

—The Message of Acts—

Lesson 7—An Enemy Conquered

- I. God's Victory Over His Enemies
 - A. How does God deal with His enemies?
 1. Part of the answer is found in God's treatment of Saul of Tarsus, who was "a blasphemer and a persecutor and an insolent opponent," (1Tim 1.13), and who was "fighting against God" (Acts 5.39). For this enemy was conquered and repurposed as a vital instrument of glory.
 2. The story of Paul's conversion is familiar. But what we need to learn is not only the *facts* of Paul's call, but also its *significance*.
 - B. The source of Saul's enmity
 1. The source of Saul's antipathy toward the followers of Jesus is explicitly stated in Paul's own account of his activities in Acts 22 and 26.
 - a) He was a strict Pharisee, loyal to the Torah and its application to life, 22.3, 6; 26.5; Phil 3.5; 15.5
 - b) He was also a zealot, devoted to the law and the rabbinical traditions that interpreted and applied it, Gal 1.14; Acts 21.20 (cp. the zeal of Phinehas, Num 25.11-13).
 2. Against this background, the source of Paul's antipathy for Stephen and other followers of Jesus is not hard to deduce: To a "strict" and "zealous" Pharisee, the proclamation of a Messiah who had been condemned by Judaism's leaders and executed in disgrace, and especially the view (attributed to Stephen) that this Messiah would destroy the temple and change the Torah, would sound like apostasy from the God of Israel. As a faithful servant of God, Saul of Tarsus was obligated to heed the command, "You must purge the evil from among you" (Dt 17.7).
 3. Moreover, if Saul had made the connection between Jesus' execution and the sign of the curse in Dt 21, he could only have seen Jesus' shameful death as a sign that Jesus *deserved* God's curse and therefore *could not be* the Messiah. Since the form of Jesus' death itself "proved" that Jesus was a false Messiah and an enemy of God, Saul the Pharisee would've seen himself as waging holy war against the enemies of God.
 - C. Judgment on the enemy
 1. Burning with zeal but blinded by ignorance, Saul had things backwards. He was to discover that those whom he was hunting down as enemies of God were in fact the beloved and chosen people of God, the friends of the Messiah.
 2. On the road to Damascus, Saul was confronted by the glorified Jesus. His fellow travelers saw the light, but no form, while Saul saw the person of Jesus in all His glory. His fellow travelers heard a sound, but discerned no voice, while Saul heard the words of Jesus and conversed with Him. This revelation was not subjective or internal but it was given to Saul alone.
 3. The glorious figure accused Saul, 9.4; 22.7; 26.14. When the speaker identified Himself as "Jesus, whom you are persecuting," it became apparent that the purpose of Saul's present journey was the reason for the enmity between him and this One whose glory outshone the sun. Saul had seen himself as a zealot for God, hunting down those who sowed seeds of apostasy among the Dispersion, but now, to his shock, he learned that, in persecuting these Christians, he was persecuting the glorified Messiah Himself.

- a) *The way people treat God's servants express their attitude toward God Himself, Ex 16.8; 1Sam 8.7; Lk 10.16.
 - 4. This violent enemy of the Lord and His people had brought himself under divine judgment (cp. 1Cor 3.17; Gal 1.13).
- D. Blind at midday
- 1. Saul's spiritual blindness had brought him under God's covenant curse, as his physical blindness, resulting from the display of Christ's glory, attests. Compare 22.6 with God's threatened judgment on a disobedient Israel in Dt 28.28-29; 1Kgs 24.19-20; 25.7; Isa 59.10
 - 2. This OT symbolism of judgment illuminates the scene of Saul of Tarsus, blinded by divine glory, groping in darkness despite the midday sunlight, in need of others to lead him by the hand to Damascus. Despite his strenuous zeal, Saul the persecutor, in a real sense, embodied the climax of Israel's rebellion against the Lord. Stephen's indictment of Israel's stubbornness perfectly sets the stage for Saul's entrance as "a blinded Israel of one," Acts 7.52; 8.1, 3; 9.1
 - 3. At the start of his mission to the Gentiles, Paul would encounter a fellow Jew, Elymas Bar-Jesus, who would oppose the spread of faith in Jesus, just as Paul had done (13.6-12). This Jewish false prophet was likewise struck with blindness as the covenant curse-sign (now spoken by Paul!) for his opposition to the Lord.
 - a) Thus Saul of Tarsus and Elymas Bar-Jesus of Cyprus epitomize the darkness and confusion that unbelievers have brought upon themselves through their rejection of Jesus the Messiah. *The Lord judges His enemies by plunging them into blindness (2Th 2.9-12; 2Cor 4.4).

III. Saul, God's Messenger

- A. In Paul's apostolic call there are echoes linking it to God's enlistment of prominent OT prophets.
 - 1. The Lord calls him twice, Acts 9.4; Ex 3.4; 1Sam 3.10
 - 2. His call is associated with a vision, 9.10, 12 (26.19); Ex 3.3
 - 3. Ananias responds to the Lord's summons with an expression of readiness to obey, 9.10; Ex 3.4; 1Sam 3.4
 - 4. Jesus answers Paul's question with an "I am," 9.5; Ex 3.14
 - 5. Ananias informs Paul that "the God of your fathers" has commissioned him, 22.14-15; Ex 3.15
 - 6. A rare biblical word for "choose" is used, 22.14; 26.16; Ex 4.13
 - a) Through these multiple allusions, Luke invites us to recognize that Paul's prophetic call is like that of Moses, the preeminent prophet with whom God spoke face-to-face (Num 12.8), and that of Samuel, the founder of the prophetic tradition subsequent to Moses (Acts 3.24). We could also compare Paul's call and commission with Dan 10.7 and Ezk 2.1.
 - 7. The prophets' commissioning visions sometimes predicted their sufferings or promised protection from hostile reactions, Jer 1.8, 10, 19; Ezk 2.6; 3.9. Paul is told something similar, 26.17; cf. 9.15-16
 - 8. Like the prophets, Paul was summoned into the glorious presence of the Lord for an audience with the Sovereign who commissioned him, 22.14; Gal 1.11-12, 15-17; cp. Isa 6; Ezk 1

IV. God's forgiveness

- A. The forgiven Saul was the best mouthpiece to bring the news of God's forgiveness to others. Being forgiven apart from (and in spite of!) his efforts to keep the law, Saul was now uniquely prepared to announce God's forgiving grace to the Gentiles apart from their efforts to keep the law, Rom 3.19-23; 10.1-9; Gal 2.15-16; 1Tim 1.16.
- B. In all three accounts, we learn that Paul was to be God's herald to the Gentiles, 9.15; 22.21; 26.18.

V. Conclusion: From Enemy to Ambassador

- A. Paul stands as the prime example of the futility of human religious effort and the surprising mercy of God. A time is coming when the Lord Jesus will destroy those enemies who persist in hostility toward Him and His people (2Th 1.6-7). But at present, God is conquering His enemies, as He pleases, through the converting and redeeming message of the cross, where Christ became a curse for us, that we might become the righteousness of God in Him, 2Cor 5.21