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How the Church Expands

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Acts 9:1-9 (ESV)

But Saul, still breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord, went to the high priest and asked him for letters to the synagogues at Damascus, so that if he found any belonging to the Way, men or women, he might bring them bound to Jerusalem. Now as he went on his way, he approached Damascus, and suddenly a light from heaven shone around him. And falling to the ground, he heard a voice saying to him, "Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?" And he said, "Who are you, Lord?" And he said, "I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting. But rise and enter the city, and you will be told what you are to do." The men who were traveling with him stood speechless, hearing the voice but seeing no one. Saul rose from the ground, and although his eyes were opened, he saw nothing. So they led him by the hand and brought him into Damascus. And for three days he was without sight, and neither ate nor drank.

Well, we are very near the end of our Bible overview. We've gone through the entire Old Testament, looking at how God created the world. How then God cleansed the earth from all of the evil that existed after we fell into human sin through a great flood. How he then populated the world by confusing our language and spreading us all around the globe as human beings, reflecting his image everywhere.

Then we looked at how, through the patriarchs—Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and Joseph—God called a people to himself. And then how they became enslaved. And then they were freed by the great Moses and then ushered into the Promised Land by Joshua and Caleb, the spies that had great faith.

And then in the Promised Land, how they wandered from God and were called back to God, and wandered from God and were called back to God—through the prophets, through the judges, and with the different kings that led them. And then we had 400 years of quiet in the Scriptures before we entered the New Testament.

And we're doing this so we might have an understanding of how the Bible is laid out. And then, of course, the New Testament is the arrival of Christ and the recording of his life in Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. And now we're in the book of Acts, one book describing church history.

In the book of Acts, we see in the timeline we're at the near moment where we are in human history—from the very beginning with Adam and Eve to this time of Christ, and then the Pentecost and the Holy Spirit being poured out in a new way under a new covenant that God has made with us as men and women in the world.

And then in this book of Acts, we highlight the start of the church, and specifically Peter and Paul, who are spoken much of in this writing from Luke, known as the Acts of the Apostles. And so we're highlighting this early church time and what we can learn from it, and what we can learn from Peter and Paul's life at the start of the era that we're living in—in the Church of God, the Church of Jesus Christ.

And what we can learn from them—I want to highlight three. The first is this: when we consider Peter and we consider Paul, it's very clear that past mistakes do not disqualify a person from being greatly used by God. Doesn't matter what your past is, how much evil you've done, how immoral you've been, what kind of deceptions you've tried to trick those around you with. It really doesn't matter before God. You can come to him and still be cleansed by him and used by him in a great way.

We see this with Peter and with Paul. Peter's life is such a great example in our text for today.

We see that Peter was hostile to Jesus at times. We even know that he denied Jesus numerous times in his journey with Christ. But we also understand that as Peter was rebellious against Jesus and rebuking Jesus at times, and was very emotionally intent and had an anger that got out of control at times, Jesus was gracious with him.

The night before Jesus was betrayed, when they were sitting at the Last Supper, Jesus predicted that someone would deny him three times. Of course, everyone wanted to know who this was. And Peter said there was no chance it would be him. But yet, by the next morning—from Thursday night into Friday morning—before the rooster crowed three times, Peter said things like, "I don't even know the man. I don't know him." People knew that he had been with him, and he denied it greatly.

Yet, after Jesus was resurrected, he appeared to Peter and encouraged him and called him back to himself. And after Jesus ascended and went to heaven, and the Pentecost came, and Jesus' promise of the Holy Spirit was fulfilled, people around them at that time were amazed and perplexed at the power of God among them in Jerusalem on that day of Pentecost. But some said, "They're filled with wine. They're drunk."

And it was at this time when Peter, I believe, started being used by God in a whole new way. The Scripture says this: Peter, then standing with the eleven—the twelve disciples who were there—lifted up his voice and addressed the crowd in Jerusalem, saying to them:

"Men of Judea and all who dwell in Jerusalem, let this be known to you or give ear to my words. For these people are not drunk as you suppose. It's only 9 a.m. in the morning. But this is what was uttered by the prophet Joel from the Old Testament, where God said, 'In those days, I will pour out my spirit on all people. Young men, old men, young women, old women—they'll dream dreams and see visions.'"

And then Peter went on to give his first sermon under the power of the Holy Spirit. And as he addressed that crowd that day, telling of the nature of human history and what they'd done to the prophets and what they'd just done to Jesus, it says this: under the work of the Spirit, 3,000 people were cut to the heart that day and joined the Church—the New Testament Church.

Peter—from one who denied Jesus, was violent in his anger, sometimes rebuked the Christ, the Messiah—became one that he used greatly.

