*Session 4*

***Saul is Saved***

Introducing the Study

As He did with Joseph being sold into slavery in Egypt, God took the death of Stephen, what others intended for evil, and used it for good. Though the Jewish officials put Stephen to death to strike fear into the fledgling Christian movement and stamp it out, their violence scattered the church, pushing the Christian message out of Jerusalem into other areas. They unknowingly contributed to God’s redemptive plan of blessing every nation with the gospel.

**How might our perspective of suffering change when we consider God’s broader plan of redemption?**

The gospel was on the move, yet persecution continued. One of the main perpetrators of that persecution was a young Pharisee named Saul. Bent on destroying what he saw as blasphemy to the religion he loved, Saul was tireless in his efforts to seek out and imprison Christians. But here again we see God’s unexpected work and unmerited grace take hold. Saul had a great role to play in God’s ongoing story of redemption.

**Who are some people or groups of people we might consider beyond the reach of God’s saving grace?**

**Setting the Context**

The Bible first introduces us to Saul at the stoning of Stephen. Saul was at least a cheering bystander, if not an active participant, during the first Christian martyrdom. Saul was a Roman citizen, born in Tarsus of Cilicia. But according to his own testimony, he was brought up in an idealistically Jewish fashion. His parents were Pharisees, strict adherents to the law. Being brought up in this environment, Saul was staunchly religious, holding himself and others to the highest legal standard. As a strict Jew, Saul refused to associate with anything unclean, especially Gentiles.

**How would Saul’s refusal to associate with Gentiles correspond to God’s law? To God’s heart?**

As a young man, Saul lived in Jerusalem and learned from an esteemed rabbi named Gamaliel. Saul’s education would have included years of studying Jewish history, the Psalms, and the writings of the prophets.

As a Pharisee, Saul saw Christianity as blasphemy. The idea that God could become a man was, in his mind, an affront to the holiness of Yahweh. So severe was this offense that Saul believed it should be punishable by death, as it was with Stephen, so he made it his life’s mission to root out other Christians. But God had a different future in mind for Saul, which would involve him going by his Greek name. “Paul’s Life” (p. 47) provides an overview of that future.

**What do stories of salvation—all of which are miraculous—teach us about the heart of God and the power of the gospel?**

CHRIST Connection

The conversion and calling of Saul is a demonstration of God’s power to save. Through an encounter with the crucified and risen Jesus, this once-hardened persecutor of God’s people began his journey to becoming the greatest missionary the world has ever known. Only the gospel can transform a public opponent of Christ into a fervent witness to His salvation.

Continuing the Discussion

Watch this session’s video, and then continue the group discussion using the following guide.

**What is your biggest takeaway when you think about the conversion of Saul?**

**In what ways should Saul’s encounter with Jesus encourage us in sharing our own faith?**

***As a group, read Acts 9:3-9.***

**What might Jesus have wanted to teach Saul through his blindness?**

**Given his background, what might Saul have been thinking about during those three days of blindness and fasting?**

Jesus didn’t ask Saul why he was persecuting the church but Him personally. This is not because He does not care for the church; instead, Christ so identifies with His followers that to attack them is to attack Him. Jesus revealed Himself to Saul and gave him instructions, which Saul followed immediately. Saul’s fasting and blindness were not punishment but an appropriate response to the intensity of his encounter with Jesus. Just as he was blind spiritually, he was struck blind physically. But God would lift both forms of blindness.

***As a group, read Acts 9:10-16.***

**How do you think Ananias felt when the Lord instructed him to take care of Saul?**

**What does God’s plan for Saul reveal about His power and purposes?**

Ananias’s response of “Here I am, Lord” revealed a heart that was eager to please the Lord and obey Him. Where most Christians would have looked at Saul with warranted fear and trepidation, God wanted Ananias to see a “chosen instrument” He would use to carry the gospel to the known world. We must not write off anyone, even those who are hostile to the faith, because God’s power in the gospel can melt even the hardest heart.

***As a group, read Acts 9:17-20.***

**What is significant about the way Ananias addressed Saul?**

**What does Ananias’s response to God’s direction reveal about his faith?**

**What stands out to you about what Saul did shortly after being baptized?**

God could have healed Saul without the personal interaction with another believer, but God has never intended anyone to live for Him apart from the fellowship of the church. When Ananias addressed Saul as brother, he was affirming Saul’s new relationship with the church. He was no longer a persecutor of the faith; he was now part of the family of faith. After Saul was baptized, he began proclaiming the One he had scorned. Though Saul might not have known everything about following Christ, he knew enough to begin sharing the gospel with those around him.

