



The Story Of Salvation

NCTM Tuesday Night Studies 2010

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28. Paul, the Apostle to the Gentiles

“According to Martin Hengel, ‘the success of the earliest Christian mission ... was unique in the ancient world’. And with specific reference to Paul, Hengel adds: his ‘mission [was] an unprecedented happening, in terms both of the history of religion in antiquity and of later church history ... With Paul, for the first time we find the specific aim of engaging in missionary activity throughout the world’ ... As a result, what he did ‘has remained unparalleled over the subsequent 1900 years’. C. H. H. Scobie makes a similar point: ‘The importance of Paul for the subsequent missionary expansion of the Church can scarcely be overemphasized. By his own extraordinary missionary activity concentrated into a relatively few years and by the theology worked out in his letters Paul laid the foundations for the later expansion in both practice and theory... What Paul preached and practised was a universal mission. Clearly Paul sees himself playing the major role in proclaiming the Gospel throughout the whole *oikoumene*.’”¹

1. The Expanding Mission of the Proclamation of the Gospel

After his resurrection, Jesus was very clear to the disciples that the charge he was giving them to proclaim the gospel was one that involved the gospel going to the whole world:

“Go, therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptising them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you.”
(Matt. 28:19-20a)

In Acts, just prior to his ascension, Jesus taught them that the coming of the Holy Spirit was with a view to them being empowered witnesses “...in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.” (Acts 1:8)

The first step towards this world-wide proclamation of the gospel was on the day of Pentecost, when the gift of tongues enabled the new Christians to be able to declare the glorious deeds of God (i.e. the exaltation of Jesus Christ) to Jewish believers who had gathered in the city from the Diaspora, for this important festival in Jewish life. In his sermon that day, Peter was clear that the promise of forgiveness and the gift of the Spirit was not for those gathered only, but “for all who are far off—for all whom the Lord our God will call.” This phrase “far off” is a reference to non-Jews (see also Eph. 2:13.)

In the next chapter when Peter and John healed the lame man at the Temple, Peter preached that what had happened was a fulfilment of the promises of the prophets:

“Indeed, all the prophets from Samuel on, as many as have spoken, have foretold these days. And you are heirs of the prophets and of the covenant God made with your fathers. He said to Abraham, ‘**Through your offspring all peoples on earth will be blessed.**’ When God raised up his servant, **he sent him first to you** to bless you by turning each of you from your wicked ways.” (Acts 3:24-26)

¹ Quoted from Andreas Kostenberger and Peter Ob’brien, *Salvation to the Ends of the Earth: A Biblical Theology of Mission, New Studies in Biblical Theology 11*, 2001, Apollos/IVP: Downers Grove, Illinois, p. 161

The phrase “first to you” shows that Peter understood that there were to be “second” hearers, and linked with his reference to the Abrahamic promise, it is clear that Peter was expecting the spread of the gospel to the nations.

One of the key early Christians was Barnabas, who is introduced firstly as “Joseph, a Levite from Cyprus” (Acts 4:36). As a Jew from the Diaspora, it would have been natural for Barnabas to be thinking about the impact of the Gospel in the pagan world. (We’ll see more of him when we come to the story of Paul.)²

In chapter 6 of Acts, seven “deacons” were chosen to help with the distribution of food to those in need. All seven had Greek names, but one in particular is noted: “Nicolas from Antioch, *a convert to Judaism*” (Acts 6:5). He was a Gentile who had become a proselyte of Judaism. (This small fact is both wonderful, but points to a problem that would raise its head in the life of the church: how “Jewish” would Gentile converts have to become in becoming Christians—we’ll see more of how that outworked next week.)

The martyrdom of Stephen was finally provoked by his criticism of Judaism, as being constantly opposed to God and His purposes (Acts 7:51ff). When he had been killed, a general persecution of Christian disciples began, and the believers, apart from the apostles, were scattered through the whole region of Judea and Samaria (remember Acts 1??). “Those who had been scattered preached the word wherever they went.” (Acts 8:4). A key proclaimer at this time was Philip, and he is noted as speaking in Samaria, which was not a *kosher* part of Israel. There, many believed and were baptised. Later Philip showed the meaning of the Old Testament prophecies to an Ethiopian who was a proselyte to Judaism. He proclaimed the gospel from the south to the north of Israel along the coastal region, up as far as Caesarea.

It was to Caesarea that Peter was summoned by the Lord (Acts 10—it is a great event to read and think about) and there another proselyte, a Roman centurion called Cornelius received the Spirit, believed in Christ and was baptised.

Those scattered by the persecution continued to proclaim, travelling as far as Phoenicia, Cyprus and Antioch (Acts 11:19). It was in Antioch that some began to speak freely to Greeks, that is to those who were not even yet proselytes to Judaism. This was a new departure, but “the Lord’s hand was with them, and a great number of people believed and turned to the Lord.” (Acts 11:21). It was Barnabas who was sent up from Jerusalem to investigate this, and there he saw the grace of God and encouraged them all to continue in the Lord. Barnabas recognised the need to strengthen what had been happening, and so he went to Tarsus and from there he brought a new and somewhat controversial convert called Saul. Together they taught for a whole year and strengthened the many who had come to faith.

