

# THE GOSPEL PROJECT – CHRONOLOGICAL

## THE CHURCH ON MISSION

### THE GOD WHO SENDS

#### *The Messenger Converted and Called*

It has been said that a picture is worth a thousand words. I love how God's Word is filled with pictures!

The LORD ALMIGHTY made a promise to Abraham, a descendant of Shem, in **Genesis 22:18 (ESV)**<sup>18</sup> *and in your offspring shall all the nations of the earth be blessed....*” Most of those descendants took the promise the wrong way, thinking the promise was all about them when actually the promise was all about the world. Scripture reveals that the promised blessing came through Abraham's descendant, Jesus. Sadly, the Jewish nation as a whole rejected Jesus as their promised Messiah and failed to recognize that He was the one through whom all nations would be blessed. The majority of Jews reject Jesus as their Messiah even today. Eventually, their understanding of who Jesus is will change.

In ‘pictures’ of the three people groups who originated from Noah (Shem, Ham, and Japheth), see all the all nations of the earth being blessed as the LORD ALMIGHTY had promised Abraham. A descendent of Shem (Philip) sharing the message of God's blessing with the Ethiopian eunuch pictured how Jesus the Savior was meant for Ham's descendants. Next, we studied how another descendant of Shem (Peter), took the message of God's blessing to Cornelius, picturing how God's great salvation was extended to Japheth's descendants.

The ‘picture’ we study today is a little different. Jesus, a descendant of Shem and Abraham, who had already ascended into heaven, takes the message of salvation to a non-believing son of Shem who called himself a *Hebrew of Hebrews* and the greatest enemy of Christ's followers. The man who received his mission from Christ would become the greatest advocate for the church by obeying the words of Jesus as found in **Acts 1:8 (ESV)**<sup>8</sup> *But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth.*” Though born in the Roman city of Tarsus, he was a also a ‘devout’ Jew. Scripture does not reveal if Saul ever encountered Jesus during Jesus' earthly ministry, but he did meet Jesus the Savior up close and personal!

We will study Luke's account of Saul's conversion; however, Saul's story is told twice more, once in his speech before a crowd in Jerusalem (**Acts 22**) and again in his testimony before Agrippa and Festus (**Acts 26**). Saul is confronted by the Savior he opposes.

**Read Acts 9:1-9 (ESV)**<sup>1</sup> *But Saul, still breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord, went to the high priest*<sup>2</sup> *and asked him for letters to the synagogues at Damascus, so that if he found any belonging to the Way, men or women, he might bring them bound to Jerusalem.*<sup>3</sup> *Now as he went on his way, he approached Damascus, and suddenly a light from heaven shone around him.*<sup>4</sup> *And falling to the ground he heard a voice*

saying to him, “Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?”<sup>5</sup> And he said, “Who are you, Lord?” And he said, “I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting.”<sup>6</sup> But rise and enter the city, and you will be told what you are to do.”<sup>7</sup> The men who were traveling with him stood speechless, hearing the voice but seeing no one.<sup>8</sup> Saul rose from the ground, and although his eyes were opened, he saw nothing. So they led him by the hand and brought him into Damascus.<sup>9</sup> And for three days he was without sight, and neither ate nor drank.

The first time that Saul is mentioned in the Bible is during the stoning of Stephen. (**Acts 7:56-58**) Now, he is ‘hot of the trail’ of followers of The Way. The Lord’s disciples were referred to as belonging to The Way in the infancy of the church – The Way being based on the teaching of Jesus found in **John 14:6 (ESV)**<sup>6</sup> *Jesus said to him, “I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.*

Saul’s trip to Damascus was not the beginning of his rampage. He later told of his persecution of the church. **Acts 26:11 (ESV)**<sup>11</sup> *And I punished them often in all the synagogues and tried to make them blaspheme, and in raging fury against them I persecuted them even to foreign cities.*

However, on the road to Damascus, he saw The Light and the rage inside of him would soon turn from rage to love! **Acts 22** tells us that the time of day was about noon. **Acts 26** explains that the light was greater than the brightness of the sun! It was the light of Jesus. **John 1:4 (ESV)**<sup>4</sup> *In him was life, and the life was the light of men.* **Acts 22** adds that only Saul understood the voice – the others with him only heard the sound. It was same way during Jesus’ earthly ministry. Jesus said in **Luke 8:10 (ESV)**<sup>10</sup> ... “To you it has been given to know the secrets of the kingdom of God, but for others they are in parables, so that ‘seeing they may not see, and hearing they may not understand.’”

