

## Paul's Transformation, Part 2

Scripture: Acts 9:10–31

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I want you to turn to the 9th chapter of Acts. We're going to try to kind of hurry our way through this 9th chapter. So we'll look at chapter 9 and just glance through it.

This is the chapter that gives us the historical account of the conversion of the apostle Paul. There is so much in the book of Acts devoted to this event, the 9th chapter of Acts. And then Paul gives his testimony in the 22nd chapter of Acts to some Jewish leaders; and then in the 26th chapter of Acts, to some Roman authorities. So we have these three accounts of the conversion of the apostle Paul.

We have really no other conversion in the Scripture that is dealt with with such detail and such length. This is a powerful story of a man who became the author of 13 epistles in the New Testament, and who dominates the historical record of the gospel into the world in the book of Acts. His life is remarkable.

When Lord Nelson, the great British admiral, came back with a great victory of a French fleet over the opponent in the Battle of the Nile, when he was trying to describe to the British people what the victory was like he said, "Victory is not a large enough word to describe what has taken place." And I would have to say that about the conversion of the apostle Paul. Victory is not a large enough word, and I don't think Paul even thought it was a large enough word, and that is why including himself and all of us, he said that, "In Christ – " Romans 8:37 " – we are not just conquerors, but we are more than conquerors, more than conquerors." That is the only phrase which does justice to the conversion, certainly of the apostle Paul.

All his life was a battle. Before he encountered Christ on the Damascus Road, he was warring against Christ, against the gospel, against the church. And after that, he was warring against Satan, and against lies and deception and false religion, and fighting the battle to recover sinners from the power of darkness.

Before the scene on the Damascus Road, this man named Saul – Saul from the city of Tarsus – was a Hebrew of the Hebrews. He was a pupil of Gamaliel, a student of Jewish traditions, a man literally wound tight with a passionate desire for the hopes and expectations of Israel, who saw Christianity and the gospel as a threat to the pure religion of Judaism. He was horrified at the thought that Jesus would claim to be the Messiah and he wanted to do everything he could to stamp out the Way, the religion that was associated with Jesus, and even to imprison, and if need be, execute all the people who were associated with it. He fought hard against the truth.

We find him standing there at the stoning of Stephen at the end of chapter 7. The people who were stoning Stephen to death are laying their garments at his feet, which leads us to think he was in

charge of that execution. In chapter 8, it begins with Saul was in hearty agreement with putting Stephen to death, and was really leading a great persecution both against the church in Jerusalem and scattering the church everywhere. “He began – ” it says in verse 3 “ – ravaging the church, entering house and after, dragging off men and women who had put them in prison.” He managed to get letters from the authorities to imprison, and if need be, execute Christians, even as far away as Damascus, almost a week journey walking. And he headed there, as we know when we come to chapter 9, to hound down the Christians, take them prisoner, and make captive of them.

When he gave his testimony to the Roman leaders in the 26th chapter of Acts and the 9th verse, he said, “I thought I had to do many things hostile to the name of Jesus,” and that is what he was doing. He fought to conquer Christianity, but Christ conquered him.

And that’s the story that we’ve been looking at in the 9th chapter of the book of Acts. One day the history of the world changed. One day that history changed because one man was transformed. The blasphemer Saul became the preacher Paul. The purveyor of hate became the prophet of love. The hand that wrote in anger the execution papers for the disciples of Christ now wrote love letters with tears to the followers of Christ. That heart that beat in the passion of anger for the blood of those he opposed now desired that the blood of Christ be applied to every heart.

He was totally transformed from a volatile enemy of the gospel, a persecutor, a blasphemer, a murderer, came the greatest part of the New Testament, the noblest statement of Christian theology, the sweetest lyrics of Christian love, the most saintly and heroic person who has ever named the name of Jesus Christ. It is a transformation like few others. He became the greatest example of the power of the resurrection, the greatest example of gospel transformation, the very pattern of transformed life. And we have been looking at his life; and we’ve worked our way fairly well through this chapter. So I’m just going to give you a very brief review.

