

Message Date: 11-08-20

To the Ends of the Earth- ACTS Part 5: What Only God Can Do

Message Title: Week 2, This Can't Be True!

✠ **T**he value of a friend

– ***What is the value of a true friend?***

– ***In high school my best friend was Terry. Together we played our electric guitars, rebuilt his dad's boat, studied, talked about girls, kept each other out of trouble (mostly) and tried to navigate being teenage boys in the mid 1980's.***

– ***I was blessed in many ways as a young man, but as a skinny awkward kid from the sticks of central Texas, one of those greatest blessings was the presence of my best friend.***

– ***Scripture speaks to the great value of a friend, and in our text today we see God use a true friend to make a critical difference at an absolute pivotal moment in the early days of Christianity.***

– ***As we pick up the story in Acts 9, Saul is being hunted by his enemies and feared by the people he needed to accept him. In that dynamic of great personal risk, a man named BARNABAS stepped forward and chose to be Saul's friend.***

– ***In time, God would use the friendship of Saul and Barnabas to help move the gospel beyond Israel and throughout the Roman world.***

– ***AND SO WE ARE CONTINUING IN JOURNEY THROUGH ACTS... BUT BEFORE we go there, today is SUNDAY NOVEMBER 8<sup>th</sup>... P.E., TRINITY ONLINE.***

– ***START with a Chronological marker. What year was DBR of Jesus? 30-36, consensus is AD 33. Hold onto that, come back to it in a moment.***

– ***LAST WEEK- Saul's conversion on road to Damascus. After three days he meets with Ananias, receives the holy spirit, is baptized, eats, and regains his strength. TODAY we see significant story of what happened next...***

– ***Starting in verse 19...***

Saul spent several days with the disciples in Damascus. <sup>20</sup> At once he began to preach in the synagogues that Jesus is the Son of God. <sup>21</sup> 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?" <sup>22</sup> Yet Saul grew more and more powerful and baffled the Jews living in Damascus by proving that Jesus is the Messiah.

✠ **T**his can't be true!

– ***Can almost hear the people in Damascus saying "This Can't Be True! Both that Jesus is the messiah, And that it is SAUL proving that he is!***

– ***One of greatest proofs of Saul's preaching was that his transformation was incredible-hard to believe if you didn't see it.***

– ***You see, Saul's transformation itself is strong evidence for authenticity of who Christ is, and his resurrection. Virtually impossible to honestly explain Saul's transformation apart from his literally meeting the resurrected Christ on the Road to Damascus.***

– ***BUT SAUL'S CONVERSION wasn't just result of what happened in that supernatural event!***

– ***For months Saul had been hearing and seeing testimony regarding Jesus***

- **Peters sermons**
- **Apostles stand before the Sanhedrin, their courage in face of suffering**
- **He had witnessed the dynamic of community of believers**
- **Heard Stephens sermon and witnessed his peace and courage**
- **Now.... His zeal for judaism, pride, and hatred for the church was sufficient for him to ignore or explain away all he saw and heard. AND SO God had to remove his spiritual blinders – did so on the road to Damascus. BUT, when God took blinders off of Saul spiritually, Saul was able to see the TRUTH of everything he had already seen and heard through the consistent witness of the very believers he was trying to destroy.**
- **POINT- Saul's transformation was the result of BOTH his supernatural conversion AND the faith testimony of believers around him.**
- **HEAR! When God saves a person, that is a supernatural act- what only God can do. And yet almost always, God will do this through the testimony- both spoken and unspoken- of other believers. ENCOURAGES US TO NOT GROW WEARY of BEING CHRIST to others- you never know how God will use our testimony. PAUL EMPHASIZES THIS IN GALATIANS 6:9**

*Let us not become weary in doing good, for at the proper time we will reap a harvest if we do not give up.*

- **God used the witness of believers in Saul's life, just as he will use your witness in the lives of others. So let us not become weary or discouraged!**
- **MOVING ON, very famous scene...**
- † Several days and many days...

<sup>23</sup> After many days had gone by, there was a conspiracy among the Jews to kill him, <sup>24</sup> but Saul learned of their plan. Day and night they kept close watch on the city gates in order to kill him. <sup>25</sup> But his followers took him by night and lowered him in a basket through an opening in the wall.