Often, in the Old Testament, a call from God came by the LORD voicing the person’s name twice indicating intense emotion. Two well-known examples are when God called out *Moses, Moses*, from the burning bush and when He called out *Samuel, Samuel* in the middle of the night to the young child. Keep in mind, this account is a revelation of Jesus from heaven unlike any of the other appearances of Jesus before his ascension.

Although Saul addressed Jesus as Lord, it was undoubtedly spoke more out of fear than reverence. Saul wanted to know who this person in the heavenly vision was. And the answer came immediately: “*I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting.*” These words would both shatter and recreate Saul’s entire world. Undoubtedly, at that moment, Saul’s heart must have thought – He really is alive!!! The one he had accused of being an impostor had actually risen from the dead. We might speculate that the dying voice of Stephen echoed in his ears: “*Lord, do not hold this sin against them.*” (**Acts 7:60**) Could it be that Saul saw the same vision of Jesus that Stephen had seen when Stephen said: *I see heaven open and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God.* Or, was Jesus so near that Saul could see and touch the nail prints like Thomas did?

What happened was not a dream. He was physically blinded by the event. He would later proclaim to King Agrippa, “*I was not disobedient to the **vision from heaven.***” It is clear that Saul had a vision from heaven. Oh what wonderful words to be able to say – I was not disobedient to God!

Saul's entry into Damascus was so very different from what he had planned. He had pictured himself entering powerful and strong instead he was blinded and weak – humbled by God. **2 Chronicles 7:14 (ESV)** <sup>14</sup> *if my people who are called by my name humble themselves, and pray and seek my face and turn from their wicked ways, then I will hear from heaven and will forgive their sin and heal their land.*

Saul was blinded for three days and fasted and prayed. This waiting period reminds me that even when we have come face to face with the Lord's will, His will is still often revealed to us in stages. Charles Stanley writes, "Paul knew Scripture thoroughly, but the truth that Jesus was the promised Messiah made him reconsider the foundation he'd been trusting. Everything he knew about God had to be reevaluated in light of this new information. Paul had a history of wanting to please God, so the Holy Spirit no doubt found him a willing pupil." Paul would later write in **Galatians 1:17-18 (ESV)** <sup>17</sup> *nor did I go up to Jerusalem to those who were apostles before me, but I went away into Arabia, and returned again to Damascus.* <sup>18</sup> *Then after three years I went up to Jerusalem to visit Cephas and remained with him fifteen days.*

The Lord had plans to use another Christian to intervene in the life of Saul before Saul was ready to move forward on God's mission. In many ways, it is not easy for most of us to identify with Saul's conversion experience. Our own profession of faith may not have been nearly as dramatic. Emotions and circumstances differ in each individual's encounter with Jesus, but that does not make our encounter any less real. However, I do believe that all of us can identify with the feelings of Ananias – that is – the Lord asked him to do something for the Lord that he was scared to do! Saul is served by a believer who is obeyed.

