

From Persecutor to Sufferer

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[0 : 00] Please do keep your bibles open at Acts chapter 21, verse 37. Let me pray again before we start. Father, we thank you for your servant Paul, for his witness, for his testimony, and for his companion Luke, who wrote and recorded this for us, so that we may learn from his example.

Teach us, we pray, and humble us by your spirit. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen. Well, I'm pretty sure many of you drive fancy cars nowadays, and so it would be rare for you to be driving around in your car without a GPS or a set-nav in your car.

And so when you're traveling to new destinations and using your GPS, it's generally wise to stick with the computer's recommendations, right?

So you get to your destination in the quickest way. But don't know about you, but I sometimes look at the map, and I wonder why the planned route is so circuitous, you know?

Particularly when you're in the country and you look at the map, there sometimes seems to be a shorter route. Yes, the shortcut does involve going down a small road, but surely, surely that's got to be quicker.

[1 : 28] And so in a moment of rashness, thinking that I might know better, I take the chance. Even as the voice on the GPS, as I turn into that road, immediately says, Turn back now.

Please turn back now. And then you soon realize why. Because not more than 500 meters in, you hit a dirt track. And the road narrows.

And that's when your first doubts creep in. Should I turn back or not? But then you think, It's only four more kilometers.

Even if I drive slowly, it would still be quicker than turning back and going the long way around. And so you press on, until the trees start to close in on you.

And you begin to cross not one, but two shallow streams. And then a sign appears saying, Beware of frequent and unexpected flooding.

[2 : 40] And that's when you begin to get anxious. Should I turn back? But it's only three more kilometers. And after all, how am I going to make a U-turn here anyway?

It's down to this one lane. Well, if you decided not to turn back, then one of two possibilities eventuate. One, God is merciful, and you make it out alive.

We have nothing more than a severe case of hypertension. Or, and I know this is going to sound a bit morbid, go with me, the police finds your lifeless body in the car, washed downstream a few weeks later.

Now, it may sound a bit overblown, but often our own lives, not literally, but symbolically, may seem like that. We find ourselves in a sticky situation, and having made a decision, which we didn't realize was wrong initially.

And then, we wonder, how are we going to get out of it? Well, in our passage today, the Apostle Paul recounts his own life, just such a situation. But, it turned out to be a life-saving turning point in his life.

[4 : 01] If you've been following along in the past weeks, you will know that Paul is now in Jerusalem. He's trying to maintain the church's unity by convincing the Jewish Christians he's not against the law.

Some Jews from Asia have come to stir things up, and Paul has been assaulted by the crowd. The Roman authorities have intervened to protect his life. And it's at this very point that Paul asks the commander to speak to the crowd.

Instead of the immediate safety of the barracks, Paul wants to at least try and win the Jews over. And so, being allowed to do so, Paul addresses the crowd in the local language of Aramaic.

So, if you jump with me to chapter 22, that's where we're going to start, in verse 1, this is what Paul says. Brothers and fathers, listen to my defense. I am a Jew born in Tarsus of Cilicia, but brought up in this city.

I studied under Gamaliel and was thoroughly trained in the law of our ancestors. I was just as zealous for God as any of you are today. I persecuted the followers of this way to their death, arresting both men and women and throwing them into prison, as the high priest and all the council can themselves testify.

[5 : 17] I even obtained letters from them to their associates in Damascus and went there to bring these people as prisoners to Jerusalem to be punished. Now, you can see what Paul is trying to do here.

He's trying to convince them that he was just like them. He too was zealous for God, zealous for the law, just as convinced as they are now that the followers of the way of Jesus were wrong, wicked, and deserving of death.

And if they didn't believe him, just ask the high priest and the council. They could vouch for him. Paul, you see, was doing exactly or did exactly what they are doing now to him.

And in a way, you can see that Paul really does empathize with them. He recognizes that they think that what they are doing is right before God. So it really took an intervention, direct intervention by the Lord to help Paul to see the reality that actually he was not in the right.

