

FROM ENEMY TO ALLY

**SERIES: SENT: LIVING THE MISSION
OF THE CHURCH.**



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Acts 9:1-31
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Today we will see what God does with his enemies.

I was in eighth grade when it happened. I had a friend who I used to be pretty close with. We used to talk on the phone regularly in the afternoons and evenings. But we had drifted apart. We began to have different groups of friends. We just started hanging out with different people. Or so I thought.

We'll watch in astonishment as God defeats his enemy. But God doesn't just defeat him. He transforms him. In fact, we will see God transform the greatest enemy of the Gospel into one of its most valuable allies. Saul will change from enemy to ally.

My friend called me several months after this had happened. She told me that I had hurt her more than anyone else in her life. She said that I had betrayed her. She felt abandoned and deserted. She said that she felt like we had gone from being friends to being enemies. Just like that.

There are many obstacles to the Gospel in our culture. We talk about them all the time. The obstacles aren't religious leaders who persecute us. Most of them are ideas, assumptions, cultural values, the demands of life, the reputation of Christians—obstacles that make Saul seem weak in comparison.

This was a shock to me. I didn't know that I had so terribly damaged this friendship. But in hindsight, I saw how fragile friendship really is. Building a friendship takes time. Destroying it can happen in a second.

How do we respond to the things that stand in the way of the Gospel? How do we get past them?

It is all too easy to go from being a friend to an enemy very quickly.

So far in the book of Acts we haven't seen much of a response to the obstacles that the disciples have faced. The apostles simply ignored the commands of the angry leaders. The followers of Jesus scattered back to their homes when the persecution became severe. Stephen suffered death.

Today we're continuing our series in the book of Acts that we've called *SENT: Living the Mission of the Church*. Last week we heard from our guest preacher, Matt Mikalatos, as he walked us through the story of the Ethiopian eunuch who came to faith. What a great picture of the Gospel welcoming in the very last person that you'd expect to be included.

But if the Gospel is going to succeed, something has to be done. Obstacles can't be avoided and ignored forever. What will give this young group of believers courage in the face of these obstacles? What will give them confidence not just that they can avoid obstacles, but that God can handle them?

As we've watched this community of Jesus followers form and develop, we've seen incredible things happen: miracles and rapid growth. But we've also seen opposition. When you include people who aren't normally included, that usually creates enemies. We'll continue to see this happen throughout Acts. The Gospel brings life. And the Gospel creates enemies.

What will give us courage? When we look at our neighbors, our coworkers, our classmates and see them living life comfortably and happily, what will give us confidence that the Gospel offers a better way? How can we be convinced that the Gospel can overcome anything that stands in its way?

We have already seen the powerful Jewish leaders stirred up. The apostles were imprisoned and beaten. Stephen was martyred. The opposition was led by a young Jewish leader by the name of Saul. This guy was public enemy number one of the early church. He was an obstacle to the Gospel.

This morning in particular, I know that many people in this room and in our country are afraid. They are afraid that some of the values of the Gospel are at risk in our country. Values such as care for the foreigner, inclusion of people who are different, protection of vulnerable people—whether they are vulnerable for reasons of race, ethnicity, gender, or sexuality.

Regardless of your political opinions or the vote that you cast on Tuesday, we have to recognize what is going on around us. Whether or not you feel that their fear is justified, there is no denying that people are scared. That should matter to us because the things they are afraid of are things that we care about. They fear injustice. Injustice has always been an enemy of God. Throughout history, the church has stood up against it.

My prayer is that the story this morning will help us. We're going to see a radical, immediate, overnight transformation of one of God's greatest enemies. We're also going to see a long-term strategy that takes time to develop. And as we see those themes unfold, we're going to notice how God invites his people to participate in the process.

The story that is told in the book of Acts is how the Gospel goes out and permeates culture. I hope this story can give us a vision for God does that and how he asks us to participate in his work.

God Defeats His Enemies

Our story begins with a vivid picture of Saul, the greatest enemy to the Gospel in this part of Acts.

Acts 9:1-2:

But Saul, still breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord, went to the high priest 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.

Remember the nature of Saul. He'd be like the present day leader of ISIS to us: the worst possible enemy we could imagine. For the Jewish believer during this time, there was no one more feared.

