



Sermon Paul ... Planting Seeds of Faith

Today we're beginning a new message series entitled "Great People in God's Story." There are lots of ways to read Scripture in order to grow as a Christ-follower, but one of the best is to focus on the remarkable stories of some of the remarkable people that are a part of God's story. We can all gain valuable insights by studying their lives, their failures and successes. We'll also learn, over and over again, how God uses ordinary people just like you and me to do extraordinary things to expand God's Kingdom. It's my hope that, by the end of this series, we'll not only be informed about great people in God's story, but also inspired by the witness of their lives, inspired enough to take fresh, bold steps of faith in our own corner of the world.

We begin our journey with a remarkably influential person: the apostle Paul. No individual, apart from Jesus, shaped the Christian faith more than Paul. Not only was Paul a remarkably effective missionary in the ancient world, tradition ascribes to him authorship of 13 of the 27 books of the New Testament, over 30% of the New Testament's content. I'd like to share with you a little of Paul's history, then dig more deeply into today's Scripture reading, and finally suggest some things that we might learn from Paul for our own faith journey.

Paul was born in the city of Tarsus, which is in present-day Turkey. His birth name was actually Saul. So why does one man have two names? No one is really sure. It could be that Saul changed his own Jewish name (Saul) to a non-Jewish equivalent (Paul) in order to be more readily accepted by non-Jews during his missionary journeys. It's also possible that God changed his name at his conversion – something God has a history of doing: Abram to Abraham, Sarai to Sarah, Jacob to Israel ... you get the picture.

While we don't exactly know how Saul became Paul, what we do know is that, as a young man, Saul traveled to Jerusalem to be trained as a Pharisee. Being a Pharisee was a big deal in first-century Judaism. Pharisee literally means "separated ones." The Pharisees were a small but very influential group who were committed to strictly obeying the Jewish laws and traditions. They saw it as their calling not only to please God with their obedience, but to preserve and protect the traditions by enforcing them in the community. Paul trained as a Pharisee under the tutelage of a famous rabbi named Gamaliel. That tells us something important about Paul: he was one very bright man. This is the ancient-world equivalent of earning your Ph.D. at Harvard.

And not only was Paul bright, he was also zealous about his work. In fact, the very first time we meet Paul in the Bible is in Acts 8, during the execution of Stephen, the first Christian martyr. Listen to how this hero of the Christian faith is introduced:

"And Saul approved of their killing him. That day a severe persecution began against the church in Jerusalem, and all except

the apostles were scattered throughout the countryside of Judea and Samaria. Devout men buried Stephen and made loud lamentation over him. But Saul was ravaging the church by entering house after house; dragging off both men and women, he committed them to prison."

It would take an act of God to transform a guy like that into a disciple of Jesus Christ, and that's exactly what happened. In Acts 9, we're told that Paul is traveling to the ancient city of Damascus to arrest Christians when he is literally blinded by the light and engaged in conversation with the Lord.

Long story short, Paul is a changed man. All the zealous energy he once invested into persecuting the church he now invests into growing it. Paul becomes a force to be reckoned with. In partnership with others, Paul takes three major missionary journeys in his lifetime, traveling literally thousands of miles on foot, horseback and by boat. He proclaims the Gospel, plants new churches and mentors new leaders. He writes long letters to those churches and leaders to support, teach, correct and encourage them. Some of those letters are Scripture to us today: Romans, 1st and 2nd Corinthians, Galatians, Philippians, 1st and 2nd Timothy, to name a few.

Paul's ministry is remarkably productive, but it is far from easy. Paul meets with many hardships along the way. When someone questions Paul's motives for preaching the Gospel, Paul responds by listing what he has suffered for the Gospel. He writes:

"Five times I have received from the Jews the forty lashes minus one. Three times I was beaten with rods. Once I received a stoning. Three times I was shipwrecked; for a night and a day I was adrift at sea; on frequent journeys, in danger from rivers, danger from bandits, danger from my own people, danger from Gentiles, danger in the city, danger in the wilderness, danger at sea, danger from false brothers and sisters; in toil and hardship, through many a sleepless night, hungry and thirsty, often without food, cold and naked. And, besides other things, I am under daily pressure because of my anxiety for all the churches."