MISSIONAL Application

Record at least one way you will apply the truth of Scripture as one whose hardened heart has been changed by Jesus.

Personal Study 1

**Saul is confronted by the Savior.**

***Read Acts 9:3-9.***

Saul was deeply disturbed. A start-up band of blasphemous followers of a rebellious Rabbi named Jesus was claiming He had been resurrected from the dead. It was ludicrous, and yet the movement was growing. This talk of Jesus being the resurrected Son of God needed to be stopped. So Saul set out with his colleagues on a hunt to find, persecute, and eradicate all who were allegiant to Jesus of Nazareth.

Stephen’s death had driven those who loved Christ into deep mourning and also scattered them throughout the region (Acts 8:1-2). For those fleeing Jerusalem, Damascus would have been one of the closest major towns just a few days travel away. When Jesus’ disciples scattered, Saul eyed the nearby city as a likely destination for many of them. Seeing the opportunity to continue his campaign to eradicate the church, Saul’s fury turned from Jerusalem toward Damascus.

As Saul approached Damascus, he was most likely considering how he would capture and eliminate those who followed Christ in the city. But he would not do the capturing that day; instead he would be the one captured. His capture began in the form of a bright light and a question.

“Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?” The question confounded Saul. He did not recognize the voice as coming from Jesus because he did not know Jesus. But Saul knew it was a divine messenger whom he needed to heed with reverence. But why would an angelic messenger from the one true God confront him about his righteous effort to get rid of those blaspheming God? Saul wasn’t persecuting God; he was trying to serve Him! The Pharisee couldn’t answer the divine messenger’s perplexing question, so he responded with a question of his own: “Who are you, Lord?”

Jesus identified Himself as the One being persecuted because Saul was persecuting His followers. What Saul was doing to the disciples he was actually doing to Christ Himself. At this moment, humiliation and humility began to set in. The world as Paul knew it was about to change, and the world as we now know it was about to begin its formation. Saul’s marching orders from the high priest were about to be usurped by orders from the Great High Priest—“go into the city, and you will be told what you must do.” Sounds simple enough, but it was easier said than done.

Luke, described Saul this way: “though his eyes were open, he could see nothing,” a clear reference back to the teachings of Jesus when He had called the Jewish religious leaders “blind guides” in Matthew 23.

If you have been “churched” your whole life, beware. It is easy to become convinced your religious ways are the same as Christ’s ways when instead they are actually opposed to His righteous purposes. Jesus doesn’t confront us to produce superficial, religious obedience. That was what Saul excelled at before his confrontation. Instead, Jesus confronts us to show who He is and to transform our hearts, leading to loving, genuine obedience. Jesus’ encounter with Saul shows that He can soften even the hardest hearts of people full of themselves.

**God used a pretty unique confrontation with Saul to get his attention. In what ways do you see Jesus confronting people today?**

**What are some ways we can be blind and confuse religious obedience with what truly pleases God?**

Personal Study 2

**Saul is called for a mission.**

***Read Acts 9:10-16.***

God making surprising choices is a consistent theme throughout Scripture. When God chose someone to make into a great nation, he chose Abraham, a man with a wife who could not have children. Then when God continued His covenant through the descendants of Abraham, He chose to do so through the younger brother, Jacob, rather than the older one, Esau. Later, when God chose a new king for the nation of Israel, He chose David, who didn’t look like a king or have the right pedigree. And when God chose to send His Son to be born as a baby, He chose for that birth to happen in a stable and for common shepherds to be the first witnesses to the Rescuer’s arrival. God works in surprising ways through surprising people.

So perhaps we should not be surprised when God once again made a surprising choice for whom He would send to take the gospel to the Gentiles. He chose Saul, the last person anyone would have expected. No one could have predicted that Saul, the ardent persecutor of the church, would become one of her greatest champions and heralds. That included a man named Ananias.

Put yourself in Ananias’ position for a moment. Surely he was excited to hear the voice of the Lord and he was eager to obey. Notice the difference in how Saul and Ananias responded to the Lord. Saul wanted to know who He was; Ananias wanted to know how he could serve Him. “Here I am, Lord,” Ananias declared, unaware of the great risk God was about to call on him to take. The instructions were straightforward, though. Ananias was to go to Straight Street to the house of Judas to give marching orders from Jesus to Saul.

Saul—the persecutor, imprisoner, and murderer of people like Ananias. Jesus said Saul would be expecting him. Ananias began processing this baffling instruction from God. His fellow Christ-followers and he had heard of Saul and no one was planning on having breakfast with him any time soon.