As we’ve looked at the elements of this transformation, we have seen that they’ve become sort of examples of a normal process for anyone who is encountering Christ and is brought to salvation. First of all, we saw in the opening nine verses, that he had a new master, he had a new master. Previous to this, he was really mastered by the leaders of Israel who were giving him delegated authority to do what he wanted against Christians. He was ruled, of course, beyond that by Satan and the kingdom of darkness. He received a new master.

We remember the opening nine verses how, on the Damascus Road as he’s traveling along, he is confronted by the Lord. Verse 4: “‘Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting Me?’ He said, ‘Who are you, Lord? Who are you, Lord?’” At that point, he bows the knee to Christ.

He knew the gospel. He knew it well enough to hate it and persecute it. He knew it well, and he knew it focused on the lordship of Jesus Christ. And here he is brought in blindness, shockingly on the Damascus Road by a sovereign act of the One he persecuted to bow his knee to Christ. We saw that original encounter.

And that’s where salvation for everyone begins. It’s a confrontation with Christ. It’s an encounter with Christ and a new master. This changed his soul. This changed his life. This changed his eternal destiny. And we worked our way through that – just remind you of it.

Followed by a new master was a new life, and immediately, he enters into a new sphere, a new realm, a new domain. And we see that in verses 10-12. In his blindness, he is left for days. And what do we find him doing at the end of verse 11? He is praying, he is praying.

He is talking to his Lord, his new master. He has come into a completely new existence, blinded for three days, absolutely alone. He is communing with his Lord. He doesn't eat anything; he doesn't go anywhere; he can't see; he is blind. This is the first mark of true conversion. The mark of true conversion is communion with God. A transformed life reaches out to God in communion with Him.

Thirdly, we saw that he not only had a new master and a new life, but he had a new mission. And starting in verse 13 down to verse 17, we remember that he was met by a man named Ananias; and Ananias came to him to tell him what the Lord had told him. Verse 15: "This man is a chosen instrument of Mine to bear My name before the nations and kings and the sons of Israel. He is going to be called into a new mission."

Down in verse 17, Ananias enters the house where Saul is after getting a message from the Lord, put his hands on him to symbolize solidarity and transfer to him what he'd heard from the Lord. And he says, "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."

For his new mission to proclaim the gospel to the Gentiles and to kings and to Israel, he must have a new power, a new power. And that new power, as we noted for you last time, is the power of the Holy Spirit. He is filled with the Holy Spirit. And you remember in Acts 1:8 it says, "You will receive power after the Holy Spirit is come upon you." The indwelling Holy Spirit empowers the believer.

And what did the Holy Spirit do with this man? Well, first, we could say two things happened to him. One, God refined his usable characteristics. That's what happens in regeneration. God takes what's already there, what's there in the DNA, what's there in the experience, and what makes you the person you are, what is usable about you, and God develops that into something that can be used for the kingdom: things like leadership ability, strong willpower, self-discipline, high motivation, persistence, inflexible convictions, self-sufficient independence, boldness – all of those kind of things – practicality, strength. All of those things were Paul's by creation and by development and by experience, and the Lord refines the usable characteristics.

And then, secondly, God has to replace the unusable characteristics – hatred, animosity, bitterness, anger – and he replaced them in Paul's life with love, joy, peace, gentleness, goodness, faith, meekness, self-control. He was a model of humility.

And that's what the Lord does in every life. Obviously when you have a new master, you live in a new sphere with a new life. You have a new mission to serve Him; that's the rest of your life. And you have a new power for that service, a power that refines what is usable in you, and a power that replaces what is not usable in you. And that is the working of the Holy Spirit; that's what He does.

