

26a ACTS

This is December 19th, 2003. We are resuming our study in Acts chapter 9, and as we do, we always stop at the outset to give ourselves the chance to go before the Lord and acknowledge the importance of the ministry of His Holy Spirit and of His grace in cleansing us and making it possible for us to understand and apply the truth from His word. So let's, at this time, go to the Lord in prayer.

Father, thank you for this day. We thank you for preserving us and providing everything necessary to further your plan and your purpose in our lives. We thank you not only for our blessings, but also for our challenges and for the difficulties that we have worked through or circumnavigated, and in each case, we know that your grace is sufficient for every need and it is an occasion for becoming stronger in our faith.

We pray that our study tonight will contribute to that goal, that we will grow in grace and in knowledge of our Savior through the things that we see from your word tonight. We ask it in Jesus' name, amen. In our last excursion into Acts chapter 8 and 9, we went back and looked at the declaration made by the Lord Jesus to Ananias concerning Saul of Tarsus, soon to be the Apostle Paul, with regard to him being a chosen vessel.

And we pretty much took both of our sessions last time to look at the idea that is expressed in that vocabulary term, both in Romans chapter 9 and over in Paul's epistle to Timothy, where I think probably some of the most important words are spoken in regard to this concept, 2 Timothy chapter 2, where one of our great memory verses is located with regard to the word of God and the study of it. And then on down, after talking about being diligent to present ourselves approved to God as a workman who does not need to be ashamed, rightly dividing the word of truth, we then see the worldly and empty chatter that leads to ungodliness and talk that spreads like gangrene. And this is the sin that is put for much of the evil that is generally in view in this idea of vessels of dishonor.

He mentions two individuals by name. How would you like to have your name recorded in the eternal pages of the word of God for failure? But that's the penalty that Hymenaeus and Philetus have brought upon their own heads because in verse 18, they have gone astray from the truth, saying that the resurrection has already taken place and they upset the faith of some. What I didn't point out last time is that being a vessel of dishonor is a part of the principle of cursing by association in the same way that being a vessel of honor is a means of expressing blessing by association.

And we have covered both of those principles in other studies and other contexts, but you can certainly see a graphic illustration here where because someone has a theological misunderstanding, because someone does not have their eschatology straight and says that the resurrection has already taken place. Now, how could this be?

Obviously, people have not risen from their graves and are walking around. So what is the nature of the error that Hymenaeus and Philetus are promulgating? I would suspect that this is spiritualizing what is in fact literal in God's word and saying, well, the resurrection that is spoken of by the early apostles and the resurrection that is foretold in the book of Daniel and Ezekiel and so on is a spiritual resurrection that you're not literally going to be raised from the dead.

And of course, Paul addresses this much more fully in his letter to the Corinthians. But he says, these men have gone astray from the truth saying that the resurrection has already taken place and upsetting the faith of some. It's one thing to be wrong yourself, but it is quite another to upset the faith of people by trying to convince them that your erroneous conclusions are correct.

Nevertheless, the firm foundation of God stands having this seal. The Lord knows those who are his and everyone who names the name of the Lord should abstain from wickedness, should depart from iniquity. Then he goes on in verse 20 to talk about these vessels of honor and vessels of dishonor that we looked at last time.

And if you remember that the cleansing is a decision that we make, we choose whether or not to be cleansed. The grace for cleansing is available. It is whether or not we avail ourselves of it.

And this is the case with Paul on the Damascus road. He in fact took advantage of the opportunity to be cleansed and be a vessel that would carry the name of the Lord. Now, returning to our passage in Acts chapter nine, after his baptism and the scales fall from his eyes and he receives food in verse 19, he strengthened and he spent some days with the disciples at Damascus.

Immediately he preached the Christ in the synagogues that he is the son of God. Verse 20 there, this is the only place in the book of Acts where the phrase son of God occurs. And it is the first truth preached by the apostle Paul that Jesus Christ is the son of God.

Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ and thou shalt be saved. To preach and teach that he is the son of God, of course, carries with it that he is the Messiah. They are one in the same, that is an inseparable truth.

The Messiah is the son of God. The son of God is the Messiah. But that Christ, the Mashiach, the anointed one is the son of God.

This was the content of Paul's earliest messages. And this was something that he was able to preach without any preparation beyond what he had received in those few days, beginning with his conversation on the road with the Lord Jesus. Because immediately he preached it.

How was he able to do this? Well, he has a huge reservoir of Old Testament doctrinal

truth in his soul. He has been a believer for many years. He has been a student of God's word since his youth.

