

## Paul's Travels – ChristChurch 17<sup>th</sup> July 2011

### Section 1 – Meeting Jesus Changes Things

Let me tell you the story of three men.

The first is a nasty piece of work. He's a rich man, but he is a thug, preying on the most vulnerable of society, stealing their money. But he's immune because he's a traitor; he has the support of some tough guys who are in charge, so there's not much his victims can do. He is not a man who is loved by his peers.

The second man is much better. He is really well educated, a pillar of society. He is a member of the religious elite, known for their good living and their strong position before God. And not only is he a member of this religious elite, he has the family connections and ancestry to match. This is a man who is going places.

Two men, completely opposite sides of the religious divide. One loved by the religious, trained by none other than the great Gamaliel. He was a Hebrew, and Benjamite, a Pharisee who was the son of a Pharisee. The other was a chief tax collector in the rich town of Jericho, shunned by the religious because of his ill gotten gains. He was working with the Roman Empire to subdue his own people, the Jews, by taking more tax from them than they could afford.

But there were some similarities. One had an unspecified thorn in his flesh, the other was short. And they both met Jesus. And after they met Jesus, their lives were turned round completely, because meeting Jesus changes things.

Zacchaeus, the corrupt collaborator, immediately promised to pay back four times the amount he had cheated people of and also give away half of his possessions to the poor, not because Jesus asked him to, but because meeting Jesus changes things.

Paul, who we sometimes think of as a lunatic who was killing Christians, was an upstanding member of the Pharisee class. Yes he stood by and allowed people to be killed and pursued members of the newly formed religion of Jesus, but he thought he was protecting God's honour and was important enough in Jewish circles to have a letter from the High Priest. Paul wasn't a bad man by his culture's standard; he was actually a very good man. But when Paul met Jesus on the road to Damascus, Paul's life turned around. He abandoned religion, convincing people in the synagogues and beyond that Jesus was the Christ and that His death and resurrection brings freedom. The nationalistic rule-keeper was transformed into a missionary to the Gentiles, because meeting Jesus changes things.

But I said I would tell you a story of three men. I've told you about Paul and Zacchaeus. Now let me tell you about my friend from university called John. John was a normal enough kid who moved to the US with his family. He was occasionally unruly, but nothing too outrageous. But then the event happened that would change his life. Unlike Zacchaeus and Paul, this event was not a meeting with Jesus. This was instead the rash action of a fifteen year old boy in a country with silly rules about gun control. John and his mate were messing with a legally owned gun of a parent when he shot himself in the neck. John couldn't move from the neck down, other than some small movement in one finger.

And John tells the story of how he met with Jesus after lying for a year on a hospital bed unable to move, hating everything and everyone for allowing his life to be ruined. If you meet John now, you will see a completely different man from the one lying on a hospital bed filled with hate. If you are expecting a miracle in this story, you are right to expect one, because meeting Jesus changes things. But the miracle is not the one you might expect, John is still in a wheel chair and can't dress himself, can't feed himself, can't go to the toilet himself. The miracle is that John is a child of God, his sins are forgiven and his life with Jesus is assured. John tells the story about how his life was heading away from the faith he had learned when he was younger. He says that if God chose to use a gunshot to his neck to bring him back to Himself, the true life-giver, then so be it. He's not thankful for being in a wheel chair, but he's thankful that he met Jesus, because meeting Jesus changes things.

## Section 2 – Connecting with Jesus Changes Things

I don't get Superman. I mean, what's with the pants on the outside of the trousers? But that's not the biggest thing I struggle with. It's actually Lois Lane. She's a beautiful, brilliant journalist, but can't see what's right in front of her. All it takes is for Clark Kent to put on a pair of glasses, and brush his hair in a different direction, and she can't tell that he's Superman. I just don't understand how she can't see what's directly in front of her.

