

## The Bible in One Year Week 25: Unlikely Converts (Acts Pt. 3)

(Acts 9:1-19)

### • False Limits & Uncontainable Movements

- A pagan sorcerer obsessed with wealth and power. An Ethiopian eunuch and royal delegate. A zealous Pharisee persecuting the church. An influential Roman Centurion. What is there on planet earth that has the power to truly unite people of such different tribes and stripes as these? We know the answer: it's the power of the Gospel of Jesus Christ. This section of Acts 8-12 shows how the movement of Christ's followers begins to work its way out to Judea and Samaria, and eventually the ends of the earth. His counter-cultural, upside-down Kingdom is breaking out to the surrounding region, and once it gets moving, it's uncontainable, it's unstoppable.
- Why is it that, in spite of what we read about the early Church in Acts, all the promises God gives us in the New Testament, Church today often feels quite containable and quite stoppable?
- I recently came across a powerful illustration about the false limits we put on ourselves. Here's how Christian leader Carey Nieuwhof words it: *"Did you know that elephant trainers can 'handle' an elephant with just a thin rope? Many years ago—when capturing and training elephants was accepted practice—elephants could be trained not to wander away by tying one of their legs to a heavy stake in the ground using a thin rope. Baby elephants are too weak to pull a stake out of the ground or break a thin rope. Of course, they would attempt to pull it out, but after several failed attempts, they would stop trying. By the time baby elephants grew up to be big, lumbering animals, the thin rope would still work and it didn't even have to be attached to a stake. Having become used to the structure of the stake and rope, the elephant—who was much, much stronger by then—would not even try to break free. He just accepted the truth he'd learned as an infant. People behave like this too. At a certain point, many of us reach a conclusion, based on a certain set of data, and we never go back to see if our conclusion still holds."*
- What do you think? Could this be a picture of some churches today? Of my life and your life?
- Last week as we looked at the first part of Acts, we focused on witnessing, with the power God gives us to point people to Jesus by our words, our actions, and our shared life together in the Church. At the end as we prayed, I invited anyone who felt called to live as a *witness* to Jesus to *stand up*—and you know what? I peeked as I prayed, and in *both services*, easily 95% of the congregation was standing or raising their hands! I even received emails of people watching online who were raising their hands from home. That's amazing! *So many* of us stood up to respond that, *yes*, we do want to live as Christ's witnesses to be a Church on the move.
- Now, imagine if in the days to come... *we really lived that out*. What would that be like? With that many witnesses living and praying and serving actively in work and church and neighborhoods, what could happen? We would literally *double* in size overnight if *every one of those people* prayerfully, by the power of the Holy Spirit, was able to be a friend, a witness and a companion to one other person and invite them to join the journey with Jesus. Double!
- Now take it a step further, what if each of *those people* that we brought into the family went on to grow as Spirit-empowered disciples and witnesses of Jesus, and they went on over the course of the year to *multiply*? And take it a step further, what if *every church in Danville* did this? What if 95% of the people in each congregation of our community would go out as witnesses and impact *one person* for Christ who went on to join this movement of Jesus? *Imagine that*.
- What would that be like, for the Church to *wake up* and be filled with a fresh unction from the Holy Spirit to *love their neighbors into a relationship with Christ*? It would be *exponential growth and impact for the Kingdom*. Imagine the transformation in our community if this many people began to live like Jesus really is King. It would look like the Church in Acts. Uncontainable.
- And if it really is that simple, what's stopping us from doing it? Really, what's holding us back? Most of you were here last week, you saw how many were standing up with their hands raised, *yes, I want to live as a witness of Jesus!* What's stopping us? Maybe we are like that elephant with one little, dinky rope the only thing that keeping us from moving. Maybe we are a sleeping giant. Maybe it would just take a spark to light a wildfire.