And with the right understanding, he is immediately able to draw on that. But this is an Old Testament doctrine. This is not one of the mystery doctrines, is it? That Jesus is the Christ, the son of God.

These truths were in the Old Testament. Jesus explained them on the road to Emmaus. And he opened the scriptures to his disciples and beginning with Moses and the prophets, told them all about himself.

So the Lord Jesus, as the son of God, as the Messiah, is foretold and is revealed in the Old Testament scriptures. I recently had a conversation, I think I told you before, with someone who has sort of decided that the Old Testament is secondary in importance and that it's really vital to spend our time as church-age believers looking at the epistles of Paul and at the revealed mystery doctrines that are contained therein. I would just say this.

The epistles are meaningless if you don't know Christ. And Christ is revealed in the 39 books of the Old Testament far more fully than he is in the 27 books of the New. Christology centers in the Old Testament.

And it is the first principle of instruction and the first principle of communication. If you want to teach a subject, an ideal way to begin is to create the need for that information in the mind of the listener. To start out by saying, why do we care about this? We create the need.

I used to do this as an artillery instructor, to stand there and indicate to second lieutenants that they would very soon be out in the field and need to know the format of a call for fire and to know the various ways to attack a target and call for the proper ammunition, to give follow-up corrections, to give a battle damage assessment and so on. That is part and parcel of what you do as an artillery forward observer and the information is vital. In the same way, the Old Testament creates the need.

The scriptures say the law was a schoolmaster to bring us to Christ. If you minimize the importance of the Old Testament, you minimize the greatest part of the Bible's witness to the Lord Jesus and the reason for which he came. And you tend to make Christianity a nice lifestyle that meets your daily needs and it can inadvertently become anthropocentric rather than Christocentric because we do gain many benefits and many opportunities in our lives as believers, but if it isn't about Christ, if it isn't for Christ, if it doesn't reflect the glory of the Lord Jesus Christ, it is deeply flawed and way out of balance.

So I think it's important to not gloss over this statement. He preached, it could just say

he preached Christ in the synagogues and put a period at the end, but he says he preached Christ in the synagogues that he is the son of God. What scriptures do you use in the synagogue? He didn't pull a copy of Philippians out of his hip pocket, did he? He didn't even have the gospels.

Luke's gospel had not yet been written. It's unlikely that Mark's gospel had received any circulation at this time. So what scriptures is he preaching in the synagogues? These are Jewish places of worship.

It's the Old Testament, isn't it? And what is he doing? He's preaching Christ from the Old Testament, the law, the prophets, and the writings, and evangelizing and witnessing to the Lord Jesus entirely out of the Old Testament. I have pointed out before that when you go to Hebrews 4.12 and 2 Timothy 2.15 and 2 Timothy 3.16, all these other great scriptures that talk about the word of God, when you say the word of, when the apostle says the word of God is alive and powerful, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing even to, when he says that, in his day, when he spoke that to the first-generation audience, what was the word of God? Old Testament. When he says all scripture is God-breathed and is profitable for doctrine, reproof, correction, and instruction, what was all scripture in the day that that was first penned? Old Testament.

When Peter writes about inspiration and says that no scripture is of any private interpretation, but men wrote and spoke as they were carried along by the Spirit of God, what's he talking about? Old Testament scriptures. Don't let anyone diminish, in our minds, the value of the Old Testament scriptures. Without them, we don't have a starting place.

Without them, we don't have a context. It would be like studying modern American culture and have no glimpse of our heritage and our history and our founding and the thinking behind our Constitution. So, having climbed up and down on that soapbox, let me go now back to this verse 21 in Acts chapter 9. Then all who heard were amazed and said, is this not he who destroyed those who called on this name in Jerusalem and has come here for that purpose so that he might bring them bound to the chief priests? So, this radical transformation is a shock to everyone.

Saul's reputation had preceded him before he ever got to Damascus. And when he arrives, and instead of seeking out Christians to arrest them, goes to the synagogue and begins to say, you know, these people I came here to arrest are right, this creates quite a ripple. Verse 22 says, but Saul increased all the more in strength and confounded the Jews who dwelt in Damascus, proving that this is the Christ.

Jesus is in italics, it's not in the original, that this is the Christ. This goes back to verse 20. Christ is the Son of God, proving to the Jews this is the Christ.