And yet we see that same difficulty in people all around us all the time. You see warnings on packets of peanuts that this product may contain nuts or warnings on McDonald's coffee saying that this product might be hot. These warnings are put on because there are some people who just can't see the world as it really is.

But then we get the geniuses who see the world in a different way than anyone else around them. People like Archimedes, who after discovering the principal of displaced water equalling the volume of an item ran outside naked shouting Eureka. Or Isaac Newton's understanding of gravity formed by watching an apple drop to the ground. These are people who have a moment's clarity and their lives, and lives of others around them, are never the same again.

This happened to Paul. We can read the account of his conversion in Acts chapter nine. Paul, who was called Saul at this stage, was on his way to Damascus to round up Christians to put them in jail. But Jesus met him on the road. Paul fell to the ground, and when he got up, he was blind. Paul went to Damascus, where a Christian called Ananias had been told by God to go and see Paul. Listen to Acts 9:17-19

*Then Ananias went to the house and entered it. Placing his hands on Saul, he said, "Brother Saul, the Lord—Jesus, who appeared to you on the road as you were coming here—has sent me so that you may see again and be filled with the Holy Spirit." Immediately, something like scales fell from Saul's eyes, and he could see again. He got up and was baptized, and after taking some food, he regained his strength.*

Paul, who had had one epiphany moment on the road, now had another one. He received the Holy Spirit and scales fell off his eyes. He could see again. Or, in some ways, he could see for the first time. Because connecting with Jesus changes things.

Let me explain what I mean. There's a way of meeting Jesus, seeing Him work, knowing what He has done and yet not being changed. That happened to lots of people when Jesus was around, mostly the very religious people who thought they had the world sorted. And it can happen to us today. We can get caught up in rule keeping and pride, but miss the heart of God. There is a sense in which we can know all about Jesus, know all about what God has done through the Bible, believe in our heads all that we hear, but that it doesn't really click. We've met Jesus, but we haven't connected with Him. We have seen Him, but don't remain in Him, as Jesus commands us in John 15.

I know my wife Gemma really well. I know her likes and her dislikes, her job and her hobbies. But so do lots of you. But I know more. I know her hopes and fears; I know what makes her laugh and what makes her cry. What connects me to Gemma is that I know her heart.

For Paul, connecting with Jesus, knowing His heart, changed things. We see immediately after the scales fall off Paul's eyes that he starts preaching to everyone that Jesus is the Christ, in the next section of Acts 9

*At once he began to preach in the synagogues that Jesus is the Son of God. All those who heard him were astonished and asked, "Isn't he the man who raised havoc in Jerusalem among those who call on this name? And hasn't he come here to take them as prisoners to the chief priests?" Yet Saul grew more and more powerful and baffled the Jews living in Damascus by proving that Jesus is the Christ.*

How did Paul change so much? All of a sudden, the information that he had learned from his childhood clicked. It made sense. It wasn't quite running through the streets naked shouting Eureka Archimedes style, but it was an epiphany moment where all became clear.

In Acts 13 Paul goes to a synagogue in Pisidian Antioch and uses texts from the Old Testament to explain that Jesus is the Messiah, the promised Rescuer. These were texts that Paul had known inside out when he was persecuting the church, but after meeting and connecting with Jesus, his world was changed and Paul understood what the texts really meant.

The Pharisees were a group of people who the rest of Jewish society thought were close to God because of their adherence to a set of rules and regulations, some from the Torah, some made up by themselves. But rule-keeping can only provide legalism, guilt, pride and lead us to be judgemental. And none of these traits are in the heart of Jesus. Jesus saved Paul from religion, and introduced him to grace. Paul realised it wasn't about his performance, it was about the saving act Jesus had performed on Calvary. And this realisation changed Paul's view of the world and of other people instantly. Paul's connection with the heart of Jesus enabled him to boldly preach that Jesus saves. And many that listened to Paul were convinced. Listen to Acts 13:43-45.

