

The Story – Unit 7 - Chapter 29

Sermon 2 - "Paul's Mission"

April, 19, 2015

His name was Stephen. He was one of the people in the early church that we talked about last week. Some of the Jewish leaders didn't like what he was saying about Jesus of Nazareth. In fact, they lied about him saying that he was saying bad things about Moses and even God. The religious leaders brought him before them. When they ask if the accusations were true, he began preaching to the religious leaders. It is interesting to read what he says to the leaders in Acts chapter 7. He basically begins with Abraham and recounts the story of God all the way up to King Solomon. Stephen, in one sermon, does what it took us almost 20 weeks to do here at capital city.

After he talks about King Solomon, he says "You stubborn people! You are heathen at heart and deaf to the truth. Must you forever resist the Holy Spirit? That's what your ancestors did, and so do you!" This enraged the Jewish leaders and they dragged him out of the city and began to stone him. It says, "his accusers took off their coats and laid them at the feet of a young man named Saul." It goes on to tell us that "Saul was one of the witnesses, and he agreed completely with the killing of Stephen."

Last week, we learned about the early church. We got a glimpse of what a church can be and should be. Today, we focus on an individual life. His name was Saul, but it was later changed to Paul. Today we get a glimpse of what an individual life can be and should be.

Saul was on a mission. It says "Saul was uttering threats with every breath and was eager to kill the Lord's followers." Saul's mission was to persecute followers of Jesus. I want us to get a glimpse of how Saul thought about Jesus. I think Saul had to go through some of the same struggles that we do. But some of the conclusions which he came to about Jesus, challenge us to come to the same ones.

With Stephen's death, the early church began to spread because of persecution. It says, "Saul was going everywhere to destroy the church. He went from house to house, dragging out both men and women to throw them into prison." Saul has heard about Jesus, but he's just another *wanna be* Messiah, who ended up dying on a cross. Saul did not have the luxury of what we have talked about these last several weeks. He wasn't one of the disciples, who for 40 days got to see Jesus and interact with Jesus. He didn't have the luxury that you and I have to know who the Easter story. He only knew the crucifixion story.

I have to be honest. There are some things I like about Saul's story. I am glad he wasn't a disciple. I'm glad he didn't physically see Jesus after the resurrection. I am glad that he had to come to a belief in Jesus without physically seeing him.

I am so glad God used him. I am glad God can use a murderer. I am glad God can use somebody who is pretty prideful. I am glad God took a Jew and used him to spread the Gospel to a Gentile world. If I am going to pick someone to be a main character in the New Testament of my Bible, it is not going to be Saul. Once again in *The Story*, God chooses the most unlikely character for his purposes.

On one of his missions to the city called Damascus, "a light from heaven suddenly shown down around him. He fell to the ground and heard a voice saying to him, 'Saul! Saul! Why are you persecuting me?'" "Who are you Lord?" Saul asked. And the voice replied, "I am Jesus, the one you are persecuting! Now get up and go into the city and you will be told what you must do." It says, "Saul picked himself up off the ground, but when he opened his eyes he was blind. So his companions led him by the hand to Damascus. He remained there blind for three days and did not eat or drink." That is it. Nothing else is said.

Can you imagine being blind for 3 days? I wonder if Saul thought, "Maybe this is what it is going to be like for the rest of my life. If this Jesus can blind

me, maybe he is just going to kill me." I can't imagine the fear of the unknown that lived for those 3 days. I wonder about the guilt. Even though he couldn't see, I wonder if the faces of the people he killed became crystal clear. As hard as these 3 days were, I am glad Saul had to deal with this kind of darkness. This kind of darkness is where we are broken. Saul was being broken. You and I have to deal with this darkness. We know what lives inside of us. You know the struggles that are going on inside of you. I know some of you are struggling with your feelings. You are in a hole and can't get out. Some of you are medicating those feelings with a little too much Bourbon each night or 1 or 2 more pills than you should be taking.

Some of your relationships are broken. You are tired of hurting your spouse and you are tired of being hurt. Maybe it is job or money problems. Maybe your health is really bad. But it has been a long 3 days of darkness.

I want to remind you of Jesus being in a tomb of death and darkness Friday, Saturday and Sunday? Paul tells us "the Good News is about Jesus. Jesus was shown to be the Son of God when He was raised from the dead by the power of the Holy Spirit." And this is what is so cool. In the midst of Paul's 3 days of darkness, when he didn't know what was next, God did. God was working on his behalf. God spoke to a believer in a vision named Ananias. The Lord said, "Go over to Straight Street, to the house of Judas. When you get there, ask for a man from Tarsus named Saul. He is praying to me right now." He tells Ananias "Saul is my chosen instrument to take my message to the Gentiles and to kings, as well as to the people of Israel."