And if you imagine Paul as some big guy built like a linebacker, easily able to withstand such punishment, think again. A second-century historian described Paul as "a man of small stature, with bald head and crooked legs ... with eyebrows meeting and nose somewhat hooked."

The Bible doesn't tell us how Paul's ministry or life ends. The final chapter of Acts, which is as far as the Bible takes Paul's story, tells us that Paul stays under house arrest in Rome waiting to stand trial under Caesar. Legend, however, suggests that Paul is executed by the emperor Nero.

Sort of makes you feel like a spiritual wimp, doesn't it? And why is Paul willing to suffer so much for the sake of the Gospel? One word: gratitude. Paul is so grateful to God for the gift of God's

unconditional love and forgiveness, provided through the cross of Christ. Paul believes that God has not just saved him from sin and death, but that God has saved him for a life of loving and sacrificial service. And so Paul invests all that he has and all that he is into God's mission.

Today's reading from Acts 17 is a classic picture of Paul in action. He enters the city of Athens, a cosmopolitan center of idol worship, where philosophers and spiritual seekers from around the ancient world gather to exchange ideas. The text tells us that Paul is "deeply distressed." That phrase literally says that Paul is "greatly upset in his spirit." Why is that?

Perhaps Paul is upset because God's commandment against idol worship is being so blatantly disregarded. But I suspect that the deeper reason is that it breaks Paul's heart to see such spiritual hunger seeking satisfaction in nothing more than wood or stone. The people of Athens are looking for God in all the wrong places. Paul has found the living God in the risen Christ, and he longs for others to do the same. To quote Martin Luther, Paul is "one beggar telling another beggar where to find bread."

It is that passion in Paul that drives him to preach the good news to the crowds in Athens. As always, Paul knows his audience, and meets them right where they are. He doesn't condemn them for their idol worship. Instead, he praises them for their spiritual seeking. Paul even quotes one of their poets in the midst of his sermon.

But Paul never shies away from speaking the whole truth about Jesus; not just the parts that he knows his audience will find easy to swallow. Not surprisingly, not everyone likes or accepts what Paul has to say, but Paul knows it isn't his responsibility to change anyone. That is God's job. Paul's job is to point people to Jesus.

What can we take away from Paul's life that helps us live as disciples in the world today? Let me share three thoughts with you.

First, Paul's life is motivated by gratitude for all that God has done for him. Paul knows he doesn't deserve God's love and forgiveness. In fact, Paul refers to himself as the worst of sinners. Perhaps he is reflecting back to the days when he was a persecutor of the church. But Paul is deeply grateful for the gift of God's love and forgiveness revealed in the cross of Christ. And so Paul's life of faith is never a duty or an obligation. It is a privilege. Can you honestly say that about your faith life? Is the generous investment of your life, your time and your money, done primarily out of duty or delight? Guilt or gratitude?

Second, Paul's faith is built upon his personal experience with the transforming love of God. Paul meets Jesus in a very real way, and it changes his life. That's a pattern that I see repeated over and over again in people's lives today. An addict is set free by turning her life over to God. It's an experience of being "born again" that changes her forever. A man mentors a group of young boys in middle school ministry, and the bond that they build, and the faith that he sees growing in those boys, transforms him. A couple goes on a mission trip to Africa, and there they see God at work in amazing ways, and they are never the same. Disciples work in the Mission Outpost and see the transforming power of God's love at work. The tears of joy in the eyes of those who are served are matched by the tears of joy in the eyes of those who serve.

Personal experience with the transforming love of God changes people. Have you had that experience? If not, I want to challenge you to take a step of faith, engage in service in some meaningful way. Serve in the Mission Outpost. Be a mentor to kids in family ministry. Become a tutor at Echo Park Elementary this fall. Do something. Get engaged. It will change your faith life.

Finally, become a planter of seeds. Share God's love in simple, practical ways throughout your day, wherever you live, work or play. Invite a friend or neighbor to join you as you worship or serve. Get into a Summer Fun Group, and invite a friend to join you as you build community. It's God's job to move people's hearts and minds. It's our job to point people to Jesus, and to use words when necessary.

Paul is a hero of the Christian faith, but through Paul we learn that God uses ordinary people, flawed people just like you and me, to do extraordinary things. God's story is filled with remarkable people, and, by God's grace, that includes you.