

From sinner to saint

If you've got a Bible, go to Acts 9.

I am sure you will have heard of the term, "Tall poppy"? What is a tall poppy?

A tall poppy is a person who rises above his or her peers," Unfortunately Kiwis have a tendency to want to chop tall poppies down, we are the great egalitarians of this world. I guess there a good tall poppies and bad ones, the bad ones tend to be all about themselves, the good ones, they're difference makers, they're legacy leavers, they're history changers. Their life changes the world. These are good people, let's not chop them down!!

Paul's life & legacy

In the bible there are quite a number of tall poppies.

- There would be no nation of Israel without Abraham.
- You wouldn't have God's people leaving Egypt in the Exodus without Moses.

If I were to ask you this question—apart from Jesus, who would you say is the tall poppy of the new testament? Maybe Peter, who we looked at last week and Matt will pick up again next week. But most would say Paul. Paul features in 15 of the 28 chapters of Acts. Also, he is the declared author of 13 of the 21 letter in the New Testament.

That's who we're talking about today. We're talking about a man named Saul who changed his name to Paul.

Paul is tall poppy, not only in church history, but actually the history of the world. He's the apostle to the Gentiles, that's most of us. We are here in a large part today as part of his legacy. Some have described him as a giant of a man

But Church tradition records that Paul is "small in size, bald-headed, bow-legged, well built, with eyebrows that met, rather long-nosed and full of grace."

We have been going through the book of Acts, and it has been a great series so far, you can jump on our website to listen to them if you want. The theme of

the series is 'The Church on a mission'. The phrase definitely applies to the early church, but just as much to us today, as a church, and as individuals.

Today we look at a Man on a mission, Paul, a key difference maker of the early church.

He may have been short, bald and fat, but what was he like?

1. He was privileged

As far as we can tell he didn't do it hard as he grew up. (he certainly did it hard later in life.) We are told he was raised in a devout Jewish home and was very committed to the Jewish faith, a particularly strict sect of the Jewish faith. But somehow he also had Roman citizenship so he had dual citizenship. He's Jewish and Roman. This allowed him to travel throughout the Roman Empire. This opened lots of opportunities for him and it gave him additional legal protections under the law. So, he really was a rare, privileged class of man.

2. He was resilient

Paul's ministry was spread over about 30 years, and it wasn't some cushy pastor's job sitting in his desk googling sermons.

Scholars, whose lives resemble nothing like Paul's, have determined that on his missionary journeys he walked an average of 30-40 km a day. I don't even walk to the office and I only live 500m away!!

As a pastor I try to be nice to people, (it doesn't always work for me), but Paul, he was hated, he was despised, he was opposed, his reputation was destroyed everywhere we went. Sometimes he'd be in the middle of a riot. He was flogged. He says, "I bear the marks of Jesus on my body." By that they mean, they flogged him like they did Jesus and ripped the flesh off his back. He says he was adrift on the open sea, almost drowned. On one occasion, they stoned him. And they thought he was dead, so they left him. He woke up, he just got knocked out. What does he do? Walks back into town to preach some more. This guy was tough!

I am pretty sure the fine print of my contract says, "When stoned, take the rest of the day off." (and I don't mean by drugs!!) Paul is incredibly resilient in what he endured and faced.

3. He was brilliant

Paul tells us in Galatians 1:13–14 that he studied under this rabbi named Gamaliel, who was one of the leading scholars in that day. So, he not only knew the Bible, but he learned it from one of the leading scholars in that day, the Old Testament, and he memorized it.

One current Bible scholar argues, “Paul became the first theologian in the early church and arguably the greatest in the history of the church.”

Of the 27 books in the New Testament, Paul wrote 13 of them. This guy wrestled with the issues and had a way of taking what Jesus had said and applying it into life.

Before he became Paul

But we have jumped ahead of ourselves. What I want to do is go back and look at what was he like before he encountered Jesus, before that life changing moment on the road to Damascus. What was he like before he became a Christian? And this is really important because, for us to understand someone—don’t just judge a person by where they are now, but look at where they started.

I have come up against this issue many times as a youth pastor, someone would complain about something one of the youth did, condemning their irresponsible behaviour, and yes I could see their point, it wasn’t good, but if they knew the background they came from, if they knew how far they had come, they would stand in awe of the transforming power of Jesus.