*When the congregation was dismissed, many of the Jews and devout converts to Judaism followed Paul and Barnabas, who talked with them and urged them to continue in the grace of God. 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.*

But there is an important point to show. The preaching of Paul, while inspired by the Holy Spirit and fuelled by huge knowledge of the Scriptures and a meeting with Jesus, did not convince everyone. Knowledge isn't enough; we need a connection with Jesus through the power of the Holy Spirit.

And the purpose of this sermon is not to tell all of you to go and be like Paul and argue and convince on every street corner that Jesus is the Christ. What I'm trying to show is that when Paul was transformed by Jesus and filled with the Holy Spirit, it enabled him to go and be the man that God wanted him to be, and to perform the mission that God had planned for him. The plan for Paul was to preach the Good News to the Gentiles. That was different than God's plan for Peter, who was preaching to the Jews. This was different again to Lydia, a rich woman from Philippi, who was involved in building and supporting the church in that town.

Our goal as followers of Jesus is not to become rule keepers or to try and find the formula to a successful life. Our goal is to follow Jesus. Being in relationship with Him, learning His heart, hearing His words and responding to His call will look different for different people, but that's okay. Some will see Jesus and learn more through music or drama. Some will see Jesus and learn more through lectures and seminars. Some will see Jesus and learn more through small group Bible study. But I think the important thing is seeing Jesus. I'm not advocating doing whatever you like, seeing Jesus in the stars in some sort of eastern mysticism. But Paul himself said in 1 Corinthians 9:22

*I have become all things to all men so that by all possible means I might save some.*

The way Paul preached in Athens in Acts 17, where he explained about the Unknown God, was different to how he preached in the synagogue in Pisidian Antioch in Acts 13 from the Old Testament and different again to how he preached in Jerusalem in Acts 22 where he spoke from his own experience.

Paul used different techniques in different places because his connection with Jesus had shown him the importance of people. Paul's letters are filled with joy for and in people. He has a passion for them, the same way Jesus does. Listen to what he says in 1 Corinthians 1

*I always thank God for you because of his grace given you in Christ Jesus*

Paul's missionary journeys were fuelled by this passion. This passion was to introduce people to the heart of Jesus, which Paul himself had learned through a miraculous meeting on the road to Damascus. The heart of Jesus is to save the sick and the lost, to look after the poor, the orphans, the widows and the oppressed, for people to be fully satisfied in a relationship with Him. He seeks the glory of God the Father. And that's what Paul's new life entailed, because connecting with Jesus changes things.

### Section 3 – Life with Jesus Changes Things

Have you ever heard someone say that if you give your life to Jesus, your life will never be the same again? A lot of the time, I think people think that becoming a Christian should give you a life immune from suffering. And while I agree with the sentiment that life with Jesus will never be the same again, I don't agree that it will always be without suffering. I don't think you find that message anywhere in Scripture.

When we look at Paul's life, he has huge amounts of difficulty after meeting and connecting with Jesus. Immediately after Paul's conversion, he swaps sides, and goes from being a Pharisee of Pharisees to being an apostle for Christ. And this leads to huge amounts of difficulty and opposition that he would not have expected as an upstanding Pharisee.

- In Acts 9, the disciples in Jerusalem are afraid of him and then the Grecian Jews try to kill him
- In Acts 13, he has a spiritual fight with a sorcerer, had Jews talking abusively at him, and was expelled from the region
- In Acts 14, he was mistaken for the Greek god Hermes and then stoned
- In Acts 15, he had a difficult disagreement with a brother in Christ about their co-workers
- In Acts 16, he was severely flogged and thrown in prison for healing a demon possessed girl

And so on. Paul was beaten, imprisoned, shipwrecked, never mind the emotional and spiritual torment from people laughing at him, questioning him, bringing up his past. Life with Jesus certainly changes things, but not always to the good life we expected.

How did Paul respond to this difficulty? Did he become bitter and twisted, angry at God and the world for allowing suffering to happen to him? Here's two occasions that I mentioned above where Paul reacts in a different way than we might expect.

