God is willing to do whatever needs doing to get your attention to show you his love for you and your need for him.

And notice, Paul does not say the “sinner’s prayer, but he does recognize Jesus as Lord and follow him.

This brings up a point.

We do not need to worry about how someone gets saved, but that they are saved!

What is God doing in your life right now to get your attention?

- Conviction of the heart?
- Little things that cause you a prick of conscious or second guessing?
- Has it gotten to something big?
- The correct response when God is trying to get your attention is to respond in humble repentance.

**GOD MAY CALL YOU TO SERVE IN WAYS YOU DIDN'T EXPECT  
IF HE DOES, STEP UP, SHARE, AND SERVE FOR HIS GLORY (9:10-22)**

As Saul was being blinded on the road to Damascus, having a conversation with Jesus, on the other side of town God was getting another believer ready to be a disciple-maker to this great persecutor.

Picture Ananias at his house. He might be cooking supper one evening and God just jumps in and interrupts his day.

God tells him to go see Saul, the terrorizer. Ananias wasn't so sure about this.

He, along with many other believers, knew exactly who Saul was. They knew he was a zealous man. They knew he would stop at nothing to stomp out the church, including sending them and their families to prison and to death.

Ananias is probably thinking that God's idea is not the best idea.

He, probably, like us, is telling God he doesn't have the time, I mean the food isn't gonna cook itself; the kids have practice; he has to work late and get up early; that isn't what he is good at; he doesn't feel called to go and minister to Saul.

Ananias recognizes the very real threat Saul is to not only the church, but to his own family.

Isn't it amazing how many excuses we can get rid of; how many promises we will break; the lies we will tell; and the responsibilities we will shuck to do something that we want to do.

Isn't it also equally amazing how many excuses we can come up with when it comes to serving the Lord and the church?

Ananias shows us a wonderful principle of being willing to obey and actually obeying God when he calls us to serve.

God tells this humble believer what he desires; he doesn't share the entire plan, he just tells him to find this man and lay hands on him to bless him.

Side note: God can call you to even bless your enemy, the person who has done you wrong; the person who has messed up your life; the person who has the potential to wreck you.

And just like Ananias, as we follow the lead of the Lord, we share in the blessings Christ gives.

A.W. Tozer prayed this prayer and I think it is a good prayer for us. *“Father, I want to know thee, but my coward heart fears to give up its toys. I cannot part with them without inward*

*bleeding, and I do not try to hide from Thee the terror of the parting. I come trembling, but I do come. Please root from my heart all those things which I have cherished so long and which have become a very part of my living self, so that Thou mayest enter and dwell there without rival. Then shalt Thou make the place of Thy feet glorious. Then shall my heart have no need of the sun to shine in it, for Thyself wilt be the light of it, and there shall be no night there. In Jesus' name, Amen."*

So many of us have wonderful gifts to serve to the Lord; we have talent abounding, but the church and the kingdom is suffering because God's people will not answer his call to serve.

We are so afraid to commit to anything.

We do not need to be afraid of godly commitment.

As we commit to serve Christ and his church we are filled with his purposes and used for his glory.

Notice how God referred to Saul when talking to Ananias. The Lord referred to Saul as his "chosen instrument."

God did not haphazardly pick Saul out of a crowd. He intentionally wanted the man who was the greatest enemy to the church.

The word "instrument" means "vessel." Vessels are crafted for specific functions. God made Saul a certain way and directed his steps for a specific purpose.

God has not haphazardly brought you here today. He brought you here; you are sitting right where you are; you are listening at this very moment because God desires you to hear this:

He has made you in his image and he loves you with a heavenly love so deep that he gave his own son to purchase you from the grip of death and hell. He has intentionally crafted and molded you the way you are for his glory. Your life has eternal purpose in Christ. You are fearfully and wonderfully made for the glory of God and the fulfillment of your life's purpose is in Christ.

You may be a believer but you are unsure of your purpose. Beloved, your great purpose is to know Jesus and glorify him forever.

You will find your specific purpose as you draw closer to Jesus.

Ananias sure didn't wake up that morning thinking he would have a conversation with Jesus and he sure didn't think he would be the disciple-maker to the church's chief persecutor.

But as you spend more time with Jesus, as you draw closer to him, the grip of the world and the fears that reside within will slowly begin to fade.

You will see yourself as wholly belonging to Jesus and you will gladly serve him in any way he calls you to serve.

We are afraid to commit because we know that commitment to serve God, to serve the church, will mean at some point in the future saying “no” to an activity, an opportunity, or a privilege.

What is more important? What is more lasting?

May we allow the gospel that has saved us begin to actually transform us. Let us move from stationary bystander to dynamic participant.

Let us serve the Lord faithfully and his church with commitment and joy.

You may be here today, and you have come to visit by yourself; maybe you are with family or friends. It does not matter why you came.

You are here and you know you don't have a relationship with Jesus.

You understand that there have been many events in your life to bring you to this point at this very moment.

You know, from God's word, that he has used those events, many good, many maybe not so good, to draw you to himself.

Jesus is here for you. He desires a relationship with you. Would you respond to him today?