The book of Acts and other parts of the NT gives us this brief account of who Paul was before he met Jesus. And you’re going to see the stark contrast. Before he meets Jesus he’s called Saul of Tarsus, and then once he meets Jesus he’s called Paul the Apostle.

Jesus says when we become a Christian, we’re born again. You kind of start over. Paul tells the Corinthians that when you become a Christian you become a new creation in Christ, so much so that in many cultures, even today, people get given a new name.

Abram becomes Abraham, and Cephas becomes Peter, and Saul of Tarsus becomes Paul the Apostle.

The first time that we meet Saul is in Acts 7:58. Jan looked at this a few weeks ago when Stephen was being stoned to death and there was Saul, *“And the witnesses laid down their garments at the feet of a young man named Saul.”*

At this stage he's probably in his late 20s or maybe early 30s. He was roughly around the same age as Jesus Christ.

What happens is, Saul surrounds himself with some men, and their intent is to stone Stephen. This is not legal. There's no trial, there's no justice. This is mob violence and vengeance. The only way to get Stephen to stop talking about Jesus is to kill him. Stone him to death. Before they did that, they took their coats off and they lay them at the feet of Saul of Tarsus. That means Saul's the leader, leaders don't do the work, they supervise.

It's amazing that a person goes from being a persecutor of Christians to being persecuted for being a Christian, from being a murderer of church leaders to being a church leader who is ultimately to be murdered. That's amazing. And what it shows us is that God can start with anyone under any circumstances and transform them.

Saul's opposition to the church

We pick up the story a few chapters later in Acts 9.

***9** Meanwhile, Saul was uttering threats with every breath and was eager to kill the Lord's followers. So he went to the high priest. ²He requested letters addressed to the synagogues in Damascus, asking for their cooperation in the arrest of any followers of the Way he found there. He wanted to bring them—both men and women—back to Jerusalem in chains.*

What happens after he kills Stephen is, some of the Christians become very scared, so they take off. And so Saul gets permission to hunt them like a bounty hunter, to track them down. And what he's opposed to, it says, are followers of the Way.

One of the early titles for Christians was 'the Way'. And this comes out of John 14:6, "I am the way, the truth, the life. No one comes to the Father but by me."

2 things about Saul of Tarsus

A couple of things we learn about Saul of Tarsus here.

1. He was very religious

Saul believed that he was on God's mission, that God had anointed him to put an end to the following of Jesus. This is what he says some years later about himself.

Galatians 1:13:

¹³You know what I was like when I followed the Jewish religion—how I violently persecuted God’s church. I did my best to destroy it. ¹⁴I was far ahead of my fellow Jews in my zeal for the traditions of my ancestors.

He was very religious. There are zealous people for every cause, but it’s not enough to just be zealous. You’ve got to be zealous for the right things. It’s not enough to just believe that you’re doing something for God. You need to make sure that it’s actually for God.

2. He was committed

How committed are you to Christianity? It’s amazing that sometimes the opponents of Christianity are more committed to their cause than the Christians. Saul was willing to walk upwards of 200 km, going from house to house to hunt down Christians.

What are you so committed to that you would walk 200 km for? That’s about a week’s journey. He was that opposed to the church and to Jesus.

What happens next? How do we explain the man who was and then the man who he became?

Acts 9: 3-9.

³As he was approaching Damascus on this mission, a light from heaven suddenly shone down around him. ⁴He fell to the ground and heard a voice saying to him, "Saul! Saul! Why are you persecuting me?"

⁵"Who are you, lord?" Saul asked.

And the voice replied, "I am Jesus, the one you are persecuting! ⁶Now get up and go into the city, and you will be told what you must do."

⁷The men with Saul stood speechless, for they heard the sound of someone’s voice but saw no one! ⁸Saul picked himself up off the ground, but when he opened his eyes he was blind. So his companions led him by the hand to Damascus. ⁹He remained there blind for three days and did not eat or drink.

There's a lot of mystery here. It's supernatural. A lot is going on. Saul will open his eyes and can't see. Close them, open my eyes, still can't see. He's blind.

Can you imagine how terrifying that would be? Saul was, as he said in Galatians, persecuting the church, trying to destroy it, and Jesus shows up and gets involved to protect the church.

Saul didn't see this coming. Saul would have thought up until that moment he was walking in the light, teaching and enforcing the truth. But the truth is he was in darkness because he didn't believe Jesus was the way.

For three days Saul was sitting there thinking what does this mean? What do I do?" He doesn't know.