Saul's very breath is laced with threats and murder. He's been hunting down believers in Jerusalem. But now that isn't enough. He wants to go to Damascus, 135 miles to the north and east. That's not even in the traditional region of Israel.



Saul is being strategic. He doesn't just want to stop those who believe in Jesus. He wants to strangle the movement. Saul's plan is to go to the furthest point that the Gospel has reached, along a major transportation artery. If he can choke the Gospel there, maybe he can prevent it going anywhere else.

This is a dangerous guy. Saul is violent, angry, and brilliant. He is a formidable enemy. He isn't like the Jewish leaders who only wanted to kill Jesus to get him out of the way. Saul knows what he is doing. The Gospel hasn't yet faced an enemy like this. What will happen?

Acts 9:3-9:

Now as he went on his way, he approached Damascus, and suddenly a light from heaven shone around him. 4 And falling to the ground, he heard a voice saying to him, "Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?" 5 And he said, "Who are you, Lord?" And he said, "I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting. 6 But rise and enter the city, and you will be told what you are to do." 7 The men who were traveling with him stood speechless, hearing the voice but seeing no one. 8 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. 9 And for three days he was without sight, and neither ate nor drank.

What does God do with a violent, angry, and brilliant enemy? He overcomes him. In a split second. Jesus confronts Saul. The light of a loving God interrupts his journey and blinds the man of hatred. Jesus identifies himself with his people, asking Saul why he has been persecuting him directly.

Saul is steeped in the Jewish Scriptures. He has read stories of God appearing to people like Moses and Abraham and David. But now it is happening to him. Saul immediately realizes what is happening. In a second, he knows that he is being confronted by the Lord himself.

It isn't much of a battle. God has destroyed his greatest enemy. Saul leaves the encounter blind. He doesn't eat. He doesn't drink. For three days, Saul was in the dark with no food and no water.

What's going on here? Where is Saul? He is in a tomb. This is death. God has killed his enemy. With a single flash of light and a word from the voice that created the universe, Saul has been destroyed. This is how easy it is for God to overcome those who stand against him. God defeats his enemies.

How do you feel about spiders in your shower? Not great, right? Everyone hates seeing a spider in the shower. But it happens. And we hate it when it does. Most of us get totally freaked out about a spider in the shower.

But unless you're in a place where there are really dangerous spiders, this is not actually a dangerous situation. I've been trying to teach this to my children. You don't actually have anything to fear from a spider in the shower. Of all the problems you will face in your life, this is one of the very easiest to solve. Get some toilet paper, smush the spider, and carry on with your business.

We get all scared and freaked out. But all it takes is a second and the perceived threat is gone.

This is what happens to the greatest enemy of the Gospel. He's on his mission to destroy the Way. Jesus shows up. In a second, the spider is squished. No more threat. And maybe he wasn't even a threat in the first place. Maybe we got all freaked out for nothing.

Take a moment to think of the largest obstacle to God that you can imagine in our culture. Maybe it's the pace of life in Silicon Valley that doesn't allow people to ask deep questions about life. Maybe it's the allure of a materialistic lifestyle that seems to answer all of life's problems. Maybe it's the challenge of supernatural faith in a place where naturalism rules the intellectual environment. Maybe it's the political environment or the reputation of Christians in America.

Whatever it is, it's just a spider in the shower. God can handle it. He is bigger than any obstacle. All it takes is a single move of God and that obstacle could be destroyed. Jesus can do it in a second.

God Transforms His Enemies

As the story continues, we see that even here, God doesn't do all of this on his own. He chooses to include someone else in the defeat of Saul.

Acts 9:10-12:

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." 11 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, 12 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."

This is a different Ananias than the man we met several chapters earlier who lied to the church about his property. This Ananias lives in Damascus. God chooses him to play a role in how he handles Saul.

This is an incredible strategy. God has plans to transform Saul. So he chooses one of the people who would have been a victim of Saul to take part in that transformation. If Jesus hadn't intervened, Saul would be trying to murder Ananias. But instead, Ananias is told to go to Saul and heal him. As we might expect, Ananias protests at first. But he is quickly convinced by God of this unthinkable task.