And we are to be filled with the Spirit. We're commanded in Ephesians 5, "Being kept filled with the Holy Spirit." That's how we are to live our lives, and it produces a submission to one another. It produces psalms, hymns, spiritual songs. It produces love in a marriage. It produces submission between parents and children. It produces right relationships with the master and the slave, as Paul

goes on to lay out in Ephesians 5. So all of these things were true of Paul, and they're true of every believer.

They were remarkable in Paul's case. They were miraculous in Paul's case. And, obviously, we don't have an experience where we see Christ; he did. On the Damascus Road, he saw Christ and Christ blinded him, and he was blinded. And by the way, Ananias declares that he saw the Lord. That is Ananias' testimony. And later on, Barnabas shows up and Barnabas declares that Paul saw the Lord.

So the fact that Paul saw the Lord is confirmed in the mouth of three witnesses: Paul himself, Ananias, and Barnabas. This was no vision; this was no apparition; this was no figment of his imagination. He saw the Lord. And he began to live his life in the practicality of the control of the Holy Spirit.

He was conscious of the Spirit working in his life every day; not at the moment the Spirit was working, but by the results of the Spirit's work, and by the power with which you proclaim the truth. He developed a keen sensitivity to sin under the leading of the Holy Spirit. He had a hunger for the truth of God, the revelation of God, the Word of God, and he became an instrument through which that word came. He did nothing to grieve the Holy Spirit, nothing to quench the Holy Spirit, but everything to honor the Holy Spirit and move in the Spirit's power.

And then fifthly we said last time, he received something else in this conversion that is normal for all believers. He received a new family, a new family; fellowship with the saints.

Transformation makes a dramatic change in your relationships. All the people Saul hated became the people he loved. And all the people he formally associated with became his enemies. It happened that fast. He was a hero to the Jewish leadership; he was a hero to them. He was on a one-man campaign with their blessing and their manpower and their authority to stamp out the way, to stamp out Christianity. But as soon as the Damascus Road experience was completed, everything changed.

Chapter 13 of the book of Acts, chapter 13 tells us in no uncertain terms in verse 44. The Sabbath came and nearly the whole city assembled to hear the Word of the Lord; and when the Jews saw the crowds, they were filled with jealousy and began contradicting the things spoken by Paul and were blaspheming. In chapter 14:19, "The Jews came from Antioch and Iconium, and having won over the crowds, they stoned Paul and dragged him out of the city, supposing him to be dead."

In chapter 17 – and it just keeps going like this. Chapter 17, just by way of illustration, is no different. Verse 5: "The Jews became jealous, took along some wicked men from the market place, formed a mob, set the city in an uproar, attacked the house of Jason, were seeking to bring them out to the people." All they wanted to do was destroy believers, including Paul and Silas who were the preachers.

We find it again in chapter 21 – and I know you can read this more carefully on your own. But in chapter 21, verse 27: "Seven days were almost over, the Jews from Asia, upon seeing him, Paul, in the temple, began to stir up all the crowd and laid hands on him, crying out, 'Men of Israel, come to our aid! This is the man who preaches to all men everywhere against our people and the law and

this place, the temple; and besides he has even brought Gentiles into the temple and defiled the holy place.”

Verse 30: “Then all the city was provoked and the people rushed together, taking hold of Paul, they dragged him out of the temple, immediately the doors were shut. While they were seeking to kill him, a report came up to the commander of the Roman cohort that all Jerusalem was in confusion. He had to send soldiers – ” in verse 32 “ – to stop them from beating Paul.”

These are the Jewish people for whom he was a hero. The change in this man was so dramatic, he was their hero once, and he became their archenemy. All the people that Saul hated became the people he loved; and all the people that loved Saul became the ones who hated him the most.

His life was a life of love; read his letters. His letters just defused love to all the readers, to all the believers. He loves them and he expresses that love. How do you account for such a total transformation, such a 180 shift? Only by the power of God and a total transformation of a man’s soul.