Verse 6. About noon, as I came near Damascus, suddenly a bright light from heaven flashed around me. I fell to the ground and heard a voice say to me, Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?

[6 : 30] Who are you, Lord? I asked. I am Jesus of Nazareth, whom you are persecuting, he replied. My companions saw the light, but they did not understand the voice of him who was speaking to me.

What shall I do, Lord? I asked. Get up, the Lord said, and go into Damascus. There you will be told all that you have been assigned to do. My companions led me by the hand into Damascus because the brilliance of the light had blinded me.

A man named Ananias came to see me. He was a devout observer of the law and highly respected by all the Jews living there. He stood beside me and said, Brother Saul, receive your sight.

And at that very moment, I was able to see him. Now, much of what we read here is a summary, has already been given as a summary in Acts chapter 9, but here, we hear it from Paul's own perspective.

And Paul here adds a few other details, like, for example, Ananias, that he was not just a disciple of Jesus, a follower of the way, but Paul describes him too as a devout observer of the law, highly respected by the Jews living in Damascus.

[7 : 44] In other words, Paul was trying to show the people there that the followers of the way, just like Paul was, need not be opposed to the law. In addition, Paul was also revealing to them that he, Paul, needed God's direct intervention, a gracious act, to show him the errors of his way so that he could then turn around.

And his physical blindness, dramatic though it was, was actually symbolic of his spiritual blindness. But until Jesus came and revealed himself to him, Paul could not see that even though his intentions were noble, his actions were actually displeasing to God.

What was really happening was he was persecuting the Lord, God. And by persecuting his disciples, Paul was persecuting God's very own son, Jesus, Israel's chosen Messiah.

Now, if the crowd was astute at this point, which unfortunately they were not, I think they would have begun to pick up the parallels that Paul was trying to draw with them.

If what Paul says of Jesus is right, is true, then by persecuting Paul, a follower of Jesus, the crowd was also persecuting the Lord. The Lord may not have been there physically to tell them that, like he did for Paul, but he was using Paul's testimony to the same effect.

[9 : 19] The question now was whether the crowd will respond like Paul did, to repent, believe, and believe the testimony of Paul.

Now, more has been revealed to Paul, of course, and so we read from verses 14 what Ananias continues to say. The God of our ancestors has chosen you to know his will and to see the righteous one and to hear words from his mouth.

You will be his witness to all people of what you have seen and heard. And now what are you waiting for? Get up, be baptized, and wash your sins away, calling on his name.

So Paul quite cleverly uses the words of Ananias to give the crowd a mini gospel presentation here. But what he does is that he tailors their knowledge of the Old Testament, or Ananias, uses Ananias' testimony, to point them back to what they know in the Old Testament.

You see, Jesus was no random Messiah. He was the one sent by God of our ancestors, that is, of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, the God whom they followed, the God whom they worshipped.

[10 : 34] The righteous one is a reference to the Old Testament, in the Old Testament, to Israel's Messiah, the king that they were, the Jews waiting for, and calling on his name there at the end, that is an allusion to calling on the name of the Lord, in Joel 2, verse 23, where on the next slide, Joel says that those who call on the name of the Lord, that is Jesus' name, will be saved.

And of course, in Acts 2, Peter uses this exact passage for his preaching. So this salvation, Paul says, comes by turning around.

That may be hard, but this is what repentance is. Repentance is not just feeling sorry for yourself. No, it requires a literal turning back.

No longer ignoring Jesus, the righteous one, but turning around, turning your life around to live for him. And baptism, which Ananias encouraged Paul to do, to submit to, is simply the outward and physical expression of this.

The water is a symbol of God washing away our sins. But more, Ananias also reveals to Paul that once he's saved, God then gives him a new purpose in life.

[11 : 59] Once he's turned around and faced the right direction, God then has a plan for him. And God's will for Paul is to witness to all people what he has seen and heard.

Which actually Paul was doing right there and then, wasn't he? He was witnessing to the crowd, telling them what he's seen and heard. But again, will the crowd listen?