In Acts 13, after being expelled from the region by the jealous Jewish leadership, this is what verse 52 says.

*And the disciples were filled with joy and with the Holy Spirit.*

In Acts 16, after being flogged and thrown in prison for helping a girl who was being abused by a spirit and by her owners, this is Paul's response

*About midnight Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns to God*

Paul learnt that life wouldn't always be plain sailing, but that he needed to trust God, and that God would never let him down. He explains his views in Philippians 4:11-13

*I have learned to be content whatever the circumstances. I know what it is to be in need, and I know what it is to have plenty. I have learned the secret of being content in any and every situation, whether well fed or hungry, whether living in plenty or in want. I can do everything through him who gives me strength.*

And in first Thessalonians 5:16-18

*Be joyful always; pray continually; give thanks in all circumstances, for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus*

Paul learnt a secret that most of Western society is not even looking for. Contented life is not found in the acquisition of stuff; money, clothes, gadgets. Contented life is not found in the acquisition of renown; fame, influence, power. Contented life is not found in the acquisition of perfection; beauty, health, prosperity. Contented life is only found in trusting that God knows what He is doing, and God uses bad situations to bring about great results.

Let's look again at chapter 16, from verse 25, where Paul and Silas are singing songs in the slammer.

*About midnight Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns to God, and the other prisoners were listening to them. Suddenly there was such a violent earthquake that the foundations of the prison were shaken. At once all the prison doors flew open, and everybody's chains came loose. The jailer woke up, and when he saw the prison doors open, he drew his sword and was about to kill himself because he thought the prisoners had escaped. But Paul shouted, "Don't harm yourself! We are all here!" The jailer called for lights, rushed in and fell trembling before Paul and Silas. He then brought them out and asked, "Sirs, what must I do to be saved?" They replied, "Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved—you and your household." Then they spoke the word of the Lord to him and to all the others in his house. At that hour of the night the jailer took them and washed their wounds; then immediately he and all his family were baptized. The jailer brought them into his house and set a meal before them; he was filled with joy because he had come to believe in God—he and his whole family.*

And I think this is the essence of why Paul can be content and joyful in the midst of suffering. I said earlier that the heart of Jesus was to seek and save the lost. Paul's misfortune, and remember his misfortune was not a missed promotion, it was a severe beating, led to the jailer and his family being saved. If you asked Paul would he take a beating for a family to be saved, I'm pretty sure he would do it every time. He was able to see that God worked through him, and the best thing that God could do through him was to bring people into a better relationship with the God who gave him strength.

I always like to contrast the suffering of Paul in this chapter with the suffering of Joseph in Genesis 40 and 41. My love of instant gratification appreciates this story from Paul, because he got beaten one day, and was involved with saving the family the next. The result of his suffering was easily seen. Joseph however had to play the long game. He was in prison for more than two years. It would be harder to trust God working after that long.

But that is what we must do. I don't always know why I go through some of the difficulties that I do. Sometimes it is to train me, sometimes it is to teach me to look to God for strength, and sometimes the difficulties are caused by me. But I have to trust that God will work His plans through me, but that doesn't mean a life free from suffering. And even if I don't see the reason, that doesn't mean God is not working.

Paul had a joy in his life, a joy from serving the God who he met on a road. It is summed up in this phrase from the beginning of Philippians.

*For me to live is Christ and to die is gain.*

Paul's joy in life is in serving Jesus Christ. His joy in death is seeing Him face to face and serving Him for all eternity. This joy in service led Paul across the Mediterranean to tell people the Good News that Jesus saves the sick and the lost. He used the Old Testament, he wrote parts of the New Testament and used those, he used his own experiences of Jesus. His desire was to introduce people to the Man, the Saviour, the Messiah that he had met on the road to Damascus.

Because meeting Jesus changes things

Connecting with Jesus changes things

A life with Jesus changes things.

Are you ready for a change?