

Just the Right Man for the Job

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[0 : 0 0] Thanks so much for reading, Kirsty. My name's Archie, as has been said. I'm the pastor in training here at Brunsfield. It's a pleasure to be with you this morning, a privilege to be bringing God's Word to you.

Do keep your Bibles open in Acts chapter 9. If you haven't already got that open, please do have that open in front of you. That would be very useful for you and for me if you do that. We see there, don't we, in Acts chapter 9, just a very unlikely man.

I wonder if you can think of someone who just seemed really unlikely for the job. And yet when they get to it, they were clearly just the right person for it.

Dylan Hartley, sorry to use another rugby analogy, you'll be getting bored of these by now, I'm sure. But Dylan Hartley, he used to play rugby for England. And he had one of the worst disciplinary records in the modern game.

60 weeks worth of bans in total he received for his ill discipline. And despite that record, he ended up being given the England captaincy.

[1 : 0 2] Such an unlikely man. And yet as captain for England, he really did do a phenomenal job. He was an extremely successful captain. Under him, England, they won the Grand Slam, an undefeated Six Nations tournament.

They recorded their first series win away in Australia. Dylan Hartley was a very surprising choice for England captain. But it would seem he was just the right man for the job.

We'll see this morning as we think about God's plan, about the explosion of the gospel, which is what we've seen as we've been working through this book together. We'll see how there's a surprising man to carry that plan forward for God.

And despite being a very unlikely man, he is just the right man for the job. Last week, Alistair began with a famous A-team quote.

I love it when a plan comes together, was the quote. Why did he start there? Well, we're in the book of Acts together. This is Luke. He's a doctor. He's a historian. And this is his account, his account of the early church growing, of the gospel spreading like wildfire.

[2 : 1 2] And in chapter one, verse eight, Jesus, after the resurrection, but before he ascends to heaven, Jesus gives the apostles a sort of mission statement.

He's telling them what's going to happen. Chapter one, verse eight says this. But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes upon you. And you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria and to the end of the earth.

That is God's plan. In our first series in Acts last year, we looked at the first seven chapters and we saw the church in Jerusalem grow, massively grow.

But last week in chapter eight with Alistair, that mission, God's plan, was really starting to come together. As the gospel began to advance beyond the borders of Jerusalem, beyond even the borders of Judea, out into Samaria, we saw as Stephen carried the gospel, as Philip, sorry, carried the gospel there.

And with the Ethiopian eunuch, we begin to see the gospel advancing to the ends of the earth. Following then some unlikely conversions to Christianity in the preceding chapters.

[3 : 21] In our chapter this morning, we get yet another very unlikely conversion. But this one isn't just unlikely. It's also very unusual. And it's recorded as unusual for a reason.

As he chooses Saul to carry out his purposes, unlikely as we'll see that is, he's just the right man for the job. This is God's plan through God's man.

And just as we begin, I want to say God does have a plan. He has a plan in the book of Acts and he has a plan today for the growth of his gospel.

As we look around the world around us, I wonder, can we be asking ourselves this morning, does God really have a plan? As we read through the book of Acts and see God's plan worked out there, do we believe that God has a plan today?

Are we prepared to be surprised by him? On the world stage, there's climate change. We're still talking about COVID. The restrictions are easing.

[4 : 29] There's apparently war looming, right, in Russia and Ukraine. Political scandals here in the UK. Rising utility costs. It all looks like a bit of a mess, doesn't it?

Maybe even slightly closer to home. The church here in Scotland seems to be shrinking, certainly very divided. And I guess if we'd look at our own selves too, in our own lives even, if we're honest, it's a bit of a mess.

There's mess out there. There's mess all around us. There's mess in here. Aren't we asking, does God have a plan in this? Well, are we prepared to be surprised by him and his goodness?

In this passage this morning, God's plan is a surprising plan for a surprising man. So let's dive into it together and be encouraged, shall we?

As we zoom in on Saul, let's see first the man that he was. The man that Saul was. See in verse 1, have a look at verse 1. Saul was breathing out, still breathing out murderous threats.

[5 : 32] Now we've met this guy before, Saul, in chapter 7. He was there as Stephen was stoned. He was there at that murder. In chapter 8, he began ravaging, destroying, persecuting the church.

And he's relentless. This guy, he's literally murderous. Into verse 2, see what he does? He goes to the high priest to ask for letters, the authority to drag the Christians in Damascus away as prisoners to Jerusalem.