And then God reveals one more specific thing to Paul, and that is when he returns to Jerusalem and he's praying at the temple. Again, Paul, I think, is trying to show that he's not against the Lord because he's at the temple praying.

The Lord says to him in a vision, verse 18, Quick, leave Jerusalem immediately because people here will not accept your testimony about me. Which, initially, Paul was reluctant to believe because he said, Lord, these people know that I went from one synagogue to another to imprison and beat those who believe in you.

And when the blood of your martyr Stephen was shed, I stood there giving my approval and guarding the clothes of those who were killing him. they know, you know, they know, they will believe me.

[13 : 09] And that's not unusual as a reaction, isn't it? Because we often think that if there's something common, there's a common bond between us, then we'll get the message across. We started together.

We came from the same country town. We grew up together. Surely, surely they'll believe me. But sadly, as we will see, that's not to be. So the Lord said, go, I will send you away to the Gentiles.

That is, go to those who are not Jews, to the rest of the world. They will hear your witness. Now, mind you here, I don't think that the Lord is saying to Paul that the Jews that were with him at this time were the ones that were going to reject him.

That particular vision was about the Jews at the time of Paul's conversion. And so Paul was still hopeful of persuading those that were before him now. But as to the past, God used the reaction of the Jews to fulfill yet another plan, didn't he, to his purpose.

For as Ruth read in Isaiah 49, verse 5 and 6, God intended for his gospel to go not just to the Jews, but to the entire world, to the Gentiles as well.

[14 : 27] For we read, it is too small a thing for you to be my servant, to restore the tribes of Jacob and bring back those of Israel I have kept. I will also make you a light for the Gentiles that my salvation may reach to the ends of the earth.

Now, of course, this particular mandate here in Isaiah 49 is for his servant, that is Jesus, the chosen Messiah. But the Lord Jesus chooses to fulfill this by commissioning his church to do the work on his behalf with the power of the Holy Spirit.

And Paul in particular was chosen as his apostle to the Gentiles, sent from Jerusalem, not just for his own safety, but to be the means by which God's plan to the Gentiles would be fulfilled.

And of course, having read and gone through Acts, a large part of what we read in Acts is a recounting of the fulfillment of this as Paul goes around the Roman world and preaches and starts churches with Gentiles in them.

And now, of course, Paul himself was eager to come back to Jerusalem to share this good news that, yes, the Gentiles have believed and his desire was, of course, that both the Jews in Jerusalem and the Jews and the Gentiles in the wider Roman Empire would remain united under the gospel, under Jesus.

[15 : 50] This was the very thing he was trying to convince, the crowd, to win them over with. So we can see, can't we, that Paul's own life and his testament here aligns with God's plan of salvation.

And in the coming weeks, in the next few chapters, we'll see him telling this story again to convince those he's teaching and preaching to that his life is part of God's salvation plan.

Now, for those of you who are here for Andrew's evangelism training on Wednesday, you might have noticed that the components of Paul's testimony is very like the training that Andrew gave you, didn't it?

Because there was the story before Christ, BCP, I think it was, then there was his encounter with Christ, and then his new life afterwards, and purpose in light of his salvation.

salvation. So Paul must have gone through Andrew's training. Either that or Andrew has picked up on Paul's testimony as an example.

[17 : 00] Either way, it is true, that's a lot of our own lives as well, isn't it? Our own stories reflect this same pattern.

And so now I want to turn to our story, and if you look at the outline, you will see the questions that I put to you. I want to ask, what is your story?

Do you know your story? And you know, I think we all need a story, don't we? Even if you're not a Christian here tonight, having a story is necessary because it gives meaning to your lives.

Now, although there are a few in the world that are psychopaths, bent on evil, but by and large, all of us, most of us, want to do good. Don't we? We want to make a positive difference in life and impact the world for good.

And so like Paul, we want to have a purpose to our life. And we're often, therefore, zealous for something, to stand for something, to fight for a cause, to see an injustice and want to try and fix it.