So here is a man who has a transformed life. Everything about him has changed. That leads us to where we left off last time. Let’s pick it up down in verse 20, down in verse 20.

He also had a new message, he also had a new message. And immediately – ” verse 20 “ – he began to proclaim Jesus in the synagogues saying, ‘He is the Son of God.’ All those hearing him continued to be amazed, and were saying, ‘Is this not he who in Jerusalem destroyed those who called on this name, and who had come here for the purpose of bringing them bound before the chief priests?’ But Saul kept increasing in strength and confounding the Jews who lived at Damascus by proving that this Jesus is the Messiah, this Jesus is the Christ.”

Look, whatever critics have said about what happened to Paul on the Damascus Road – some say he fell off the horse and hit his head, some say he had some kind of staggering experience because he looked in the sun and it blinded him. They have all kinds of explanations; we talked about that last time. None of that can explain this transformation, none of it. Not any kind of accidental thing or any kind of temporal, or any kind of physical circumstance. This is a conversion that is so radical that immediately he goes from persecuting Christians to preaching that Jesus is the Christ and proving it.

And where does he go to do that? In the very synagogues that gave him the authority to capture and execute, if necessary, Christians. The transformation is just radical, radical. He cannot hold back from speaking, and he is speaking about the Lord Jesus Christ.

Now, notice, it didn’t take any time. It is an immediate transformation, verse 20: “And immediately while he’s still in Damascus, he’s just been given his sight back.” He’s just began, in verse 19, to take some food after fasting. He’s just beginning to be strengthened and still in Damascus, he begins immediately.

That is a clear word used 35 times in the gospel of Mark, by the way, a gospel which shows Christ as the perfect servant. And everything the perfect servant did, he did immediately. And here is Saul with the same kind of immediacy.

“He’s just a new convert. What’s he got to say?” I’ll tell you what he’s got to say. This is a highly educated man. This is an elite man. This is a noble person. This is somebody who sat at the feet of Gamaliel who was the most outstanding Jewish teacher in the world at that time.

He has mastered arguments against Christ. He has mastered arguments against the gospel. He has mastered arguments against Christian preachers and Christian testimony. He listened to Stephen’s entire masterpiece presenting and leading up from the Old Testament all the way to Christ, the Righteous One. He understands it because he has argued against it and fought against it; and now that has totally reversed, totally reversed. He knows what he has said against it, and he now knows it’s true. So in Damascus, there were many synagogues; that’s where he went “to the synagogues,” not one, but many, verse 20 says.

There were many Jews in Damascus; many, many Jews. And there were, therefore, many synagogues. And it was those synagogues – listen – it was those very synagogues that had sent word to Jerusalem to have the Jerusalem authorities send their arch-conqueror of Christianity, their arch-persecutor Paul: “Send him up here because the gospel is reached here. We need Paul to put a stop to it.”

The very synagogues that had solicited his help were the places that he went. He went right back there and lifted up his voice. The man’s courage is really incredible. The very synagogues from which he had received the letters to persecute Christians of the places he goes.

It would have been much easier for him to begin anywhere else, anywhere else, anywhere. But he goes right there because he’s not ashamed of the gospel of Christ, as it says in the 1st chapter of Romans. And what is his message? It’s very instructive.

What did he say when he arrived? He proclaimed Jesus, saying He is the Son of God. He proclaimed Jesus, that He is the Son of God. That is the Christian truth; that is the Christian gospel; that is accurate. He is the Son of God. Jesus is the Messiah. Jesus is God, the Son. Jesus is deity. Jesus is one with God.

You remember the Jews condemned Jesus because he made himself equal with God by saying God was His Father? He is, therefore, the true representative of God. He is the true Anointed One, the King of Israel, the promised Messiah, Son of God, title of incarnation.

Saul is preaching Jesus as God incarnate. The Holy Spirit is filling him. How is he doing this? He’s just proclaiming Jesus, but he’s backing it up. If you go to the end of verse 22, he’s proving it, he’s proving it.

