

A Man For All Reasons

When we last left Saul of Tarsus he was standing in front of the murder of Stephen, approvingly. The men who stoned Stephen laid their robes at Saul's feet and it's one of the great introductions to a villain in literature. He casually stands by as the hero of the story is killed by the mob.

It really is like a scene from a James Bond film where the first shot you see of the villain is one of him standing dispassionately while someone is tortured or killed. It confirms that they are the villain. They are evil. They are powerful. And almost nothing can stop them.

We pick up the next scene in the first lines of Acts Chapter 8:

And Saul approved of their killing him [Stephen].

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.

Acts 8:1-3

The Chaos that ensues shatters the Church and sends them running in all directions. Their short-lived utopia in Jerusalem comes to a sudden end and they are forced to move quickly and discreetly back to their communities or on to new communities away from persecution. The gospel quickly spreads to Samaria, to Africa, to Syria, to Asia Minor, to the world.

It's pretty clear that there is little influence of Jesus' ministry beyond Palestine during his earthly ministry. The seeds of the gospel were spread in the lives of the disciples and then spread throughout their own country

and region, but we don't see the radical expansion of the message until this great persecution is unleashed on the believers in Jerusalem.

An interesting legend does describe how king Abgar, from the city of Edessa in northern Syria, heard about Jesus and his miraculous healing power. Abgar, who had been suffering with leprosy for a long time sent a letter for Jesus, entreating him to come to Edessa to heal him.

According to the tale, Jesus sent a response back praising Abgar for 'having believed without having seen' and then explains that he cannot leave his homeland until he has accomplished the mission for which his Father has sent him into the world. He promises, however, that when he has ascended, he will send one of his disciples to heal the king. After Christ ascended, a disciple of Jesus, Addai, was chosen to travel to Syria and heal the king. After healing him Abgar was baptized, ordained it for his subjects, and then made Addai a bishop. *The teaching of Addai* tells the tale.

This is of course just legendary, but it hints at the way that the Church actually spread from the heart of Jerusalem to the outer extremities of the Middle East and beyond. Spurred by the persecution of the Church the Christians took their message and ran with it. And as they shared the message of healing and hope it was taken up by Samaritans, Syrians, Ethiopians, and Jews.

The Church shattered because of the great persecution that Saul was leading. But that shattering was like the mowing down of dandelion heads whose decapitation leads to hundreds of more seeds being taken up by the wind and scattered throughout the world. And I'm sure many of you are experiencing the dispersive powers of the dandelion these days.

In his zeal, Saul requests from the chief priests marching orders to track down the Christians in Damascus. He is focused on the synagogues, which tells us that the early Christians continued their Jewish practices of

worship. They are participating in the reading of Torah, and prayer, but adding to it the understanding that Jesus was the promised Messiah. On his way to Damascus, Saul is suddenly blinded by a light that flashes around him. Falling to the ground he hears a voice saying to him, “Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?” Saul is terrified, but he answers back, “Lord, who are you?” The answer returns, “I am Jesus, whom you persecute. But get up and enter the city, and you will be told what you are to do.”

Now there is repentance and there is repentance. A few weeks ago, Pastor Dave spoke about how in our lives there is the constant turning back to God that describes the lives of his followers. But here we see something more dramatic and we can’t underestimate the impact that this encounter has on the life of Saul and the future of the Church.

As we slowly approach our text for today we need to recognize the unique persona and personality of Saul.

First, Saul is a Jew of the Diaspora, from Tarsus, in Asia Minor. He is a zealous and observant Pharisee who was a master of Hebrew Scripture. He was a student of the famous Rabbi Gamaliel of Jerusalem.

Second, Growing up in Tarsus, Paul was immersed not just in the Jewish thought and customs of his family but also in the Greek world of his day. He knew how to write and speak in Greek and the Greek style of rhetoric and thought would have permeated his education.