So, immediately he is able to confound and to witness and to testify to Christ among his

fellow Jews. God has 11 other men doing that same thing and their disciples and their followers in Jerusalem and Judea and Samaria and Galilee and in that region, right? So, here is Saul who is doing the same thing successfully in Damascus in a Jewish community. What I think is interesting is that Saul was struck down outside Jerusalem.

We ought to look at that for just a moment because go on to verse 23. Now, after many days were passed, the Jews plotted to kill him, but their plot became known to Saul. They watched the gates day and night to kill him.

Then the disciples took him by night, led him down through the wall in a large basket. Then in verse 26, it says, when Saul had come to Jerusalem, he tried to join the disciples, but they were all afraid of him and did not believe that he was a disciple. Unbeknownst to us and not really hinted at in Luke's account, there has been a period of about 17 years pass between verse 22 and verse 26.

How do we know this? Turn with me to Galatians chapter one, where Paul himself gives an account of this period in his life. Beginning in verse 11, I make known to you brethren, this is Galatians 1.11, that the gospel which was preached by me is not according to man, for I neither received it from man nor was I taught it, but it came through the revelation of Jesus Christ. For you have heard of my former conduct in Judaism, how I persecuted the church of God beyond measure and tried to destroy it.

And I advanced in Judaism beyond many of my contemporaries in my own nation, being more exceedingly zealous for the traditions of my fathers. But when it pleased God, who separated me from my mother's womb and called me through his grace to reveal his son in me that I might preach him among the Gentiles, I did not immediately confer with flesh and blood, nor did I go up to Jerusalem to those who were apostles before me. But I went to Arabia and returned again to Damascus.

So notice Paul says here, he did not go up to Jerusalem, he did not confer with the apostles. And yet in Acts chapter nine, within a few verses of his preaching in the synagogues of Damascus, we have him in Jerusalem talking to apostles. But let's go on here, because he says he was in Damascus, he didn't go to Jerusalem, he went to Arabia and then returned to Damascus.

So struck down on the Damascus road, he goes into Damascus, he leaves Damascus and goes to Arabia and then returns to Damascus. The total time Saul set out on this journey to arrest Christians in Damascus, and it was probably like Gilligan's Island, he probably thought this was a three hour tour, but he's going to end up living in Damascus and or Arabia for a total of three years without returning to Jerusalem. So, because look at verse 18, I went to Arabia, returned again to Damascus, then after three years, I went up to Jerusalem to see Peter and remained with him 15 days.

But I saw none of the other apostles except James the Lord's brother. The people have

used this to say that the term apostle was used for more than the 11 original disciples plus Paul. But you can see here, that he says none of the other apostles except James the Lord's brother, rather than saying, I only saw two apostles, Peter and James.

And I think the reason he does it this way is that James, the half brother of the Lord, the author of the epistle of James in our New Testament, had a standing in the Jerusalem church that was akin to that of the apostles. He was considered in their number, even though technically he's not an apostle. And so those who said, well, but James was just as important as Peter and John and Andrew and Philip and the rest of them.

He says, well, I did confer with James, the half brother of the Lord. Now concerning the same things which I write to you indeed before God, I do not lie. Afterward, I went into the region of Syria and Cilicia, and I was unknown by faith to the churches of Judea, which were in Christ.

They were hearing only, he who formerly persecuted us now preaches the faith, which he wants to try to destroy. And they glorified God in me. Now look at chapter two, verse one of Galatians.

Then after 14 years, I went up again to Jerusalem with Barnabas and also took Titus with me. Went up by revelation, communicated to them the gospel, which I preach among the Gentiles, but privately to those who are of reputation, lest by any means I might run or had run in vain. Tells the story of Titus and the whole spying out of liberty with regard to circumcision and so on.

And then when you get down to verse seven, on the contrary, when they saw that the gospel for the uncircumcised had been committed to me, just as that for the circumcised was committed to Peter, for he who worked effectively in Peter for the apostleship to the circumcised. Notice, isn't this an interesting thing that when Paul gives his sketch of his relationship to the other apostles, he is clear that Christ's commission to Peter was the good news for the circumcised. He was a sent one to the circumcised.

That goes back to our translation of Acts 1.8. You shall be witnesses unto me both in Jerusalem, Judea and Samaria until the end of the world. But here, after a total of 17 years from his conversion have passed, he sees James, Cephas and John, who seem to be pillars and perceive the grace that had been given to me, they gave me and Barnabas the right hand of fellowship that we should go to the Gentiles and they to the circumcised. Now, if Peter, Cephas, is commissioned and sent to the circumcised, and this is declared twice in this passage, what does this do to the whole first pope idea? Well, it only works if the Catholic Church is composed only of circumcised Jews, because the circumcised means the Jewish community.