3 things about Jesus' encounter with Paul's

1. Jesus considers an attack on the church as an attack on him

I don't know if you noticed this, but Jesus confronts Saul and says, quote, "Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?"

At this point, Jesus isn't on earth, Jesus already died, rose, and returned to heaven, and Saul couldn't get to him. What is Jesus saying? "You're persecuting me." Jesus loves his church so much that he considers an attack on his church an attack on him. We do need to be careful how we treat the church, I am not talking about the institution, but our fellow believers, who of course are an integral part of the institution.

The church is his wife

The metaphor that the Bible uses often, including Paul the apostle in Ephesians 5, is that Christ loves the church like a husband should love his wife. Gay and I are married, we are one to use the imagery of Genesis. So, if somebody attacks Gay, they attack me also, Gay might respond nicely because she is lovely and gentle, I am less likely to!!!

Jesus is saying "Do not attack my wife." "Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?"

2. Jesus pursues us before we pursue him

There are plenty of people who think they have to go and search for God, and they talk about their journey or pilgrimage seeking God.

That is not Saul's story? He is not going to stand up at the campfire and say, "You know, I loved Jesus, but I couldn't find him. I was praying to him and searched everywhere looking for him, and I went on this spiritual quest around the world and finally I encountered Jesus and he accepted me"? No. In fact, Jesus would say, "I was on a quest to find Saul of Tarsus. I was the one who was on the mission to find him and have a relationship. He wasn't looking for me, I was looking for him. He wasn't pursuing me, I was pursuing him. He didn't even want to hear from me, but I wanted to talk to him."

3. Jesus answers prayers for lost people

You may remember as Saul was murdering Stephen, Stephen prayed, like Jesus did "Father, forgive them." Stephen prays a prayer that echoes the prayer of Jesus as Jesus was dying.

And we just turn the page in the book of Acts, we go from Stephen's prayer to the answering of Stephen's prayer. I need to be reminded of that. Keep praying for those who don't know him.

Who should you and I be praying for that doesn't know Jesus? You may say, "They're too far gone." They're not that far gone. "Their heart's too hard." Can't get any harder than Saul's heart. "They don't even care about Jesus." Neither did Saul.

We pray in hope. We pray in faith. We pray in love. And sure, it's between Jesus and that person, but we see here that Jesus likes to answer those prayers. If there is anyone you have stopped praying for, let this be the occasion that you start praying for them again.

From sinner to saint

So Paul has gone from Sinner to saint, he is still the same man, privileged, resilient, brilliant. But God takes his basic character and redeems it. He was born again, transformed, a new creation, redeemed, but he was still the same man.

1. God redeemed his privileged status

He still came from a privileged background, he's still a dual citizen. So once he becomes a Christian, he can now travel through the Roman Empire pretty freely, which is what you're going to see in rest of the book of Acts. And so when he's arrested, he says, "Hey, I'm a Roman citizen. You can't do this to

me,” and it gives him legal protection. God redeems, God uses his privileged status.

2. God redeemed his resilient nature

Here was a guy who was willing to make a plan, raise money, get some guys, declare war on Christians and walk 200km trying to track them down. He was very resilient. He meets Jesus. The resiliency doesn't go away, but the mission changes. “Now I'm going to travel like that to tell people about Jesus' love, not to shut churches down but to open churches up, not to persecute Christians but to pastor Christians.” God redeems his resiliency.

3. God redeemed his brilliant mind

God redeemed his brilliant mind. All of a sudden, he started thinking God's thoughts. He started to have, as he says in Colossians, “the mind of Christ.” He starts to think about Jesus and see everything connected to the person and work of Jesus. God gave him a great mind, and until he met Jesus it wasn't greatly used for God's glory, but it was redeemed.

What talents has God given you that could be redeemed?

And so my question for you is, what is God seeking to redeem in your life? You may come to Jesus and say, “I have practical ability. I have musical talent. I'm someone who has natural, innate leadership ability. I have a business background”—or whatever the case may be. “I'm a teacher, I'm a researcher.”

Whatever your thing is, what has God given you as talents, abilities, and capacities that could be redeemed? What do you do with those things? You bring them to Jesus and ask, “Lord Jesus, what does it look like to do these things to your glory and other's good? How could these be used to build your church, the community and the mission of the gospel?”

There is this song which I have played before, I like it, catchy tune, and excellent message

Matthew west - Do something song