- **Saul's preaching is so effective he becomes target of assassination- great irony, persecutor has become the persecuted, both resulting from the work of Christ.**
- **What is NOT so well known about this passage is the issue it raises regarding the TIMING of these events, and a potential conflict between LUKES account of these events in ACTS, and PAULS own account he shares in GALATIANS. DETAILS. STAY WITH ME...**
- **After his baptism, Saul spends 'several days' in Damascus, preaching that Jesus is the son of God, the messiah.**
- **THEN, in verse 23, Luke tells us that after MANY DAYS has passed, there was a conspiracy to kill Saul. How long is MANY DAYS?**
- **This takes us to Galatians chapter 1... Here Paul is describing how his teaching- the 'gospel he preached' was not of human origin- that he didn't learn it from any person, including himself. Rather, it was given to him by revelation, directly from Jesus. WHEN DID THAT HAPPEN?**

Galatians 1:15-18a <sup>15</sup> But when God, who set me apart from my mother's womb and called me by his grace, was pleased <sup>16</sup> to reveal his Son in me so that I might preach him among the Gentiles, my immediate response

was not to consult any human being. <sup>17</sup> I did not go up to Jerusalem to see those who were apostles before I was, but I went into Arabia. Later I returned to Damascus. <sup>18</sup> Then after three years, I went up to Jerusalem...

– **Ok.. lets walk through this, looking at both ACTS and GALATIANS**

- **Paul receives the holy spirit, baptized, regains strength, AT ONCE begins to preach in Damascus. His message at this point centers on proving that Jesus is the Son of God, the Messiah. His SOURCE of this teaching, in these first days or weeks, was his own great knowledge of the OT scriptures and prophecies regarding the messiah, as well as the teaching he had heard from Peter, Stephen, and other believers... ALL of which the Spirit had opened his eyes to be able to understand that this all DID INDEED prove Jesus was the son of God.**
- **THEN, after this initial short period, Saul journeyed east to ARABIA, likely through the Nabatean kingdom toward what is modern day Saudia Arabia.**
- **HERE in Arabia Saul received his revelation from Jesus directly, the revelation of truth he would begin to teach and later write down in his letters to the church, which now make up the bulk of the new testament.**
- **AFTER a period of time, he returns to Damascus and resumes his preaching. THEN, after MANY DAYS, he learns of the plot to kill him and escapes. According to Galatians, these MANY DAYS totaled around THREE YEARS, the bulk of which was likely spent in Arabia.**

– **We also learn more about this even from Paul's second letter to the church in Corinth...**

2 Corinthians 11:32-33 In Damascus the governor under King Aretas had the city of the Damascenes guarded in order to arrest me. <sup>33</sup> But I was lowered in a basket from a window in the wall and slipped through his hands.

– **SO, what do we see here?**

- **Evidently, the Jews of Damascus who wanted Saul dead conspired with the governor of the region, likely citing the need to protect the public order that Saul was disturbing. Saul would be accused of this many more times. This Governor served under the authority of a KING ARETAS, who we also learn of from ancient extra biblical sources.**
- **KING ARETAS ruled the Nabateans, whose capital city was PETRA. (Debate, but) evidence that he came to power over Damascus around AD 37, and that he DIED in AD 39.**
- **Therefore, Paul's return to Damascus, which was under the control of Aretas' governor, would have happened between AD 37-39. SO, IF RESURRECTION OF JESUS WAS AD 33, this puts the beginning of Paul's ministry around 4-5 years later. HOLD THOUGHT**

– **AND SO, Paul escapes in a basket lowered from a hole in the city wall. Now we move to the second half of this story, when Saul arrives in Jerusalem.**

‡ The power of a friend

<sup>26</sup> 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.

- **Think about Saul's position here. He is being hunted by his enemies, and feared/distrusted by the people he needed to receive him. SAUL IS ALONE, sustained only by his new and absolute faith in Christ.**
- **HERE, BARNABAS ENTERS THE STORY.**

<sup>27</sup> 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.

- **Easy to miss the fullness of what happened here.**
- **Luke says Barnabas “TOOK HIM” and BROUGHT HIM, using two different words**
- **Image is that of Barnabas taking Paul ‘under his wing’, holding on to him, so that when he brings Saul to the apostles, he is essentially saying “Saul is here with ME. My credibility is his credibility. The way you receive him is the way you receive me.**
- **In other words, Barnabas puts himself on the line for Saul. He advocates for him, and in doing so he cements a friendship that would be central to God’s plan to work through Paul in the years to come.**
- **Paul is famous as the apostle/missionary to the gentile world. But it is difficult to see Paul’s ministry happening the way it did apart from the friendship and encouragement of Barnabas.**
- **Continuing on... Luke tells us that Barnabas brought Saul to the apostles, and then...**

✠ Saul in Jerusalem- is there a contradiction in scripture?

<sup>28</sup> So Saul stayed with them and moved about freely in Jerusalem, speaking boldly in the name of the Lord.

<sup>29</sup> He talked and debated with the Hellenistic Jews, but they tried to kill him. <sup>30</sup> When the believers learned of this, they took him down to Caesarea and sent him off to Tarsus.