And then there's Paul. Paul, we would think, would be beyond the reach of God. I sat in a small group on Friday morning, and the gentleman in this group—we talked about a man that we're all familiar with in our community, and we've watched him slide farther and farther and farther away from God.

And one of the gentlemen said, "I think he's beyond reach." And my heart just sank as I was studying Paul, because there's no question that many people thought Saul, who became Paul, was beyond reach.

He was one who approved of Stephen's—one of the early disciples—stoning, his execution. He was standing there giving his affirmation. He was breathing murderous threats against the disciples of the Lord. He went to the high priest and asked for letters from the synagogue at Damascus, so that if he found any belonging to the Way—they called themselves the followers of the Way back then, Christians and believers, they did—if he found any belonging to the Way, he might bring them bound back to Jerusalem.

He went to Damascus just to find Christians, tie them up, and put them in prison in Jerusalem. Now, as he was on his way and he approached Damascus, suddenly a light from heaven shone around him. And falling to the ground, he heard a voice saying to him, "Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?"

This was a stubborn man of deep rebellion, of great anger, a murderous man. "Why are you persecuting me?" He said, "Who are you, Lord?" He said, "I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting. But rise and enter the city, and you will be told what you are to do."

And of course, Paul—Saul, who became Paul—is credited with writing most of the New Testament and has probably had the greatest influence on believers since this time.

A few years back, my son called me after a chapel time that he had with the Iowa Hawkeyes. And as he was listening to the chapel time, there was a gentleman presenting the chapel time named Ron Gruber. Ron was a member of the Sons of Silence in Waterloo for many years. He is known as murdering numerous people—or he self-confesses to doing this—murdering numerous people around the country as one of the hitmen for the great Sons of Silence motorcycle gang.

But one time, when he was running from the police and he was out in the woods hiding from the police, this man, who was deeply hardened in his heart, had a little conversation with God. And through this conversation, much like Paul's conversation, he decided to stand up and walk out of the forest that he was in and give himself to the police and start his way of repentance.

God has used Ron greatly. A few years back, we had him at the Cedar Falls Bible Conference, and I could not believe the crowd that turned up to hear his testimony. Ron still runs a small church out here, not far from Grundy Center, Iowa, out in the country. Many people thought someone like Ron would be beyond the reach of God's grace. But we see in the early Testament here of Peter and then Saul, that really no one is beyond the reach of God's grace.

It doesn't matter what your past or where you come from, what shame you're carrying. Jesus went to the cross to pay the penalty for human sin and be the lifter of our shame, so that our conscience could be cleansed, our heart purified, and the Holy Spirit could use us. It doesn't matter how dirty we are. This is why Jesus said to the Pharisees, "You foolish people." He said, "First clean the inside of the cup, and then the outside will be clean."

Christianity is not about external behaviors. It doesn't matter what external behaviors you've had. It comes from the internal heart. And if God touches the human heart and cleanses it by his blood, then that person can be available to the flowing of the Spirit of God in their lives. And we're living in this time where, when a person confesses Christ, that cleansing Spirit comes within us and begins to do his work.

And so we see in the New Testament Church, there's no one beyond God's reach. We can all be used greatly by him.

We also see that we all have uniquely different callings and designs from God, as we have this deep longing in our heart to understand not only that we're precious and important—that we're very valuable, intimately valuable to God—we also want to know that we're special, that we're unique, that we have something unique about us and a unique calling in our lives.

And when children begin to understand that, that they are special and unique, you know what they do? They don't feel the need so much to compare themselves with others or compete with others. And our world does such a great job of trying to get people to compare themselves with one another or compete with each other. When God says, "I just want you to be free to be who I created you to be, to be used for the very unique purpose that I gave to you—why I sent you here."

Because each one of us should understand that when God looks at the world and he looks at us, he sees us uniquely different from every other human being. He rejoiced in the day each one of us was born. He's excited about sending us here to the earth for a specific purpose.

We see that with Peter. Peter was not like Paul. Peter was a great preacher who, more than Paul, stayed in one area and did his preaching. But Paul was a missionary traveler who was more of a teacher.

And if you study through the book of Acts, you'll see that God gave all kinds of different gifts to different individuals. And they were not to compare themselves against one another, but they were to live into the uniqueness that God gave them. And as they did this, the church started to flourish, and it started to grow, and it started to be strengthened and expand.

But it took a while for the disciples to figure this out, that this was a team effort where God gives each person unique gifts. It's not about this world, but it's about internal accomplishment. It's not about glory for individuals this side of heaven, but it's about advancing the eternal kingdom of God here on the earth, and we're all in partnership with it.