[18 : 11] That's why, you know, you see so many of these petitions come up in change.org or on these GoFundMe pages. They're all reflections, aren't they, of people wanting to make a difference, wanting to have a purpose in life.

And I think were it not for our own insecurities, because, you know, we want to do that, but then we also want a comfortable life. We want a secure income, and so we concentrate on looking after ourselves.

But were it not for that preoccupation, there would be more Paul's in our lives, or more Paul's in this world. Or, as you all know, Greta Thunberg's in our life, fully dedicated to their causes, right?

But as we saw with Paul, well-intentioned but misplaced zeal is still wrong, isn't it? You may think you're even trying to please God, but if it's not God's will, if you got his will wrong, then it doesn't make it right, no matter how well-intentioned you are.

Instead, I think if you reflect on it, more often than not, such zeal stems from pride, I think, and self-righteousness. Take the case of Paul, he thought he was better than the wrongdoers, right?

[19 : 24] He hunted them down to stop their wickedness and evil. And very rarely do we see injustice in the world, like we turn on the TV and then we think we're part of the problem, do we?

Our first instinct is to think that we're the heroes, that we will do something about to save this world. You see, pride blinds us, doesn't it, like it did for Paul, to our very own failings and sin.

And so it really takes God's intervention, the same act of grace that he showed Paul to expose our wrongdoing. And he does that by revealing his son to us, Jesus.

So that's the second part of our life story, isn't it? When have you first encountered Jesus for the first time? When did you encounter Jesus for the first time?

And I have to say, even if you've grown up in church, you still need to come face to face with Jesus and come face to face with the truth of not just what Jesus has done for the world, because that's what you do here when you come to church, you hear the gospel, you hear what Jesus has done on the cross for the world, but you really encounter Jesus when you come face to face with the truth of what Jesus has done for you.

[20 : 51] That's when you finally apply the gospel to yourself, not in a theoretical way, but in a personal way. When you hear for the first time that this gospel, this good news of Jesus, it's not just for the world, but it's for you.

Now God, of course, is unlikely to reveal himself to you like Paul did in a vision or this blinding light that causes you to go blind, because God has already revealed to us Jesus in the writings of the prophets and the apostles, namely in the Bible.

God is more than likely to reveal Jesus to us. In fact, God is very certainly revealing himself to us in the words of the Bible, and that's where we need to turn to meet Jesus.

At times, God may also bring a friend alongside us like Ananias who will explain the Bible to us, but something as uneventful as just turning up to church or going to your Bible study week in, week out, is the means by which God reveals Jesus to us.

As you open the Bible, maybe at home by yourself as well, that is where we meet Jesus and we encounter him, not just for the first time, but each and every day of our lives.

[22 : 20] And you know what, friends, because Jesus is the truth, whenever we meet Jesus in his word, we will always have the truth about us exposed as well. not just the truth, but the truth as it applies to us.

That is, our sin and our pride cannot remain hidden. And we all know that things get hidden when it's in the dark, right? But once the light is turned on, that stain on the carpet becomes very clear, doesn't it?

The mold on your parents' bathroom towels, or your bathroom, if you don't clean it, it gets fully revealed. And so that's our sin as well, under the light of Christ.

And notice what Jesus does to Paul. We sometimes like Jesus to reveal himself to us gently, and not pull any punches. But look at what Jesus said to Paul.

It was pretty blunt, isn't it? So, so, why are you persecuting me? It's not so, so, why are you not treating me not nicely? Right? No, why are you persecuting me?

[23 : 27] And so, that's the same with us, isn't it? As we read the Bible, the Bible is active and living, sharper than a double-edged sword, and we ought not to be surprised when it penetrates deep into our hearts.

As I was saying to both congregations in the morning, reading the Bible is dangerous. Good, but dangerous. And so, again, is this part of your testimony and life story as well, that you've heard God's voice loud and clear, and even though it's humbling and fearsome, you decide to repent, turn around, to submit to His will.