Do you see who this guy is? He's gone to the highest religious authority in the land. He's been given the stamp of approval to literally go down and hunt those belonging to the way.

In other words, just Christians, those who follow Jesus, the man who said that he was the way, the truth and the life. They're in the way and Saul wants to get them out of the way. It's like he's the top agent of the secret police with all the weight of that authority behind him.

This is the man, a murderous, anti-Jesus fanatic. But we will see that he's chosen by God.

[6 : 39] If you're here this morning and you don't know Jesus, if you've come to believe for whatever reason that you've gone too far, that you couldn't possibly be a Christian, that you'd never be acceptable, that you've walked too far in the wrong direction, would you see that this man recognize how anti-Christian he was, a murderer and yet chosen.

And for us as a church, as Christians in the room, those folks that we've maybe just completely written off for whatever reason, they've decided that they'll never accept Jesus.

Maybe they're very anti-religion themselves. Maybe we've tried to share the gospel with them in the past. Maybe they grew up in church. Some of them maybe even grew up here, sitting under the word of God in this very room, hearing the gospel proclaimed and yet they've walked away.

Maybe the lifestyle that they're living, you just know that there's no way they're going to give that up and follow Jesus. Friends, can I say, please, please, please don't give up on those people.

I'm sure we can all think of at least one friend or family member like that. And I challenge you to reach out to them today. Just send them a text, give them a phone call, see how they're doing and pray.

[7 : 59] Pray earnestly for gospel opportunities to share Jesus with them and be prepared to be surprised by this good God. You see this man?

He's the most unlikely of converts. But look at this too. There's another angle on Saul here, I think. Another reason that he's so unlikely. Very often we think about people becoming Christians, people who just obviously need Jesus because they've hit rock bottom.

Seems that their world is crashing down around them. And in their moment of need, they turn to him. It's a wonderful and familiar story that I think. But we have no reason to think that about Saul.

Remember who he goes to in verse two? It's the high priest. Saul was a powerful man in a powerful religious community. He's got unrivaled credentials, unrivaled qualifications.

He describes himself as a Pharisee of Pharisees. He's got access to the high priest. We have no reason to believe that this man would feel that he might need Jesus.

[9 : 04] In fact, he's got nothing to gain and everything to lose. Maybe you're here this morning and actually that's more like you. If you're really honest in your heart of hearts, you've decided that you actually just don't really need Jesus.

Or there's too much at stake, too much that you don't want to give up, too much of your identity that you know that Jesus would challenge. If that's you this morning, you're in very good company.

See the man that Saul was. He is such an unlikely man. But God chooses unlikely people. Wherever you're at this morning, can I urge you to look at this guy, the man that he was, this man was not just anti-Jesus.

He was literally a murderer, hunting down Christians. His identity tied to his Jewish anti-Christian-ness, to his position as a Pharisee, to his lifestyle.

This is the man that he was. And this is the man that God chose. Because God had a plan through this man. Even this man. So that's the man that Saul was.

[10 : 14] But everything changes as we look next at the man that he met. Have a look at the man that he met. Verse 3. On his way to Damascus. On his way to persecute the Christian there.

The Christians there. Suddenly, it says in verse 3, doesn't it? Suddenly, a light from heaven. Straight away, we see that this is an unusual story. And then in verse 4, Saul hears this voice.

Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me? Again, this is a very unusual story. This sort of audible voice out of nowhere. It's not normal. Whose voice is this?

Do you see Saul asks the same question? And the answer comes, look at verse 5 with me. I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting.

Just notice before we move on, the way Jesus associates himself so closely with his followers here. That to persecute them, to persecute his church, is to persecute him.

[11 : 14] And don't miss what that means for us this morning. Because this is a wonderful truth. If you're here today and you're facing struggles in life, as I'm sure we all are. Maybe especially if you're feeling the squeeze of persecution for your faith.

But in whatever challenges you face in life, know that Jesus associates himself so intimately with you. If you're a Christian here this morning, you're so thoroughly united to him that he says to you, Your suffering is my suffering.

Your pain is my pain. Your persecution is my persecution. I feel it with you. I walk it with you. This is the man that Saul meets.

And in many ways it's a very unusual encounter. The sudden bright lights. The audible voice. Now I don't think we should expect to see Jesus in this way today. To hear him audibly like this.

I wouldn't want to write that off. Let me be clear about that. But it's certainly not normal. I grew up in the kind of churches that put a massive emphasis on this sort of thing.

[12 : 19] Around people who would often talk about hearing Jesus' voice audibly like this. Asking me if I ever had. And I don't know about you, but that just made me feel like a second class Christian.