Ananias’ reply was basically, “Maybe you have the wrong guy and wrong address, Lord.” But Ananias was not trying to question the authority of Jesus; he wanted to understand why Jesus would call on him to run straight toward danger. It was difficult to understand. But Jesus was adamant: “Go.” Ananias was to step out in faith and serve the man who had come to his city to kill him.

But God’s instructions were not without explanation. God assured Ananias that Saul had a pivotal role to play in God’s story of redemption. This man—the one responsible for the reign of terror that had fallen on the church—would experience such a radical transformation that he would be an instrument of the gospel. Before he had spread fear; now he would proclaim forgiveness. He had been a champion of the law; now he would preach grace. He had believed Gentiles to be unclean; now he would welcome them into the kingdom. And he had inflicted suffering because of Christ; now he would suffer for Christ. Saul was to be sent out on mission, and it was a mission he never expected.

So Ananias obeyed and his heart was opened to a man who should have been his enemy but who was now his brother. And at the same time, Saul’s eyes were opened to the gospel of Jesus, he was filled with the Holy Spirit, and he was baptized as the sign of being a true disciple of Jesus. The Christ-persecutor was now a Christ-follower. Saul, like Ananias, was now called on to step out in faith to share the gospel, even when things would come full circle and he would be persecuted for his faith (Acts 9:16). We should all be grateful for the obedience of Ananias, the Damascus resident whom God used to encourage the man who would become perhaps the greatest missionary and theologian of the church.

**We normally think of God sending us to share the gospel with unbelievers. How does God send us to other believers too?**

**How have other believers come alongside you like Ananias did for Saul?**

Personal Study 3

**Saul is united with other believers.**

***Read Acts 9:17-20.***

There is one word that must have made all the difference for Saul. There he was, blinded physically, and coming to understand the extent of his spiritual blindness. Then there was a knock on the door of the little room where he had sat for the past three days without eating or drinking. And that’s when he heard the word: “brother.”

How sweet that word must have been to the ears of the blind man. How he must have perked up when he heard it. This word was followed by an explanation that the person behind the voice he heard had come on behalf of Jesus, the One who had appeared to Saul on the road, so that his sight might be regained and that he would be filled with the Holy Spirit. There was not an “I-told-you-so” tone of arrogance accompanying what he heard. What he heard was not a word of judgment. Instead, it was a word of grace. Jesus had sent someone to speak truth into the confusion that had become Saul’s life.

This interaction was the launching pad Saul needed. Something like scales fell from his eyes and he could physically see again, but more importantly, he was also beginning to see spiritually with vivid clarity. After, Saul went where he had originally planned to go—the synagogues—but with a much different message: “He is the Son of God.” Imagine the surprise of those who knew of Saul, the zealous persecutor of the church, when they heard him proclaim the very thing that had been grounds to execute Stephen.

Furthermore, imagine the surprise of the Jews who were beginning to believe Jesus was the Messiah because of the message from this fledgling preacher whom Jesus had just confronted. Saul preaching Jesus confounded the Jews (Acts 9:22), meaning, Saul was so convincing and clear that his listeners were at a loss as to how to refute him.

If we keep on reading in Acts, we see that Saul eventually made his way to Jerusalem. When he got there, he was met with suspicion. After all, this was the same man who had been breathing down the neck of the fledgling church. But here again we find another Christian willing to stand up and vouch for the new convert. This time it was Barnabas, whose name means “son of encouragement.” Barnabas endorsed Saul, which served to encourage him in his mission.

In both of these cases, God used the fellowship of Christians to solidify and perpetuate Saul’s calling. The same thing happens today. It is often through the church that we discover how God has uniquely gifted us to proclaim and demonstrate the gospel, and it’s through the church that we find the necessary encouragement to persevere in that calling.

While not all of us are called to be Paul, we are all called to be Ananias. We are all, as part of God’s fellowship of believers, meant to be the ones who offer support and encourage others. We are meant to be looking—and looking with expectation—for where the sovereign hand of God has positioned us. We might not ever gain the notoriety of Paul, but we must move toward the spirit of Ananias. In doing so, we must approach every single interaction, no matter how common and ordinary it might seem, with the same words that characterized this great supporting character in the biopic of the apostle: “Here I am, Lord.”

**Who has served in the role of Ananias or Barnabas for you?**

**What are some of the obstacles you encounter in serving others as Ananias or Barnabas did?**