Now, friends, I don't know about you, but I know I need a coherent story in my life. Not because I want to tell others about it, but I need to know it for myself because I want to understand where I've been, and more importantly, where I'm going.

But you know, without God's input into your story, if you're making it up just by yourself, then it's really not the truth, is it? Your perceptions of life, I don't know how much certainty that gives you because you can't even control tomorrow what will happen to you.

How are you able with confidence to tell your story for the rest of your life? It's at best guesswork, isn't it? God's story for me.

[24 : 52] No, the only story that I can rely on with confidence is the one that God has for me. He alone knows, and like Paul, God reveals his story for me by interweaving it with his story of his son.

That is, God's will for me is caught up with God's will for his son. And so the more I know about Jesus' story in the Bible, the more I will know about God's will for me.

Because they go hand in hand. Our lives are meant to be in Christ. And so for us, the first step is to know God's story. Know Jesus' story, which is historical, not made up, and then to respond to it by repenting, turning away from our sin, having it forgiven, and then being given this new life.

This new life, which then God sets out for us, so that we can submit to his will. And God, of course, may not call us like Paul to be an apostle to the Gentiles, because that's been done already by Paul, but we too are disciples of Jesus, aren't we?

Following in the way. That means we too are called to testify to what the Lord Jesus has done, to be witnesses to what we have seen and heard and read.

[26 : 11] And to be honest, if you've experienced something as life-changing as meeting Jesus, then you really would want to tell others about it, wouldn't you? The most important thing in your life ought to be the thing that you're most excited to tell others about, isn't it?

And so, I want to encourage you then, if you have experienced this life-changing impact of Jesus in your life, to use whatever opportunity God gives you to be that witness in whatever capacity you're given.

Now, unfortunately, I have to say that even though we do that, there will be times when people will still not believe us. And that was the case with Paul and the crowd.

Paul goes from being a persecutor of Jesus to being a sufferer for Jesus. Why? Because the crowd that he was witnessing to did not end up believing him.

So, let me finish then by reading the rest of what did happen to Paul. And this will just be a little snapshot because we'll pick it up again next week.

[27 : 16] So, verse 22, the crowd listened to Paul until then. Then they raised their voices and shouted, rid the earth of him, he's not fit to live. Why were they so angry at that point?

Well, the word Gentile triggered them. They were so fixated on Paul being anti-Jew that the very mention of the word Gentile stopped them listening and they reverted to their prejudices thinking that Paul was with the Gentiles and therefore against the Jews.

Now, thankfully the Roman commander was still there. He saw the commotion and immediately he brought Paul into safety. Then he decided that he ought to beat Paul up because he didn't understand what was going on.

Paul was speaking in Aramaic up to that point and all of a sudden there was trouble. So, he thought Paul must have been stirring up trouble. Thankfully, Paul reveals himself then and there that he was a Roman citizen and by birth no less, which was more prestigious than the commander's second-class citizen because he paid for it maybe with a bribe or something with money.

So, that's where we finish for this week. We'll continue next week. But this week, I just want to come back to this question again. Do you know your own story and are you sure?

[28 : 35] And if you are, are you living in accordance with it? Because only God's story for your life counts. You may even know and believe in Jesus' story.

But it's only when we, like Paul, allow Jesus' story to transform our own lives, first through repentance, then faith, and then ongoing obedience to his will, that we find certainty for our future, peace and joy.

And as we begin to live out that life, become a living testimony to God's grace. So, let me encourage you, if you're doing that, to keep going, and if you're not, to find your story in Christ's story.

Submit to God's will and become a living testimony to God's grace. Let's pray. Let's pray. Father, thank you for revealing yourself to us in your Son, Jesus, and for showing us why he came.

Help us to all respond with repentance and faith and then obedience. Teach us to submit to your will and be living testimonies of your grace in our lives.

[29 : 49] In the name of Jesus, our Savior and Lord, we pray. Amen. Amen.