Don't you sometimes wonder why God doesn't just intervene on his own? Why doesn't Jesus appear in a bright light to everyone? Why not have weekly visions in the courtyard at Google so that any new employees can be introduced to Jesus and transformed by the Gospel? Why doesn't God work that way?

I don't know. But he doesn't. Not even in this story. Even here, he chooses to involve his people in the transformation of the Gospel.

Acts 9:17-19:

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." 18 And immediately something like scales fell from his eyes, and he regained

his sight. Then he rose and was baptized; 19 and taking food, he was strengthened. For some days he was with the disciples at Damascus.

When my children were little, I cooked a fun breakfast most Saturday mornings. Pancakes. Waffles. Muffins. It was something that we all looked forward to.

But my kids are getting older. Now I don't cook a special breakfast every Saturday. Sometimes I do. But now each of them is learning to make a few special dishes. They take turns cooking. I've been including them in the work of Saturday breakfasts.

This is what God does. Of course, the difference is that I include my kids so that I can sleep in. I'm just tired. God doesn't want to sleep in. He wants his people involved in the process of transformation. Even when Jesus walked on the earth, he sent people out in pairs to preach the news of the kingdom. Jesus never does things on his own.

Ananias gets to participate in a kind of resurrection. He prays for Saul. Something falls from Saul's eyes. All at once, he can see. He rises. He is baptized. He eats and is strengthened. After three days in the dark without food or water, Saul has come back. Saul has risen from the dead, just like Jesus, whom he persecuted and has now put his faith in.

Just like that, the greatest enemy of the Gospel is not just overcome, but he is transformed. The enemy is now the ally. The obstacle has become an opportunity. God has done something miraculous and he has invited his people into the process. God defeats his enemies by transforming them. And he invites his people to help. God involves his people.

We heard this morning again about Foster the Bay. Foster the Bay is a coalition of Bay Area churches committed to providing a loving home for every child in the foster care system. Their model is to raise up foster families from churches and surround them with 3-4 support friends from their church. We are part of that coalition.

Isn't this one of the way that God involves his people in the transformative work of the Gospel?

You take the terrible situation of a parent who is unable to care for their child. But then a follower of Jesus steps into the pain in that place. As they do so, they are

surrounded by people from their community who come alongside of them to help through prayer and meals and rides and babysitting.

That foster family gets to take part in the process of healing and redemption. The support friends get to see their work contribute to the health of a family. The child gets embraced by a community of people who love and cherish them. None of that takes away from the pain of what happened in the first place. But it provides a path forward. A path of redemption. Transformation happens for everyone who is involved.

Perhaps you'd like to get involved in that process. I'd encourage you to consider it. We are in particular need of support friends to come around some of the new foster families in our church. Or maybe God has been tugging on your heart to move toward becoming a foster family. This is not a new thing for PBC. People have been caring for vulnerable children through foster care and adoption for decades around here. Foster the Bay is just a new way to support and encourage what God has been doing.

There are a lot of ways that God involves his people in the transformative work of the Gospel. But one thing is common for all of them. They involve risk. Think about Ananias and his obedience to God's incredible request of him. He was very literally risking his life.

Are we willing to take part in what God is doing even if it means we put ourselves in danger? What if it only means that we risk sacrificing our comfort? Are we willing to step into the life of another person, whether it is a foster child or a co-worker or a person from a different cultural background or political conviction?

How is God inviting you to be involved in the outworking of the Gospel today?

God Works Patiently

So far in our story this morning, we have seen what looks like an immediate transformation. Saul has gone from persecutor to preacher almost overnight. But his first attempts at ministry don't go exactly as planned.

Acts 9:20-25:

And immediately he proclaimed Jesus in the synagogues, saying, "He is the Son of God." 21 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?”
22 But Saul increased all the more in strength,
and confounded the Jews who lived in
Damascus by proving that Jesus was the Christ.**

Right away Saul begins to preach the Gospel. The text emphasizes that “immediately” he proclaimed Jesus. We know a bit more of the timeline from the book of Galatians. It seems likely that Saul spent the better part of three years in the region around Damascus before the next events take place. So all of this unfolded over a decent length of time.