It's interesting. Near the end of Peter's life, when Jesus was reinstating him after he denied Jesus three times, he asked Peter if he loved him, and he said, yes, I do. And he asked him again if he loved him, yes, I do. And the third time he asked him, and then he said to him, "This truly I say to you, Peter, when you were young, you used to dress yourself and walk wherever you wanted. When you are old, you will stretch out your hands, and another will dress you and carry you where you do not want to go. You will stretch out your hands." He said this to show the kind of death Peter was to glorify God with. And after saying this, he said to him, "Follow me."

We know from church history that Peter also was crucified, but he asked to be crucified upside down because he was not worthy to be crucified in the way of his Lord.

But when Jesus told him about this unique calling on his life, this unique purpose, Peter looked around and he saw the disciple whom Jesus loved. John writes this. This is John. He saw John following them, and Peter saw him and said to Jesus, "Well, Lord, what about this man over here? What about his calling? What about his life?" Jesus said to him, "If it is my will that he remain alive until I come, what is that to you? You follow me."

Each of us is given a unique calling. We shouldn't compare ourselves with others. We shouldn't compete with others. We should be asking God, "God, what is my purpose? What is your plan for me? How have you made me? What is my unique giftedness, and how can I contribute?"

And you know what we do? We often make excuses. Oh, Lord, I'm too young. Oh, Lord, I'm too old. Two of those are addressed in Scripture. Paul said to young Timothy—he said, "Let no one look down on you because you're young, but be an example for others, child of the King." Caleb, too old—85 years old when they went into the promised land. And Joshua asked him which land he wanted, and Caleb said, "Give me the hill country, for 40 years ago I'm still as strong in my spirit as I was then. And now I want to show it in faith before God."

Maybe other things get in the way—excuses about how we're feeling or things that have happened to us in life. Self-pity. Cynicism. Some sort of enslavement to some sort of sin. And we miss God's purpose and plan for our lives.

But there's always grace. God has a unique calling for each of us. He has an inspired life he's calling each of us to live into. And then we see that God is doing his work in the world through many different people all the time.

In the Book of Acts, you see something supernatural happen. The church quickly goes from Jerusalem to city after city after city after city, as the Holy Spirit breathed life into people who were available to him.

The word traveled as they obeyed God. And all of a sudden, the work of God around the world started to change the whole culture.

And the start of the New Testament church is the start of the Holy Spirit's power, working in the hearts of every believer that makes themselves available to him—all around the world. And wherever we go, whatever we do, no matter what our past, God can use us greatly by His Spirit.

The Book of Acts says this: The churches were strengthened in their faith. They kept growing and maturing in their faith, and they increased in number daily.

Fascinating. Somehow, spiritually at that time, the church was getting more and more and more. When it says faith, it means confident in God. The church was getting more and more confident in God because they were walking with him, seeing him work in their midst. And because of this—not weekly, but daily—the church was growing.

How did this come about? Acts 2:42, probably one of the most famous verses in Acts, says this: They devoted themselves to the teaching of the Bible. They gave themselves to what this revelation tells us. They let it soak into them. They had fellowship around this together as a team, and the breaking of bread together, and they prayed—day and night, they prayed.

How does the church go forth in the world? First of all, through the foundation of prayer. If we're lifting our hearts towards God in prayer, the praying church is the advancing church.

I can only tell you that as I studied this this week, friends, I just found myself saying, "God, would you do it again? Would you draw people to yourself so powerfully that they devote themselves to your word, they encourage each other in it, and they just pray—and then watch what happens?"

I just want to ask you today, friend, without any excuses, sins, temporary things set aside—have you been asking God what he has for you, what he has for you in life? Are you seeking him, knocking on his door, saying, "God, here I am. I'm available. I'm ready. I'm willing"?

Because that's what they did. They just sat there and said, "God, whatever you want." Maybe the Spirit is speaking to you today.

This is the era we're living in, friends. God is being patient with the world, not wanting any to perish, but all to come to everlasting life. They need Jesus. And how do they see Jesus? Through his people, filled with His Spirit, out in the world, serving him, being the salt and being the light of the world.

And the power of this in our lives comes from prayer.

Let's pray together.

Father, we thank you for teaching us about your ways in the world. We thank you for giving us this unique history of the church that we're in. We thank you for breathing your Holy Spirit into your people once they believe.

Father, we do need a sensitivity to your Spirit. Our soul gets so distracted, so filled by things of the world. We have so much information around us. And in the middle of this, your still quiet voice is still speaking, still whispering, still calling us to you—to find strength, to find power, to find life.

And then you stir in us, Father, the supernatural life of your Son.

Father, give us ears to hear. Hearts to see. Hearts to believe. Father, thank you for many who are surrendered to you. May we surrender even more and be more available to what you have for us in the days ahead.

We pray it in Jesus' name. Amen.