2. Paul’s Conversion

Paul, born Saul, was from Tarsus, a Roman city in what is now modern Turkey, and so was both a free-born Roman citizen (with the rights this entailed) and a Jew who came from the line of Benjamin. He had a faithful Jewish upbringing and was zealous for the Law according to its Pharisaic interpretation. He hated the sect of the disciples of Jesus, for their claims that Jesus was the Son of God were blasphemous. He devoted himself from the time of Stephen’s execution to their eradication, and having done a thorough

² Just a small note, Barnabas is introduced to us in the account of his giving to the apostles of money from the sale of land, for the meeting of the needs of others in the community (Acts 4:34-37). Great ministry grows best in the context of humility.

job in Jerusalem, then proceeded to seek them out in the places to which they had fled. He set out for Damascus determined to find and arrest these people there.

On the way he had his “Damascus road experience” (Acts 9). This encounter with the risen Jesus Christ involved a thorough conversion: all his assumed priorities were overturned by the fact of the Lordship of Jesus of Nazareth. With the conversion came a call, but it was not given immediately: “Now get up, and go into the city, and you will be told what to do” (Acts 9:6). There a disciple, Ananias had been called by the Lord to seek out Saul, known only as an enemy and persecutor to Christians at this time, and to lay hands on him so that his sight would be restored.. The reason for this was, the Lord said,

“This man is my chosen instrument to carry my name before the Gentiles and their kings and before the people of Israel. I will show him how much he must suffer for my name.” (Acts 9:15-16)

These events solidified all of Paul’s later ministry. He came to see that, far from being blasphemy, it was in fact proper to affirm that Jesus is the centre of God’s saving purposes, and that he is Israel’s Messiah, the Son of God and Lord of all. It is this Lord Jesus who rules creation and who is bringing creation to its glorious fulfilment. He saw too that righteousness with God could only be on the basis of grace and justification of the ungodly: all his presumed legalistic righteousness was shown up to be persecution of the Lord of all! His experience was essentially one of complete forgiveness and full reconciliation. All of this linked in with his calling to carry the name of Christ to the Gentiles. Since justification by law was seen to be a hollow and fruitless impossibility, then the division between Jew and Gentile had been abolished by this Lord Jesus. The Gospel was for all the world.

Immediately after these events Saul began preaching in the synagogues that Jesus is the Son of God (Acts 9:20), proving to the Jews in Damascus that Jesus is the Christ (Acts 9:22). This brought about a growing antagonism, and he had to flee secretly from the city back to Jerusalem. There he was not readily welcomed by the suspicious and hurt Christian community, but Barnabas worked hard to help the community see the reality of grace which had been worked in him, and how Christ had claimed him (Acts 9:26ff). Again, as Saul talked boldly of Christ in Jerusalem opposition grew and he had to flee again, this time going through Caesarea to his home town of Tarsus. It was from there that Barnabas sought him to go to Antioch. From Antioch Barnabas and Paul had gone to Jerusalem with a gift to the believers there to support them during famine, and then they had returned to Antioch.

3. The missionary journeys

“A cursory glance at Paul’s letters quickly reveal that the apostle understood his missionary activity to Gentiles within the context of an Old Testament expectation in which the Gentile nations would on the final day partake of God’s ultimate blessing to Israel.”³

Having returned to Antioch, a gathering of five prophets and teachers (who seem to come from a variety of ethnic backgrounds according to their names and descriptions) were addressed by the Spirit of God as they worshipped and fasted. Saul and Barnabas were to be set apart for the work to which the Lord had called them (Acts 13:1-3). Immediately obedient, the two had hands laid on them, and they set off, “sent on their way by the Holy Spirit.” They were accompanied by John, who had come up with them

³ Kostemberger and O’Brien, *op. cit.*, p. 164

from Jerusalem. This first missionary journey took them first of all to Cyprus (Barnabas' birthplace).

(See slideshow for outline of the missionary journeys.)

Their approach was to speak first in the synagogues. Later, if the synagogue rejected that word, they would seek other places from which to teach.

Signs and wonders accompanied the preaching of the word.

They did not often stay long in any place but moved on to other places to proclaim the gospel. If a place seemed receptive and it provided a place from which the gospel could go out more widely (e.g. Corinth and Ephesus) then they seemed prepared to stay longer.

Generally the Jews in the audience rejected the gospel, but many Gentiles came to believe. The Jews also were envious of the great crowds that gathered to hear them. The following is a typical account of what happened in their ministry:

On the next Sabbath almost the whole city gathered to hear the word of the Lord. When the Jews saw the crowds, they were filled with jealousy and talked abusively against what Paul was saying. Then Paul and Barnabas answered them boldly: "We had to speak the word of God to you first. Since you reject it and do not consider yourselves worthy of eternal life, we now turn to the Gentiles. For this is what the Lord has commanded us: "I have made you a light for the Gentiles, that you may bring salvation to the ends of the earth.'" When the Gentiles heard this, they were glad and honoured the word of the Lord; and all who were appointed for eternal life believed. The word of the Lord spread through the whole region.

But the Jews incited the God-fearing women of high standing and the leading men of the city. They stirred up persecution against Paul and Barnabas, and expelled them from their region. So they shook the dust from their feet in protest against them and went to Iconium. And the disciples were filled with joy and with the Holy Spirit. (Acts 13:44-52)

They quickly sought out local leadership in the church. There was no sense of an ongoing dependency upon the missionary preachers for the decision-making in the churches planted. The only accountability was to the truth of the gospel and the law of love.

Likewise, there was no sense of an ongoing financial dependency on the sending churches by the planted church. Just as they had responsibility for local decision making, so also they had responsibility for local support.