Even like a bit of a fake. If you're here this morning and you're worried that your Christian experience isn't real. That you can't be a real Christian because you've not had a Damascus Road experience like this.

You need to know that this sort of experience isn't normal. And it's definitely not necessary to knowing Jesus. To knowing him in faith. Having said that, there is also a pattern here that is evident in the story of every real Christian, isn't there?

This is the man that Saul met. And he is the man that we all need to meet. It's essential that we would hear and see Jesus for ourselves. I think it's unlikely that it would be in this way.

But just very normally, we're able to do that as the Holy Spirit works in our hearts. As we approach his word, the Bible, and see Jesus revealed to us there.

[13 : 26] As we hear the good news proclaimed, we meet him. We hear him. But I think more than that, I don't think we should even necessarily be expecting single moments like this in people's lives.

That can happen. But even when Saul recounts his conversion himself, he does that twice in this book. We'll dive into those in more detail further down the line. But in two different speeches, once in chapter 22 and again in chapter 26.

And there in chapter 26, Paul uses, or Saul uses, a strange phrase. Maybe you know the phrase. He says it as Jesus speaks to him. Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?

It is hard for you to kick against the goads. Maybe you've heard that strange phrase before, kick against the goads. What does that mean? Well, it's a farming image, really. Imagine an ox pulling a plow.

The goad then is like the stick that the farmer uses to guide the ox. So what is Jesus saying? I think he's saying that Saul has been up to this point resisting that guidance, kicking out against him like an obstinate ox.

[14 : 36] What that means is that Saul must have already encountered Jesus in some way. Now, of course, this is his first encounter with the risen Jesus in this miraculous way like this.

But I think there is at least a suggestion here that God, that Jesus, by the prodding of his Holy Spirit, has been guiding Saul in this sort of direction. Indeed, we know that Saul and Jesus were more or less contemporaries.

This is conjecture, but we might imagine them in the temple together. Perhaps Saul was one of the Pharisees that Jesus called out during his ministry, challenged him.

He certainly would have heard Jesus's teachings. It's why he's persecuting his followers. And we've seen, haven't we, just a couple of chapters before this, that he was there at Stephen's speech.

As Stephen proclaimed the word of God, as he preached the gospel, perhaps even there, Saul was feeling that uncomfortable conviction. Perhaps even there, he was beginning to be humbled, to see that despite who he was, he desperately needed Christ's mercy.

[15 : 41] I know there are some of you here this morning, perhaps those watching online, exploring this church thing or rediscovering it after some time away.

And you know that uncomfortable prodding of the Holy Spirit. Maybe you're beginning to see that whatever you felt before, you might really need Jesus. And here he offers you himself mercy and grace.

He says, will you bring down your walls of pride? Are you prepared to follow him in humility? There's no better time to do that than right now.

Would you come to him? So yes, this is chapter nine of this book. It is a remarkable moment. As Saul meets the risen Jesus, as he finally bows to him.

But I do think it's helpful to realize that this probably isn't his first encounter with the good news, because very often this is how people come to follow Jesus. Last week, Glenn Scrivener, he's a pastor down in England.

[16 : 47] He posted something fascinating on Twitter. He asked his followers to picture an evangelist. When I say evangelist, what sort of person comes to mind?

Sure, for most of us here, we probably have a Billy Graham sort of figure, whether a charismatic man or a woman on stage sharing the gospel. That's an evangelist. Next, he asked another simple question.

Can you picture the person or the people that led you to Jesus? And for most of us, I'm sure those folks were defined not as the charismatic man or woman on stage.

Those moments can be significant, but very often it's people who are marked by their honesty, by their integrity, by their love, by their persistence, and their willingness to walk with us through the hard questions of life.

And so as we reach out with the gospel, might we be the same? Marked by our integrity and honesty and love and persistence, never giving up, continuing to hold out this gospel as we do our best to take our opportunities to point people to Jesus.

[18 : 02] Because this is the man that Saul met. And he's the man that we all need to meet. Because actually, God's plan is really always accomplished through this man.

Through Jesus. Before we move on, you might have noticed that Saul met another man. So let's just see this other man that Saul met, Ananias.

Notice his willingness to be used by Jesus in verse 10. How does he respond to the Lord calling him? What does he say in verse 10? Yes, Lord. Otherwise translated, here I am, Lord.

The prophets of the Old Testament, Samuel, Isaiah, others like them, they respond in exactly that way to God's call. Here I am. It's a response that says he is willing to be used by God.