In the early church, Saul, who is also called Paul, quickly becomes the main character throughout the book of Acts. He was the least likely person to become the leader for the church. First, he used to persecute Christians. Second, for the gospel to be taken to the whole world, specifically the Gentiles, you would think that God would use a Gentile. If you are going to reach Africans, you would think God would use an African. If he wants to reach Germans, you would think he would use a German. But God uses a Jew to reach the Gentiles.

You have to be careful when you think God should do something a certain way. If I have learned something throughout the story, God uses the most unlikely of people for his purposes. Remember Abraham and Sarah. Why would He choose a couple, who are in the 80's and 90's, who can't have children, to build a nation? Why do you choose a teenage girl to be the mother of the Messiah? Why not a Jew to take the message of Jesus to the Gentiles?

Paul established 10 non Jewish churches. He writes 13 of the 27 books of the New Testament. He took 3 missionary journeys. The chapter you read for this week begins at Paul's first journey.

Doc and I talked this week and Doc said he didn't like the word *journey*. He didn't like it because of the implication. The implication may give off this trip to here and back. I was talking with a family this week. They and their 4 kids drove out west for spring break. He drove 15 straight hours. Then for the next 5 days they went to national parks and camped in tents. I can't think of anything worse. My idea of roughing it is a Motel 6. Then on the last day, he drove 15 hours straight back home. This isn't that kind of trip for Paul. These journeys were how he was living his life. He went to major cities and tried to establish a group of believers. Sometimes he would be in a city up to 2 years.

Here at Capital City, we challenge anyone who is a part of this place to think about your journey with God. How are you doing life with God? Around here, we call it "The Path of a Disciple". Let me remind you. On this path, there are certain stages, so you know where you are on the journey.

The first stage is Just Looking. This stage is where you are checking God out. A lot may not make sense, but you are willing to ask the question. The second stage is Getting Started. You are being drawn to God. You may have made some commitments to God. You are trying to develop consistency on this journey. The third stage is Digging Deeper. You want to know God more. You are trying to grow and mature as a disciple. The final

stage is All In. It is not about you. It is about God and His agenda for your life. It is about loving God and loving people. Just like Paul, it is a way of life.

A few months ago, I was in Indianapolis with some other men and women who work at churches and work in the area of discipleship. One church had four stages: infant, child, adolescent and adult. Just so people could see if progress was being made, they would ask how they were doing with the issue of selfishness. As an infant, you are going to be pretty selfish, but as you grow you should be less selfish and more selfless. You can't say you are an adult and say you are really selfish. Maybe that is a good one for us.

Here is what I want to do with the rest of our time. I want us to think about this word *journey*. It is a word that mirrors the Christian life. Today, let's not think about *journey* in terms of location, let's think *journey* in regards to who we are as we go. So as we focus on Paul, I don't want to tell you where he went, I want to tell you who he was as he went. The things that marked his journey may need to mark our journey as well.

The first thing that stands out about Paul is he was willing to do whatever it took for someone to know Jesus. A small, but significant thing in Paul's life was his name change. I mentioned this earlier that his name was Saul and I kind of glossed over that his name was changed to Paul. In Acts 13:9, it says "Saul, also known as Paul." That is it. I would love to tell you that there's some spiritual reason for the name change. Do you remember Jacob? In the Old Testament, Jacob was a liar and a cheater for the first 40 years of his life and then one night he wrestles with an angel from God. After wrestling with God, God changes his name saying, "You are no longer Jacob, but Israel." We know that Israel has 12 sons who become the 12 tribes of Israel. Jesus is one of the descendants. Amazing!

Saul was a Jew and this was his Jewish name. Saul was also a Roman citizen. He had the Latin name of Paul. After his conversion, wanting all Gentiles to come to Christ, he took on the name that they would be more accustomed to. His method was to put people at ease and to approach

them with his message in a language and style they could relate to. Paul was willing to do whatever it took for someone to know Jesus.

One of the major cities he went to was Athens. While Paul was in Athens, he was deeply troubled by all the idols he saw everywhere in the city. He was given the opportunity to address the city council. He could have said, "God says you shall have no idols before me." He doesn't. Look what he says, "Men of Athens, I notice that you are very religious in every way, for as I was walking along I saw your many shrines. And one of your altars had this inscription on it: 'To an Unknown God.' This God, whom you worship without knowing, is the one I'm telling you about. (Acts of the Apostles 17:16, 22-23 NLT) "He is the God who made the world and everything in it. Since He is Lord of heaven and earth, He doesn't live in man-made temples, and human hands can't serve His needs-for He has no needs. He Himself gives life and breath to everything, and He satisfies every need. (Acts of the Apostles 17:24-25 NLT) Whatever it took!

What about you? Are you willing to do whatever it takes so that someone will know Jesus? Would you be willing to change your name? Would you leave your job? Would you be willing give up something really important to you? Monks in the monastery used to contemplate this question ... Would you be willing to go to hell for someone if it meant they could go to heaven?