Now how do you prove to Jews that Jesus is the Son of God? How do you prove that? How do you prove it? It’s only one place you can go. Where is it? The Old Testament. You have to go to the Old Testament to prove it.

You think he knew the Old Testament? Absolutely. He’s an Old Testament scholar; comes out in all his letter. He was an Old Testament scholar because he had been trained by the elite Old Testament scholars. He was an Old Testament scholar because he was a Hebrew of the Hebrews.

As to the tradition, he was passionate and zealous. As to the law, he literally was without visible manifest guilt. He knew his Judaism cold. And all of a sudden, the Holy Spirit illuminated all that he knew about the Old Testament, and it all pointed to Christ.

In a sense, he had his own Isaiah 53 experience. He looked back on Christ and it hit him: "He was wounded for our transgressions, He was bruised for our iniquities." He is the Anointed One of God. He could have declared, and perhaps did, that Jesus was the fulfillment of Isaiah 53, that Jesus was the fulfillment of Psalm 22, that Jesus was in His resurrection the fulfillment of Psalm 16, that Jesus was the final ultimate Lamb depicted in all the other animal sacrifices; Jesus was the servant of Jehovah, the slave of Jehovah who would come and redeem His people.

He probably did what Jesus did in Luke 24, went back to Moses, the prophets, and the Holy Writings and taught them everything about Jesus that he knew there. He proved it. It's an amazing thing when a highly educated Jew, who knows his Old Testament well, comes to Christ.

I studied under such a man, Dr. Charles Feinberg. Fourteen years he studied to be a rabbi, mastered the Hebrew language, a master of the Old Testament; absolutely brilliant, brilliant man. He knew the Old Testament so very well. He knew it in its original Hebrew language.

He married his wife who was part of the Fiddler on the Roof community. They had great roots and great Jewish history. And he was incredibly saved by the grace of God. And all of a sudden, all that Old Testament truth and revelation focused on Jesus Christ. He was prepared for that, and so was Paul.

Now please notice, this is how you evangelize. You evangelize by proving that Jesus is the Son of God. Could I just encourage you that evangelism is doctrinal; it is doctrinal; it is doctrinal.

It's fine to give a testimony. It's fine to talk about what the Lord has done in your life. You've got to get beyond the subjective, right? You've got to get beyond that. You've got to get to the facts of the gospel.

The facts of the gospel is laid out in 1 Corinthians 15: "How will anybody believe unless they hear? And what do they have to hear? They have to hear about Jesus. How will they hear without a preacher?"

Faith comes by hearing the truth concerning Christ, concerning Jesus. It is objective. You give the gospel. You prove that Jesus is the Messiah, that He is the Lord, the Christ, the Savior.

Christianity is not subject. It's not an experience; it's not a feeling; it's not an emotion; it's not some kind of esoteric trip; it's not a religious idea. It's historic fact. We don't want people to think it's an experience, we want them to know it's historical. That is why it is so important to affirm the authority of Scripture, because if we lose the authority of Scripture, then we have no basis to validate history; and history is the basis of all our Christian faith.

Christianity is not subjective, it's objective. Paul knew that instantaneously, and so he began to

declare that Jesus is the Son of God, and he proved it to the Jews the only way you can prove it, and that's from Scripture. The gospel is objective. And when you give the gospel, you must prove the gospel is true from Scripture. It is centered not in your life and not in mine and not in our experience, but in the saving acts of God recorded in Scripture, culminating in Christ, historical acts that were accomplished outside and above and beyond our lives. It has to be so. So he preached Jesus as the fulfillment of Scripture.

Then in verse 21, just to point out: "All those who were hearing were amazed and were saying, 'Is this not he who in Jerusalem destroyed those who called on this name, and who had come here for the purpose of bringing them bound before the chief priests?'" What has happened to this man? They are shocked at the sudden and total transformation.