And yet, see how reluctant he is when he's given the assignment. In verses 11 and 12, Jesus sends him to Saul. And see his response in verse 13? He's basically saying, Saul, are you serious?

[19 : 08] The guy who's trying to destroy the church, the persecutor of the way, are you kidding? And then yet, with some encouragement, as Jesus commands him to go, Ananias trusts Jesus.

He finds Saul. And look how he greets Saul in verse 17. Brother. Brother Saul. This guy, the enemy really, the guy who would have had Ananias quaking in his boots.

He grasps him and he calls him brother because he's met Jesus. And so now, regardless of who he was, he's become a follower of the way.

He's become a brother. Don't miss the significance of this encounter for us this morning. Notice that Saul is not left to navigate the way on his own. As Ananias comes alongside him, so as we commit to one another as a community of believers, I wonder what would it look like for us to disciple one another?

You know, recovery programs, they're well known for their 12 steps to help heal addiction. One of the core steps in that program is the responsibility to help others, to draw alongside those suffering on the same path that you're walking.

[20 : 23] You know, I suspect they probably pinched that principle from healthy churches. Would we walk alongside one another in this way? I wonder who might you be able to play this role for?

Even in this room, is there a brother or a sister, someone that you might be able to gently and naturally disciple, not to force this on them, but to draw alongside one another?

But it's not just one-to-one like that, is it? I wonder if you noticed, did you see in verse 19? Saul spends several days with the disciples. That's other followers of the way. And friends, it is so important for us to be meeting with a community of believers like this.

Understand that these were the people that Saul was hunting. He hated them, and now he is their brother. And for us then, even when it's hard, it can be awkward, it can be difficult meeting together.

But it's why we do it on a Sunday. Maybe if you're online at this stage, if it would be possible for you to join us at all, let me encourage you to do that. Because we don't meet simply to learn or to enjoy a good sing song or to sort of consume the content.

[21 : 35] It's much more significant than that, what we're doing here today. As we come together like this, it's to be built up and encouraged by one another in faith. Pointing each other to Jesus as a community of those helping one another on the way.

So we've seen the man that Saul was. We've seen the man that he met. Well, two men, but think about Jesus really. We've seen the man that he met. And as we finish, let's see the man that he became.

The man that Saul became. In verse 9, we see he's blind. Having encountered Jesus, he's blind. He's not eating or drinking. This isn't a punishment for Saul.

I don't think we should think of it like that. But more like a time of reflection. See in verse 11, as the Lord appears to Ananias in that vision. And at the end of verse 11, he tells him that he'll find Saul doing what?

Praying. Praying. He's praying. This is his initial response. As he reflects on what he's experienced in the darkness of his blindness. It's prayer and fasting.

[22 : 41] See the sort of man that he's become. And let's take a closer look in verse 15. See what Jesus says about him. This man is my chosen instrument to proclaim my name to the Gentiles and their kings and to the people of Israel.

I will show him how much he must suffer for my name. Do you see God has a plan through this man? And that plan is precisely what happens.

It's precisely what Saul does. Firstly, see how he proclaims Jesus's name. See in verse 20. At once he began to preach in the synagogues that Jesus is the son of God.

And then at the end of verse 27. Look there with me. He preached fearlessly in the name of Jesus. And in verse 28. Speaking boldly in the name of the Lord.

Saul immediately begins to be used by God to preach his word. To proclaim the name of Jesus. And so we see not only does God choose unlikely people.