Third, being a man from Tarsus, the capital of the Roman district of Cilicia, he claimed Roman citizenship and all the rights and privileges that would come along with being a Roman, not least of which was appealing to a higher court or Roman authority when you needed to get out of a jam. Saul, his Jewish name, was called Paul or Paulus, his Roman name. As he begins to minister and write to Gentiles spread around the empire he naturally switches over to his roman name.

Saul, who is called Paul, is uniquely positioned to understand the gospel and the significance of Jesus' resurrection. He now sees that Jesus was the Messiah.

Having this confirmed to him in this vision and being filled with the Holy Spirit. He now sets out, not to destroy the Church, but to join in its mission and fellowship. He preaches to the synagogues in Damascus, he does the hard work of convincing the apostles in Jerusalem to accept and sanction him. And, interestingly, he claims the title of apostle even though he has not witnessed firsthand the risen Christ. Maybe, this encounter on the road to Damascus was so dramatic that he considered it a direct encounter with the resurrected Jesus.

Saul is finally accepted and commissioned and begins to take the message beyond Palestine. Saul is transformed from the fiercest enemy of the Church to the Church's most effective missionary and hero of the faith.

And now, the Lectionary launches us from this scene of the stoning of Stephen to Paul on his second missionary journey. (It's quite a jump and I've struggled here to lead up with some context while leaving enough time to deal with the text.) He has just been chased out of town and left his companions, Timothy and Silas in Beroia. He is escorted to Athens to wait for the others but while he is there he can't help himself. He heads to the synagogue and debates with the Jews, he heads to the marketplace, the agora, and tries to convince anyone who happens to walk by while they are shopping. And you get a sense again of the type of person that Paul was, he just couldn't give it up. He would pester and pester and go after you until you responded.

But then, we are told, Stoic and Epicurean philosophers come across him and take him on. They say, "what would this babblers (seed-pecker) like to say?" and others said, "He seems to be a herald for foreign divinities; for he was proclaiming Jesus and the resurrection."

They led him up to the hill just below the Acropolis which was called Areios Pagos - or Ares Hill. Ares, or for the romans, Mars, was the god of violence and war. He was a brother to his sister Athena, whose statue would have towered above them all at the top of the Acropolis. Of course, the temple to Athena - the Parthenon was completed in 432 BCE and still stands atop the Acropolis. Athena was recognized as the goddess of wisdom, strategy, and justice.

Some of you have been able to visit Athens and I'm sure you've made a point of visiting and if you plan to someday my only advice is to make sure you have a legitimate tour guide. When Ceri and I were there in the summer of 2002 we hired a guide, who was apparently not a guide and just a guy, who was hanging around the acropolis waiting for some naive tourists to require his services. He may have been making some stuff up on the spot and also made some inappropriate comments about how Greek architecture could stand for thousands of years but the Twin Towers only lasted a few decades. This wasn't even a year after the towers fell and I worried about how some more passionate Americans might react to his routine.

The Areopagus was under this giant compound of temples and idols, and in the shade of Athena this council brings Paul to account.

We might imagine this scene as a friendly debate, but some scholars have suggested that this is more like a trial than a philosophical back and forth. The Areopagus was the hill, but it was also the council, an important legal institution that upheld Athenian democracy.

Remember, that the most famous person put on trial in Athens, Socrates was also accused of "preaching foreign divinities". And his was a lethal sentence.

No, this address may be a crucial defence not just of Christianity and the gospel but of Paul's intentions and character. Of course Luke does say that

the Athenians love to discuss and listen to the latest thing, but this may be just a description about how the crowd gathered around the council to listen and not a comment dismissing the importance or function of the council itself.

In a legend that tells of the formation of the Areopagus, there is a line that reads: “When the dust drinks up a man’s blood. Once he has died, there is no resurrection.”

Paul was called to answer for what he was trying to convince people of in the marketplace and to explain these foreign gods. This wasn’t a favourable audience. In the synagogue, he was able to create a common ground with the history of Israel and God’s coming Messiah. But here atop the pinnacle of Greek thought and culture, the Jewish basis for faith and understanding of God was moot.