**Read Acts 9:10-19 (ESV)** <sup>10</sup> *Now there was a disciple at Damascus named Ananias. The Lord said to him in a vision, "Ananias." And he said, "Here I am, Lord."* <sup>11</sup> *And the Lord said to him, "Rise and go to the street called Straight, and at the house of Judas look for a man of Tarsus named Saul, for behold, he is praying,* <sup>12</sup> *and he has seen in a vision a man named Ananias come in and lay his hands on him so that he might regain his sight."* <sup>13</sup> *But Ananias answered, "Lord, I have heard from many about this man, how much evil he has done to your saints at Jerusalem."* <sup>14</sup> *And here he has authority from the chief priests to bind all who call on your name."* <sup>15</sup> *But the Lord said to him, "Go, for he is a chosen instrument of mine to carry my name before the Gentiles and kings and the children of Israel."* <sup>16</sup> *For I will show him how much he must suffer for the sake of my name."* <sup>17</sup> *So Ananias departed and entered the house. And laying his hands on him he said, "Brother Saul, the Lord Jesus who appeared to you on the road by which you came has sent me so that you may regain your sight and be filled with the Holy Spirit."* <sup>18</sup> *And immediately something like scales fell from his eyes, and he regained his sight. Then he rose and was baptized;* <sup>19</sup> *and taking food, he was strengthened. For some days he was with the disciples at Damascus.*

We do not know much about Ananias. Don't confuse him with the Ananias who with his wife Sapphira lied about their giving and were struck dead for it. This particular Ananias was described as ...*a devout observer of the law and highly respected by all the Jews living there.* (**Acts 22:12**) We do know Ananias was obedient to his heavenly vision from the Lord! He was told to go to Straight Street. This street still exists today in the old

city of Damascus, Syria. Even the name of the street where Paul resided as he awaited God's messenger reminds us that the road to heaven is the same for us as it was for Paul over 2000 years ago. **Matthew 7:14 (ESV)** <sup>14</sup> *For the gate is narrow and the way is hard that leads to life, and those who find it are few.*

It is comforting to find that when Ananias had reservations about acting on the will of God, he was free to tell his doubts to Jesus. Ananias shared his burden with the Lord – *I have heard from many about this man, how much evil he has done to your saints at Jerusalem. And here he has authority from the chief priests to bind all who call on your name.* The Lord did not interrupt Ananias. He listened but, you guessed it, He still said, *Go!* However, the Lord encouraged Ananias by explaining that Saul would be *a chosen instrument of mine to carry my name before the Gentiles and kings and the children of Israel.* That is a gigantic mission, but before that could happen, Saul needed to hear from Ananias. The Lord had prepared Paul's heart down to the minute detail of revealing that a man named Ananias would come to him!

Would Saul still have been chosen if Ananias had been disobedient? YES, of course! God would have just used someone else to fulfill His mission and Ananias would have missed the blessing that comes from being obedient. But, Ananias did not miss his blessing – he went to Straight Street to take a message to a man he knew to be persecuting his brothers in Christ.

Many of us are pretty selective when it comes to sharing the gospel. We love to talk about Jesus with people who already know Him. We love to contact the people we think will respond. We look at the “least lovely” around us and assume that they never will come to Jesus. We convince ourselves that an enemy of Christ can never become an advocate but that is the devil's lie. Saul is compelled to proclaim Jesus as Messiah.

**Read Acts 9:20-25 (ESV)** <sup>20</sup> *And immediately he proclaimed Jesus in the synagogues, saying, “He is the Son of God.”* <sup>21</sup> *And all who heard him were amazed and said, “Is not this the man who made havoc in Jerusalem of those who called upon this name? And has he not come here for this purpose, to bring them bound before the chief priests?”* <sup>22</sup> *But Saul increased all the more in strength, and confounded the Jews who lived in Damascus by proving that Jesus was the Christ.* <sup>23</sup> *When many days had passed, the Jews plotted to kill him,* <sup>24</sup> *but their plot became known to Saul. They were watching the gates day and night in order to kill him,* <sup>25</sup> *but his disciples took him by night and let him down through an opening in the wall, lowering him in a basket.*

With his conversion, Saul whose Roman name was Paul would begin his walk on an oftentimes lonely road. His former Jewish brothers plotted to kill him and in the beginning many of the new Christians were frightened of him but there were enough believers willing to be put their own lives on the line so that Paul could fulfill his mission to all people. He would later write in **Galatians 3:28 (ESV)** <sup>28</sup> *There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is no male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.*