Listen to what Paul says in 1 Corinthians 9:19- 23. "I have become a slave to all people to bring many to Christ. When I was with the Jews, I lived like a Jew to bring the Jews to Christ. When I am with the Gentiles, who do not follow the Jewish law, I too live apart from the law so I can bring them to Christ. But I do not ignore the law of God; I obey the law of Christ. When I am with those who are weak, I share their weakness for I want to bring the weak to Christ. Yes, I try to find common ground with everyone, doing everything I can to save some."

Another characteristic of his journey was that difficult times did not keep him from sharing Jesus. Many of us think that if we are a Jesus follower, things will go well. If things go well, we see that as a sign that God is with

us. If things don't go well, sometimes we think God is not with us and we have missed His will. That type of thinking isn't from scripture. Things did not always go well for Paul. It was a very hard journey.

In Antioch of Pisidia and Iconium, Paul and Barnabas are run out of town. In Philippi, he gets beaten with rods and thrown in to prison. A mob in Thessalonica tore the city apart looking for Paul and Barnabas. In Lystra, they stoned Paul and dragged him out of town and the only reason they stopped was because they thought he was dead. The believers pray over him, he gets up and he goes back into the city. I have to be honest with you. (In that situation) I am turning in my resignation. I am done with the journey. It just isn't worth it. It was worth it to Paul.

What do hard times do to you? Do they cause you to drift from God? Do you question if He cares? Difficult times seemed to draw Paul closer and make him more dependent on God.

The final aspect that I want to tell you about is the reason Paul was able to do whatever it took for someone to know Jesus. It is the reason hard times did not keep him from sharing Jesus. The aspect of Paul's journey that allowed these other things, is that he was connected and sensitive to the Holy Spirit.

Do you remember when Saul was blind for three days? "Ananias went and found Saul. He laid his hands on him and said, "Brother Saul, the Lord Jesus, who appeared to you on the road, has sent me to that you might regain your sight and be filled with the Holy Spirit." We are told something like scales fell from his eyes, and he regained his sight. Then he was baptized.

Do you remember the little verse out of Acts 13:9? "Saul, also called Paul, was filled with the Holy Spirit." Paul could not have accomplished all that we have talked about today without being connected to the Holy Spirit-living inside of him. Let me take you back to Jesus' resurrection. For forty days he appears to them, and near the end of the forty days Jesus tells

them, "Do not leave Jerusalem, but wait for the gift my Father promised, which you have heard me speak about. For, John baptized with water, but in a few days you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit. You will receive power when the Holy Spirit come on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth." You can't do this without the Holy Spirit.

Do you know who the selfie is really of in the Book of Acts? It is the Holy Spirit. In a listing of the Books of the Bible, some will describe the Book of Acts as Acts of the Apostles, but this should be Acts of the Holy Spirit of God.

I told you Paul was connected to the Holy Spirit, but he was also sensitive to the Holy Spirit. Paul was not a puppet; The Holy Spirit, the great puppeteer pulling his strings. Paul was compelled and drawn to people and places on this journey. He wasn't given a map saying go here, then here. I would liken it to when I am driving. Especially, on a long trip, it is easy to drive for a while and not notice anything. You have been in the zone, not very aware. But sometimes, I am specifically looking for an exit. I notice every sign. I am on the maps on my phone. Paul was connected and very sensitive to any opportunity the Holy Spirit might put in front of him.

Probably 10 years ago, Rebecca and I bought a treadmill for our home. We used it for a couple years, but one day it quit. I think a fuse went out. I went to Lowe's and they didn't have the right kind. I found the sheet that came with the treadmill and there was a parts number. The message said they were back ordered. A couple of years went by. The treadmill sat in the room. It wasn't making a difference in our live because we weren't getting on it and using it.

So let me ask, on the path of a Disciple. Where are you? Are you Just Looking, Getting Started, Digging Deeper or All In? How are you doing with selfishness? How willing are you to do whatever it takes for someone to know Jesus? Do hard times shut you down on your journey or are you

willing to hang in there? Are you becoming more connected and sensitive to the Holy Spirit?

Grace Gone Viral. We have seen what a church can be. Last week we learned that the church is not a movie theater, a restaurant, a grocery store or a gas station. All those are about us. We are to be entertained, we are the consumer and we are the audience. Last week, we said, what if we became a church where God is the audience and everything we do is not for us, but for him. And from this week, what if every day, we lived our lives where the Holy Spirit had our focus and our attention and everything we did was for Him.

In November of 2013, my oldest daughter got married. I got to marry them, but we did it a little differently. Traditionally, the preacher is up front and the couple has their back to the audience. We did it differently. I wanted everyone to see them. I had my back to the audience. That was in case I cried. I wanted Billy and Mackenzie to be the focal point.

So, we wanted to end today, with God, Jesus and the Holy Spirit being the focal point. They are our audience. They are the only ones up front.