- **Breaking Every Barrier**

- I don't know for sure, but I want to see it, I pray to see it. Here's what I do know. When the Church is on the move, genuinely, in the power of the Spirit, with the holy love of Jesus, this movement *cannot be stopped* by human boundaries and limitations. The Gospel breaks through every barrier, every limit, every line we draw—and we see the most *unlikely people coming to Christ*. It happened in Acts, and it's still happening today. Take a look at Acts.
- Chapters 1-7 that we looked at last week were about how this all began at the center in Jerusalem, as the Spirit poured out and the wildfire started to spread. It ended with Stephen, the first Christian martyr, giving up his life like Jesus: *"Lord, don't hold this sin against them."*
  - And with that, these believers who had been meeting, worshiping, serving, witnessing in Jerusalem, were suddenly scattered in a wave of persecution. And the beautiful thing is, *this actually served to advance the Gospel*: it helped bring about the very thing Jesus said would happen: Acts 1:8, *"You will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth."* Acts chapter 8-12 that we're looking at today is about the "in all Judea and Samaria" part.
  - And throughout these chapters we see multiple stories of *unlikely people coming to Christ*. We get this story of a pagan sorcerer in Samaria who holds a lot of influence and power, becoming a follower of Christ! We get this story of an Ethiopian eunuch who's an important delegate of their queen, in the middle of a trip along the road, getting baptized and becoming a follower of Jesus! We get this wild story of Peter being called to go, breaking every Hebrew cultural norm, into the home of a Roman Centurion, preaching the Gospel to the whole house, watching the Holy Spirit fall on these these gentiles, these "enemies" of Israel, and baptizing them all right there.
  - And perhaps most radically, we get the story of this man named Saul, to whom we're first introduced as the young man who stood, approvingly, as a witness of Stephen's death.

- **Paul**

- Saul, also known as Paul, against all odds, against anything we would expect, becomes arguably *the greatest* instrument of the spread of this movement of the Gospel the world has ever known.
  - Consider his life *before* he encountered the risen Christ on the road to Damascus. Here's the description we get from Acts: when Stephen was killed it says, *"And Saul approved of their killing him. On that day a great persecution broke out against the church in Jerusalem, and all except the apostles were scattered throughout Judea and Samaria...But Saul began to destroy the church. Going from house to house, he dragged off both men and women and put them in prison..."* And later it continues, *"Meanwhile, Saul was still breathing out murderous threats against the Lord's disciples. He went to the high priest and asked him for letters to the synagogues in Damascus, so that if he found any there who belonged to the Way, whether men or women, he might take them as prisoners to Jerusalem..."* And it's in that moment, when he's literally *going on a mission* to destroy the Church, that he encounters Jesus on the road and his life is hijacked for the opposite mission of Jesus Christ.
  - That was Paul before Christ, now consider this description Paul gave of his life *after* Jesus: he writes in 2 Corinthians 11, *"I have worked much harder, been in prison more frequently, been flogged more severely, and been exposed to death again and again. Five times I received from the Jews the forty lashes minus one. Three times I was beaten with rods, once I was pelted with stones, three times I was shipwrecked, I spent a night and a day in the open sea, I have been constantly on the move. I have been in danger from rivers, in danger from bandits, in danger from my fellow Jews, in danger from Gentiles; in danger in the city, in danger in the country, in danger at sea; and in danger from false believers. I have labored and toiled and have often gone without sleep; I have known hunger and thirst and have often gone without food; I have been cold and naked. Besides everything else, I face the daily pressure of my concern for all the churches."* Elsewhere he said that he had learned the *secret* to living in all circumstances: in Philippians he writes, *"I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me."* In Galatians he writes, *"I no longer live, but Christ lives in me. The life I now live in the body, I live through faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me."*

- **No Limits**

- Can you imagine a more radical turnaround? The man went from causing the suffering and scattering of Christians everywhere, to literally *suffering for* the mission of Christ. He went from trying to squash this movement in its tracks, to being used by God to write more than half of the *New Testament* which has fueled the movement of the Church for the past 2,000 years. The difference was *Jesus*.
- And these radical turnarounds still happen today, whether you hear about them or not: you can find stories of unlikely people having their lives flipped by Jesus. I saw a recent story online of a young man who was once an active militant with a radical Islamic group in the Middle East—a terrorist—coming to Christ, and now he lives as a witness, under the daily threat of death. I read a story from Bob Goff a few years ago about a dangerous, violent witchdoctor he visited in a Ghanaian prison who came to Christ and helped bring most of the other prisoners to Christ.
- The Gospel never stopped moving. The Gospel can't be chained, can't be contained. It's *us* who stop moving. It's the Church that falls asleep. We allow one thin little cord of fear, or self-preservation, or self-satisfaction, or comfort, or apathy, to keep us tethered and we fail to see that with one swift movement, we could wake up and break free and break through, by the power of Christ, to see *our* lives, *our* community turned upside down in the Kingdom of God.
- So what's stopping us? Where do you draw the lines? Who do you write off? Worship leader Jonathan David Helser says, "*I'm more free today than I was, but I'm not as free as I'm gonna be.*" I don't know about you, but when I read these stories of God's powerful work, *I want to be free*. I know he's done so much already, but I also know that *I'm not as free as I'm gonna be*. Do you want to be there, too? Do you want to see this Church *move* and *multiply* and the Gospel of Jesus spread like fire? Let's wakeup today! Let's repent today! Let's pray today!