By the way, notice the word "destroyed" there, which leads us to think that he must have killed more than just Stephen. So they're trying to figure out what has happened to this man is the transformation that shocks everyone. Meanwhile, verse 22: "Saul kept increasing in strength and confounding the Jews who lived at Damascus by proving that this Jesus is the Christ."

I would just point out to you, he didn't have some mystical way of doing this. He proved it the only way you could prove it to Jews, and that's from the Old Testament, the Old Testament. Never hesitated. He had a new mission; now he had a new message.

He illustrates really what should happen to all of us. We have a new master, we have a new life, we have a new kind of communion, we have a new family, we have a new mission, we have a new message, we have a new power. And then that leads us to another very obvious thing, a new enemy. The transformed person has a new enemy.

Verse 23 – and this will take us to the end of this section: "When many days had elapsed – " now I have to stop there. "When many days had elapsed." The Jews plotted together to do away with him. Now the hunter becomes the hunted. The one who came to kill becomes the one they want to kill.

Now let me help you with "after many days" because this is a big time lapse. Literally, it's sufficient days. This denotes a time of considerable duration. According to Jewish computation, it could be a time period as much as three years: sufficient days.

You say, "Well, why so vague? Do we have any idea?" Yeah, we do. We have a very good idea of how long it was. Listen to Galatians 1:15, Paul writes, "When God, who set me apart, called me through His grace, was pleased to reveal His Son in me so that I might preach Him among the Gentiles. I didn't immediately consult with flesh and blood. When I was converted, I didn't consult with flesh and blood, nor did I go up to Jerusalem to those who were apostles before me; but I went away to Arabia – " Nabatean Arabia, not Saudi Arabia, different " – and returned once more to Damascus. Then three years later I went up to Jerusalem."

In that little phrase, back into chapter 9, where he says, "Many days had elapsed," three years. He spent three years in Damascus and in Nabatean Arabia before going to Jerusalem. So verse 23 talks about a plot that was hatched that caused him, verse 26, to go to Jerusalem; but three years have gone.



And what went on? What was he doing in Nabatean Arabia? He was receiving revelation from the Lord. He was receiving revelation from the Lord. That's what he says in Galatians 1: "I didn't get it from flesh and blood." God was downloading everything into the mind of the apostle Paul.

After returning from Arabia to Damascus – I don't know how long he was back in Damascus – but after returning, the Jews plotted together to do away with him. Why? Because when he came back, he was going to be preaching again. This gets very interesting. And so they plotted to do away with him.

But their plot became known to Saul. They were also watching the gates day and night so that they might put him to death. They didn't want him to get out of the city, they wanted to kill him. So they watched the gate. Fascinating statement in 2 Corinthians 11:32.

In Damascus, the governor under Aretas the king, kept the city with a garrison. So the governor of Damascus was under the authority of this man Aretas the king. Just coincidentally maybe. Aretas was the king of Nabatean Arabia from 9 BC to 40. Saul had been there for three years, and I believe that he had probably irritated the life of that king. And when he came back to Damascus, that king made sure that that garrison was surrounding the city so that he couldn't escape.

All that to say he had new enemies. Everywhere he went he made enemies, everywhere. But his disciples took him by night, let him down through an opening in the wall, lowering him in a large basket. Ancient cities, of course, are surrounded by walls, high wide walls, and those walls were houses, and their windows were on the outside of the wall, of course, projecting through the wall.

In the dead of night, Saul was taken into one of those houses and lowered to smuggle himself out of the city. Where did he go? Well, he came to Jerusalem, verse 26 said, he came to Jerusalem. He was trying to associate with the disciples, the apostles, who were still there.

Remember what I told you when the persecution broke out in the city of Jerusalem, believers were scattered everywhere, but not the apostles? Back to chapter 8: "On that day, great persecution –" verse 1 "– began against the church in Jerusalem. They were all scattered throughout the regions of Judea and Samaria, except the apostles."