Summarizing stoic and epicurean philosophy in a paragraph will not do it justice. Like any philosophy or religious thought, it developed and changed throughout the years. Generally, the stoics thought that a person’s fate couldn’t be avoided and it was more virtuous to accept it, cooperate with whatever happens, and approach life with a dispassionate understanding that you either fit in with it or you don’t. This led to many Stoics recommending the noble act of suicide and bravely accepting the inevitable final end to life. So, Stoics like Seneca, who was contemporary with Paul and the tutor of Nero, said, “look at our wrists to find the way out.”

The Epicureans are described sometimes as being hedonists but their founder survived mostly on bread and water and preached against the excesses. He did promote happiness and contentment and suggested that God, though he may exist, is far from us and we can’t really know him.

Paul begins by recognizing the Athenians religious longings. and their altar to an unknown God. While many in the city were certainly religious and

involved in the cult, we know that the stoics and academics would probably have considered these deities all but irrelevant. Paul is correct in recognizing the outward religious fervour but his comment probably is using hyperbole.

You could imagine if someone drove through our streets and saw many churches and may accuse us of being highly religious, but this might be more of a taunt knowing that most of our city don't attend worship.

Nevertheless, Paul says that he will make this God known.

And he begins by describing a God who is the creator of the cosmos. A god who so transcends human life that he doesn't need human help. You can imagine him looking up from Mars Hill to the Acropolis and great compound of buildings and saying that this god doesn't need to be housed in temples. This god who is the Lord of all life, who creates and shapes, and sustains us. All human activity stems from this god and leads us to wonder who He is. And yet, he is not far, in him we live and move and have our being.

He is like a parent to us and like the Greek poet Aratus, who hailed from the same region as Paul, said, "For we too are his offspring."

Of course, Aratus was referring to Zeus. The full quote was: "Everywhere we all need Zeus, for we are also his offspring."

But Paul, successfully linking the thought of one of their own poets with his conception of God, continues: "Since we are God's offspring..." certain things can be concluded. We cannot make God into some idolatrous form. He made us and we cannot remake him in a graven image. Also, there was a time that he overlooked our ignorance but now God demands repentance because the time of judgement is at hand, a righteous time presided over by a "man" whom God has designated. The event that symbolizes the truth of this present and coming reality is the resurrection of this man from the dead, a resurrection brought about by God.

And so, for the fourth week in a row, we are presented with a testimony of the work of God that culminates in the resurrection of Jesus. Paul proclaims along with Stephen and Peter that Jesus is the centre of history and Easter the central event.

And the response is well... disappointing maybe. Paul is allowed to move along at least. We're told that some believed, some wanted to hear more, some scoffed at him and laughed him off. Of those who believed, one of the Areopagites Dionysius and a woman, Damaris, possibly a temple prostitute or the wife Dionysius.

The point of the passage is that this central message of Jesus Christ and his resurrection, the primary event of human life, points to the unknown God who has now revealed himself, to Jew and to Greek, to man and to woman, to ancients and to moderns.

I wonder if this morning it doesn't amaze you to see the way in which this tiny group of persecuted believers exploded on the world stage and without some key players, like Stephen, like Peter, like Paul, it might have all come to nothing. Doesn't it boggle your mind to think about who else would have been born and raised and educated and gifted in the same way as Saul so that the message could be adjusted and suited to this Greek world.

If it wasn't going to be Paul? Who would it have been? Where would we be without him?

But God had the right person at the right place at the right time.

And I wonder this morning if that doesn't stir something in you. If it doesn't make you pause to wonder where God has you placed. What if God has uniquely gifted you to be his light and reflect his love in a way that no one else could? What if you are the right person, at the right place, for such a time as this?

And what if our church community was the right church, for the right place, for such a time as this? What would it mean if we collectively used our unique gifting to speak to our world, in the marketplace, in the academy, in the schools, in the parking lot?

Yes, we might get laughed at by some. Some of us are already getting laughed at. But, some people might want to hear more. And, some might understand and connect with the message, and have faith in the God that wasn't that far from them.

Prayer

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