- [23 : 42] He also uses unlikely people. This is such an unlikely man. And in a sense, I don't think that should be a surprise to us. The sort of people God uses all through scripture.
- Noah was a drunk. Jacob was a liar. Rahab a prostitute. David an adulterer and murderer. Jonah ran away from God. Peter denied Christ three times in his moment of need.
- God uses unlikely people. Are you prepared to say, here I am. And be surprised by how he might use you.
- Notice too, just as Jesus said he would. Saul also begins to suffer as Jesus uses him to proclaim the gospel. See how they respond to his preaching in verse 23.
- After many days had gone by, there was a conspiracy among the Jews to kill him. Right away, he's suffering. And there's much more of that to come, as we'll see in Luke's narrative through Acts, as the persecutor becomes the persecuted.
- [24 : 51] Now, as we finish, let's not lose sight here of what Luke really wants to convince his readers of. Because for him, what he's saying is that Saul is the real deal.
- As he shows us God's plan, he wants to show us that Saul is God's man. Notice again in verse 27. Barnabas took him, that Saul, and brought him to the apostles.
- He told them how Saul had seen the Lord and that the Lord had spoken to him. When the apostles in chapter 1 appointed Matthias to replace Judas so that there would still be 12 apostles, if you remember this, I appreciate it was almost a year ago that we were there together.
- But the criteria for an apostle there was that they had been with Jesus, that they had seen and heard and been a witness to his resurrection. The word apostle really just means messenger, but here it means something more.
- It's a title, apostle with a big A, if you like. And so as we journey through the rest of Acts, and as we see Saul carry the gospel beyond the Jewish nation, as we see him share and point to Jesus, Luke wants us to remember this unusual encounter, to remember then the authority with which Saul is able to speak.
- [26 : 11] And for us, the authority with which he writes as an apostle. Most of the New Testament this man wrote under the name Paul, of course, which is just the Greek version of the same name.
- He's writing and it is the authoritative word of God. And so we can trust it. As Peter, one of the other apostles, says of Paul in his letter to Peter in chapter 3, verse 16, he says, his letters contain some things that are hard to understand, which unstable and ignorant people distort, as they do the other scriptures to their own destruction.
- See what Peter says about Paul's letters? Yes, they're very challenging. And there are some people today who would point us to Jesus and tell us to ignore Saul, but see what Peter says about his letters.
- They are scripture. They're God's word. We do not need to distort them and we can trust them. Friends, this morning, let's not forget how unique Saul is, how unique his experience has been.
- And yet, surely there's a word for Christians here too. Of course, not that since we've met Jesus, we might now start calling ourselves apostles with a big A, claiming to speak with God's authority.
- [27 : 26] Not even do I think that there's a sort of, that we might all become preachers as soon as we meet Jesus. And yet we do all have a story to tell, don't we? If you're a Christian in the room today, your life has been transformed by the wonderful grace of God in Christ.
- God doesn't just choose unlikely people. He uses unlikely people. And so I wonder, who might you be able to share your story with? Who can you come alongside like this and just encourage them?

I've been walking with this guy called Callum for a while now, just a wonderful example of this. I met him a few years ago whilst I was working for Christians in sport. He's a footballer and he was at university in Sterling.

And when I met him, he'd really just encountered Jesus. He'd grown up in the church, but he'd walked away and he'd been living that kind of classic university party life. He'd been having lots of fun.

He was good at football. He was doing well at uni. He seemed to have everything sorted. He didn't really think he needed Jesus. But literally that week, a friend of his encouraged him to have another look at Jesus, to pick up his Bible and give it a crack.

[28 : 37] And as he did that, in his words, in Callum's word, Jesus just walked right off the page. And as he read about him, he saw who he really was. He heard him speak through the gospel and he was totally transformed.

And see what happened next. His teammates at the football club, they just couldn't believe it. His friends, the way he slowly started to live differently, but really it was his willingness to share that story of how he met Jesus.

Just very normally, nothing. He wasn't on a stage. It was just drawing alongside his friends in normal conversations, telling them what had happened and what was happening in his life.

I wonder, could we do the same sort of thing? So where have we been this morning? See the man that Saul was. And that means that you, even you, no matter who you are, no matter what's in your past or in your future, even you, it also means that they, those you've written off for the gospel, it's a wonderful good news for everyone.

No one is beyond God's mercy in Jesus, even you, even them. See the man that Saul met, only him, only Jesus.

[29 : 56] There is no other way. He is the way, the truth and the life. Seek him, encounter him in his word, that we would follow him.

And see the man that Saul became. Again, that means that you, even you, and they, even they, can come to Jesus and be transformed.

Joining this community of believers on the way, seeking to hold out the gospel to a watching world. But this is where we land. Remember Dylan Hartley, an unlikely man, chosen and the right man for the job.

We've seen the man that Saul was. We've seen the man that Saul met. We've seen the man that Saul became. All this to say, this is God's plan through God's unlikely man.

Shall we pray together? Let's pray. Heavenly Father, we thank you so much for your word. We thank you for Jesus.

[31 : 00] We thank you for this wonderful encounter that we read of as Saul meets Jesus on the road to Damascus and his life is transformed. And I pray for each of us here today that we might meet Jesus too.

That as his word has been proclaimed, and as we go away and as we open your Bible and see what you have to say to us in it, I pray that your Holy Spirit would be revealing Jesus to us.

that for each of us, he would walk right off the page and we would meet him and be transformed. We pray in Jesus' name.

Amen. Amen.