So he finds his way back to Jerusalem and he wants to meet the apostles. He wants particularly to meet Peter. He wants to meet Peter. He tries – imperfect tense – which means repeatedly, over and over again. And they refused to do that because over and over again – the same imperfect tense – they were all afraid of him. They didn't know what had gone on for three years. They were still afraid of him in three years.

They hadn't seen him in three years and he still literally conjured fear in everybody. Until a big-hearted Christian, a Son of Encouragement Barnabas, verse 27. "Barnabas took hold of him and brought him to the apostles and described to them how he had seen the Lord on the road, and He had talked to him, and how at Damascus he had spoken out boldly in the name of Jesus." There's the testimony of Barnabas, to add to the testimony of Ananias, to add to the testimony of Paul that he actually did see the Lord. In Damascus it was Ananias who cared for Paul. And here in Jerusalem it is Barnabas, Son of Encouragement.

Barnabas is highly respected, by the way, among the apostles, highly respected among the believers. He becomes Paul's companion, right, Paul and Barnabas. Barnabas explains Saul's conversion. Saul wants to do something to make reparations, to make it right. He wants to be received back in. He wants to be embraced.

So what can he do to sort of validate his desire? Verse 28: "And he was with them, moving about freely in Jerusalem, speaking out boldly in the name of the Lord." He did that for two weeks.

How do I know that? Because in Galatians 1:18, it says, "I came to Jerusalem to become acquainted with Peter, or Cephas, and stayed with him 15 days. And I didn't see any other of the apostles except James, the Lord's brother." So the apostles that he did see were James, the Lord's brother, who was really beyond the apostles, not one of the original apostles; but Peter. He spent 15 days with Peter and he moved freely, speaking out boldly in the name of the Lord.

Verse 29: And where was he doing this? "He was talking and arguing with the Hellenistic Jews." No do you remember this whole scenario? If you go back to chapter 6, you go back to Pentecost.

Go back to Pentecost, you know you have many Hellenistic, that is Jews living outside the land of Israel. They're in Jerusalem for the Passover. The Spirit comes, the church is planted, thousands are converted. Days and weeks, thousands and thousands more. And so there are many Jews who stay. They don't go back because there are no churches anywhere else, they stay there. They are associated with Hellenistic synagogues.

There are synagogues all over Jerusalem planted there by Jews from other countries other than Israel. There are foreign Jews you could say. That is where Stephen began his ministry, because when the believing widows among the Hellenistic Jews weren't getting enough food, people had to step up and help feed them, and they chose some Hellenistic men and identified them sort of as deacons and gave them that mission. They were men full of the Holy Spirit, full of grace, full of the power of God. They started preaching in the Hellenistic synagogue.

And, of course, Saul is from Tarsus, that's in the Hellenistic world. So he goes, in a sense, back to that familiar place where so many had preached, where Stephen had preached and the others had preached, and he debates with them and he talks with them and he argues with them.

And what's he arguing? Again, he's doing the same thing he did in Damascus, the very same thing. Verse 27: "He, in Damascus, speaks out boldly." Verse 28: "In Jerusalem, he speaks out boldly." And the whole point is to prove again that Jesus is the Son of God.

And what was the result? They were attempting to put him to death. Wow. He left Jerusalem three years before to go kill Christians. He comes back, and the people that sent him want to kill him.

His life is in grave danger, and so we pick it up in verse 30: "When the brethren learned of it, they brought him down to Caesarea –" on the coast "– and sent him away to Tarsus. "Paul, you've got to get out of here. You need to go home."

In Galatians 1:21, he says, “At that point, I went into the regions and Syria and Cilicia where Tarsus was.” He left. “Go away – ” they said “ – go home. Get some rest. There’s no stopping what’s going to happen in Jerusalem, it’s going to end badly. You need to be safe.”