– **Lets Return once more to Galatians...**

<sup>1:18</sup> Then after three years, I went up to Jerusalem to get acquainted with Cephas and stayed with him fifteen days. <sup>19</sup> I saw none of the other apostles—only James, the Lord’s brother. <sup>20</sup> I assure you before God that what I am writing you is no lie. <sup>21</sup> Then I went to Syria and Cilicia. <sup>22</sup> I was personally unknown to the churches of Judea that are in Christ. <sup>23</sup> They only heard the report: “The man who formerly persecuted us is now preaching the faith he once tried to destroy.” <sup>24</sup> And they praised God because of me.

- **HERE is where some try to claim there is a contradiction between Luke’s account and Paul’s.**
  - **Acts 9:27 “Barnabas brought Saul to the apostles”**
  - **Galatians 1:18-19 Paul says he saw only Peter and James, half brother of Jesus.**
- **Is this a problem? NO. Very logical scenario when we think it through.**
- **First, Luke’s purpose in writing Acts is the broad story of the growth of the church, here, showing how God was beginning to work through Paul. He is detailed at times, but leaves much detail out. PAUL, in Galatians, includes detail that is specific to the point he is making there. Two different authors, describing same events, from different perspectives and giving different details. AND THESE DETAILS DO NOT CONFLICT.**
- **Luke only tells us that Saul met with ‘the apostles’, and these apostles were Peter and James, not the entire group. But why? We will learn later in Acts that Peter and James were the leaders of the Jerusalem church. Thus, it makes sense that Peter and James met with Saul on behalf of the other apostles, wanting to first learn the truth about this feared persecutor of the church.**

– *And so, Saul stays with Peter and James for 15 days, and during that time preaches boldly in Jerusalem, even to the Hellenistic Jews, his own community. This doesn't go over well, and once again Saul is under threat of death. Then believers in Jerusalem- who just days before were still terrified of Saul, helped deliver him out of Jerusalem, north to Cesarea (on Med coast), where he likely caught a ship to the region of Cilicia (modern day turkey) and his home town of Tarsus. Saul would not return to Jerusalem for 14 years.*

– *Now, Luke sums up what God is doing in the church*

<sup>31</sup> Then 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.

– *Think of that. The gospel has spread through Jerusalem, all Judea, Samaria, and the region of Galilee. THAT IS ALL OF ISRAEL. In just 4-5 years, the church has grown from 120 people on the day of Pentecost to thousands, across all of Israel, out into the Mediterranean world, and south to the distant land of Ethiopia, considered by people of that time to practically be the end of the earth.*

† **T**he spread of the gospel that we see in Acts, in just 4-5 years, is something that only GOD could do.

– *This is a story of what ONLY GOD COULD DO.*

– **TAKEAWAYS**

† Scripture is RELIABLE

– *I took you through all of this detail to demonstrate that when you compare different versions of the same story, written by different people at different times for different purposes, the story is consistent and true.*

† Never underestimate what God can do when you choose to be a FRIEND

– *Significance of Barnabas' friendship to Saul cannot be overstated.*

– *God may be working in a persons life, perhaps a person not easy to befriend. But YOU may be the Barnabas- the encourager- they need. Your friendship may not just make a tremendous difference in their life, but beyond them in ways you might never know.*

– *NEVER underestimate God's power when He leads us to be a friend.*

– *Read Luke's last sentence again, this time from NASB...*

So the church throughout Judea, Galilee, and Samaria enjoyed peace, as it was being built up; and as it continued in the fear of the Lord and in the comfort of the Holy Spirit, it kept increasing.

– *This is a powerful encouragement to us. Let me paraphrase...*

† In the midst of *life as it really is*, as we fear God and are led by the Holy Spirit; we will know PEACE, we will be STRENGTHENED, and through us, God's church will GROW.

– *"Life as it really is"... For these believers, persecution still existed, even though it was diminished. Saul was fleeing for his life. The point here is that the peace, comfort, and encouragement of the Holy Spirit wasn't contingent on peaceful circumstances. IT IS GREAT when life around us is calm, in control. We desire this, work toward it.*

- ***But the peace and strengthening experienced by these believers in our story- this is what happens when the community of believers- TOGETHER- fear God- worship him, are surrendered to him, and together experience the presence, comfort, and encouragement of the Holy Spirit.***
- ***This was true of the church in Acts. MAY IT BE SAID OF US- in an uncertain time such as ours today... THAT THE CHURCH throughout Gypsum, Eagle, Edwards, Avon, all Eagle County... (and your community) enjoyed peace, as it was being built up; and as it continued in the fear of the Lord and in the comfort of the Holy Spirit, it kept increasing.***