But Paul here clearly says, he who worked effectively in Peter for the apostleship to the circumcised worked effectively in me toward the Gentiles. If anybody was in a position to

be the first pope for the church, it would be Paul rather than Peter. They gave us the right hand of fellowship that we should go to the Gentiles and they should go to the circumcised.

The original 11 apostles have not forgotten their commission from the Lord Jesus to go to Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria, to the historic nation of Israel. And that is confirmed here in Galatians, which is much later than the events we're looking at in Acts. This is 20, 30 years after the fact.

They desired only that we should remember the poor, that very thing which I also was eager to do. So, when we go back to Acts chapter 9 in the light of Galatians 1 and 2, what do we see? We see that there is a great compression here in time between increasing the Moor in strength and confounding the Jews who dwelt in Damascus, proving that Jesus is the Christ. Then, after many days were passed, there at the beginning of verse 23, this many days, that's almost an understatement.

This is probably after three years. He had taken his trip to Arabia. Now, why did he go to Arabia? There's no explanation given for this trip.

Arabia is in the opposite direction than that of the Gentiles. Where is Arabia, by the way, relative to Israel? It's basically where Saudi Arabia is now. It is the Arabian desert.

It is east and southeast, mainly southeast, of the historic boundaries of Israel. Why would Saul go that direction? He's up in Damascus. We know where Damascus is in the modern day, right? What's it the capital of? It's in Syria.

So, he's in Syria, and instead of going either to Israel or to the Gentiles, he goes to the cousins, those who are also descendants of Abraham but are not Jewish, the sons of Abraham by Keturah, the Arab nations. Now, there's no explanation given in the Word of God why Saul went this direction. Did he just go away to be by himself for meditation? Seems like a long trip to get by yourself.

Jesus would just go climb a nearby mountain, and he was by himself. My surmise, my hypothesis, is that perhaps Saul had a little bit of difficulty, just as the rest of the Jewish nation did, with the idea that the unwashed, uncircumcised multitudes out there were going to be his field of endeavor, and that maybe if he was going to carry the word of truth beyond the borders of Israel, that it would be to these who were next closest in relation, other sons of Abraham. Maybe he was going through his Old Testament and saying, well, sons of Abraham, those are the ones where God is at work.

It's just a guess on my part, but I can't think why else he would go to Arabia. What's in Arabia? Now, there is another possibility, because what is located in Arabia? Mount Sinai. And it is possible that Saul, without ever mentioning it, made a little pilgrimage down to Jebel Musa or whatever else was thought to be the place where God revealed himself to

Israel.

I just, it's intriguing to hypothesize why did Saul go to Arabia? And it must have been important enough to mention in inspired scripture. So I just leave you with those guesses and that's all they are. There's not a shred of evidence in any of Paul's writing as to why he went.

But whatever this was, there was plenty of time to make an extended trip because there's a total between Damascus, Arabia, and Damascus of three years. And that's the many days of verse 23 of Acts chapter nine. Now, then he goes and makes a quick trip to Jerusalem.

He spends a little over two weeks there. He only sees Peter and the half-brother of the Lord, James, confers with them for a little while. And then he leaves again and goes to Silesia and elsewhere before coming back and receiving a commission along with Barnabas.

So we've got a total of 17 years. So now, as we think about this, what is the point? It's interesting to look at and try to trace exactly what happened to Saul. But when we ask ourselves the question, well, if my tape recorder broke at this point or if Sam got laryngitis at this point, what would we take away from this study? There is a pattern in the word of God that the Apostle Paul is another exemplar within.

It is the example of Joseph, it is the example of Moses. It is the example of many, many Old Testament figures. And that is, I think David is perhaps the most prominent example of this, where there is a commission and there is a great light that shines and a great turning point in one's life.

And there is, in effect, an anointing and a commissioning and a calling. And then there is a great, large silence, period of seeming inactivity. Joseph has his dreams and then for years and years, he's a prisoner, he's a servant, he's a nothing, he's a nobody, he's obscure.

Moses seems to be destined for great things, has to leave the land of Egypt and spends 40 years out of sight and out of mind. David is brought from the sheep to be anointed by the prophet Samuel and then nothing happens for years. He seems to get another start when he comes to the palace to play the harp for Saul and his appointed armor bearer, but nothing comes of it and he goes back to his father.