They don’t presume on God; they don’t presume on God’s power; they don’t presume on God’s providence, on God’s grace. They’re thoughtful, careful. They know the power that this man possesses. They know the strength of his capability to argue for the sake of the gospel. They know how useful he is, they know that, so they send him home.

What do you think he did when he got home? Yeah, chapter 15, verse 23, he writes a letter. It says this – this is a letter, verse 22: “It seemed good to the apostles and the elders and the whole church, to choose men from among them to send to Antioch with Paul and Barnabas – Judas called Barsabbas, and Silas, leading men of the brethren, and they sent this letter by them.”

Listen to this. This is a letter from the apostles, including Paul: “The apostles and the brethren who are elders, to the brethren in Antioch and Syria and Cilicia who are from the Gentiles, greetings.” How did you get brethren in Syria and Cilicia? That’s where they sent Paul. They sent Paul out of Jerusalem back there. What do you think he did? He went back to his own city, back to his own hometown and not only proclaimed the gospel to the Jews, but he proclaimed the gospel to the Gentiles.

And further, look at verse 41 of chapter 15, this is amazing. Verse 40: “Paul chose Silas. They were committed by the brethren to the grace of the Lord. And he was traveling through Syria and Cilicia, strengthening – ” what “ – the churches.”

I mean this man is a force. Talk about church planter. They sent him away for a rest and he plants churches, churches. The final touch on his life, verse 31, at this point anyway, we’ll see him again in a few chapters in Acts.

But final note here: “So the church – ” verse 31 “ – throughout all Judea and Galilee and Samaria enjoyed peace.” Why did it enjoy peace? Because it’s arch persecutor was gone. He wasn’t persecuting and he wasn’t there to be persecuted, and the believers had scattered. “The church enjoyed a measure of peace, being built up; going on in the fear of the Lord and in the comfort of the Holy Spirit, it continued to increase.”

I love that. That occurs over and over in the book of Acts, the increase of the church. It multiplied; it grew. Incredible moment in the history of God’s redemptive plan. Transformed man, Saul: the world that he touched felt the power of this man and it was the power of God.

I remember many years ago as a student reading a homily in a letter of Paul to the Romans by John Chrysostom who was an early church father known as a great preacher. He was called the golden-tongued orator. And John Chrysostom said he loved the city of Rome, especially because it was there at the city of Rome that Paul died. And Chrysostom said it will be there that he will be raised up to meet the Lord in the air. And then Chrysostom said this: “I would like to see the dust of Paul’s body that took the gospel everywhere, the dust of that mouth which lifted the truth on high, and through which Christ spoke; the dust of those feet that ran throughout the world and were never weary; the dust of those eyes that were blind but which recovered their sight and saw the salvation of

multitudes.”

Interesting to think that he would have wished to see even the dust of such a man. What a fearless, powerful man he was. Peter takes over the story in the book of Acts now and Paul comes back in later; and we'll get back to him soon. Let's pray.

Father, we thank You that we've been able to spend a little time tonight just thinking about this portion of Scripture, so wonderful, and we need to think and meditate on it. We need to read it again and again slowly and think deeply on not only this chapter, but the testimony of Paul in chapter 22 and 26, and his testimony in Galatians 1. We need to understand the amazing way in which You transform souls. How total is the transformation; how radical is the transformation; never better illustrated than in the case of this man, a hater of Christ who became a lover of Christ. A persecutor of Christ who became a preacher of Christ. There is no explanation for this transformation other than divine power, and that's the power of the gospel.

We thank You, Lord, for its transforming work in our lives. We're grateful for that power. We see that power in the lives around us all the time. We see it in our own lives.

Help us, Lord, not to minimize the greatness of salvation. And help us to so live that we put on display that transformation. Paul was transformed, and he acted transformed, and he put on display that power by being an obedient and trusting and faithful sacrificial servant. And may it be that we live visibly transformed lives to put on display what You've done for us by Your saving grace. We give You praise, in our Savior's name. Amen.

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