The episode of facing Goliath comes up and he's noted by all of Israel and then he lapses into obscurity once more. He's a favorite for a while and then he becomes a fugitive. And for years and years, he's living in the caves and he's hunted by the government.

And over and over again, you see that there is a call and then there's a period where a person could easily say, I wonder why this person didn't just get discouraged and throw

up their hands and quit. Here is Saul with this dramatic confrontation on the road and great start in successful preaching in the synagogues of Damascus. But three years go by and that seems to kind of lose its steam, goes to Arabia, comes back, he's going to go to Jerusalem and then he's going to have a 14 year period where we know virtually nothing.

No inspired epistles are written, no great churches are started, no historic events are recorded in the word of God for 14 years. Really for nearly all of this 17 year period, there's just nothing. Just a little brief glimpse here and there, a little tiny detail.

And we can, I think, find an encouragement in this that God is not unrighteous to forget our work of faith and our labor of love. And when we respond to God's calling, it doesn't necessarily mean that there's going to be great, notorious deeds of wonder and miraculous happenings. We may go on and it seems as though there is no real impact, that there's no real effect.

Today, Christianity at large, popular Christianity, measures everything by impact. They've turned impact, the noun, into a verb and they talk about how impactful a conference was and so on, or a book or a tape series or whatever, but everyone is looking for visible results. But what we fail to appreciate, I think, a lot of times is the time that God invests in preparation.

This entire earthly existence of ours is time invested in preparation for a much longer opportunity for ministry in the millennium and beyond. And this time of preparation may be inscrutable. It may be invisible.

It may be unremarkable, so unremarkable that no real note is taken, even by observers who are near at hand. Look at the greatest apostle, one of the greatest faithful ministers of God's word that has ever walked the planet. There's 17 years.

The first 17 years of his apostleship are virtually unrecorded. But why? That time obviously was necessary for preparation. The great work that the apostle Paul is going to do in the latter years of his life, the great epistles that are going to be written, the great ministry that is going to be initiated, the training of the generation of pastors that will come up after him, all is founded upon the quiet time and the learning and the faithfulness and the consistency that he is going to develop in these 17 years.

Some things just take time. There are some things you cannot rush, that you can't hurry, that you can't do by way of instant gratification. It just takes a consistent, plodding, step-by-step-by-step-by-step advance.

And the years that Joseph spent in prison, the years that Moses spent herding goats, the years that David spent guarding the sheep, the years that Elijah spent in the desert that are unrecorded. Even the great prophets of the Old Testament, there are years and

years and years of their prophetic ministry that is completely unrecorded in the word of God. Sometimes a man of God will show up and say something to a king.

I wonder, what about the whole rest of the life of that man of God? Was his entire life just for that one moment, that one prophecy, that one message that was delivered? Maybe so. But look at the amount of time that was invested in his ministry, in his prophetic identity. Well, the same is true of us.

God is cultivating us for service. And if we can look at these examples, especially the one that is before us here of the Apostle Paul, and remember that God is never idle, and he doesn't waste time. The time that passes in seeming ineffectiveness or obscurity or no accomplishments and no impact, that's not the way God looks at it at all.

Every moment counts. Every hour, every day, every week, every month of these 17 years of the Apostle Paul were times of preparation, times of getting his theology realigned. In the light of the Lord Jesus Christ.

And preparing him to have an impact that is immeasurable, that has been beyond imagination over the last 2,000 years. So was it too much of a price to pay to wait 17 years before beginning that more notorious and more visible ministry? Is 17 years a worthwhile investment for 2,000 years of impact? We are investing our 3 score and 10 years here for the opportunity to have an effect for at least 1,000 years in the kingdom of the Son and probably an unknown amount of impact on into the kingdom of the Father. So it's an interesting observation to apply to ourselves because I think many of us don't really feel like our opportunities are large or that our impact is great.

And at the end of year 16, you could have asked Saul of Tarsus and he might have said, well, I don't really know how much the Lord is using me. I don't really know if that message I got on the road has come to pass. And little did he know that in God's time and when he was ready, the extent to which he would be used in the same is true of us.

So it is required of a steward that a man be found faithful. He that is faithful in that which is least will be faithful also in that which is much. And if we concentrate on being faithful stewards of whatever God gives us now, that is the preparation.

That is our 14 years. That is our 17 years to be ready for whatever God has called us to in both in this life and in the life to come. Well, with that thought, we're going to pause and take our break.

When we come back, we'll resume with Saul at Jerusalem and see what kind of an experience he has there with the Son of Encouragement.