Saul tries to preach, but we see a pattern. First, the people are skeptical of his authenticity. They only know him as an enemy, not an ally. But then Saul proves himself to be quite convincing in talking about Jesus. He “confounded the Jews.” He was good at this. Saul took the same zeal that he had for destroying the Way and now applied it to building up faith in Jesus.

Those Jewish leaders didn’t appreciate the change, so they tried to kill him. Saul didn’t become a martyr. He escaped their attempt by being lowered in a basket through the wall. This was a bit of a humiliating end to his preaching efforts in Damascus.

A few months ago, I was driving out of a parking lot and turning onto a road near some retail stores and restaurants in downtown Sunnyvale. I didn’t see a huge construction road sign with a flashing yellow light, so I ran right into it. Knocked it to the ground with a huge bang.

I stopped my car in the middle of the road and got out and propped the A-frame sign back up. Made sure the light was working. I looked around me and there were people on both sidewalks laughing at me. I’m sure I seemed frantic and confused. They thought this scene was hilarious. And it was.

Sometimes we need to be humbled. I like this story of Saul because we get to see the great apostle make some mistakes just like we do.

After being humiliated in Damascus, Saul goes to Jerusalem where an almost identical pattern repeats. He preaches. People are skeptical. He proclaims Jesus in convincing terms. The Jewish leaders want to kill him and the church helps him escape. This time he is taken to Caesarea, a port town, and he heads to his hometown,

Tarsus, likely on a boat. Again, with the detail from Galatians we know that he stayed in Tarsus for 10-12 years. It’s a long period of silence from Saul.

In a moment, God defeated his greatest enemy. Over a few days, he transformed his enemy into a follower and a preacher. But then it took another seventeen years or so until this guy was actually ready to do much good.

Meanwhile, as Paul was off somewhere else, the church was doing great without him.

Acts 9:31:

So the church throughout all Judea and Galilee and Samaria had peace and was being built up. And walking in the fear of the Lord and in the comfort of the Holy Spirit, it multiplied.

I’ve always loved this verse. As soon as Saul gets sent away, then the church had peace. God defeated his enemy. He transformed him. But he couldn’t use Saul right away. Saul wasn’t ready yet. What the church really needed at this point was not the brilliant preaching of Saul. They needed Saul to be absent. Then the church had peace.

That’s how God defeats his enemy. This chapter opened with the greatest threat to the Gospel consumed by murder and violence. We were concerned for the survival of the church. But the story ends with peace and tranquility. The enemy of the Gospel has been defeated.

Saul was defeated, transformed, and transported. The disciples have gone from experiencing the fear of Saul to walking in the fear of the Lord. The enemy has become an ally. The obstacle has become an opportunity. And now the slow and steady work of God continues.

God defeats his enemies. He transforms his enemies. But he also works patiently.

We need to be ready for God to do any of these things. Maybe he is going to take an obstacle and defeat it right away. Maybe he’ll transform it into an opportunity. But God also might take a while to get around to the plan that he has in mind.

The famous quote by Martin Luther King, Jr. seems appropriate here: “The arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends toward justice.” That is only true because our God is at work bending his creation toward transformation through Jesus Christ.

Let's think again about the obstacles to the Gospel in our culture. The church in first century Jerusalem was afraid of Saul. What are we afraid of? What are some of the obstacles that could be transformed into opportunities?

We talk about busyness and drive and ambition and how they stand in the way of people coming to faith. But what would happen if God defeats the idols that we give ourselves over to and transforms our hearts? What if we weren't driven to see our companies succeed, but to see the Gospel go forth? What if we weren't busy with making money, spending money, and finding ways to save money? What if we were busy with giving our lives away? What if we used technology not to distract and entertain and level up, but to connect and empower and proclaim the truth?

It's a scary thing when a driven, angry, brilliant man opposes the Gospel. But it's a beautiful thing when a driven, passionate, brilliant man puts his energy to work for Christ. Isn't that what we'll see with Saul when he comes back in Acts 11 and takes the Gospel to the world?

Let's talk for a moment about one more obstacle to the Gospel. Because of the recent election, the reputation of the evangelical church in this country has never been worse. Whether or not that is deserved, it is a reality. There is the perception that evangelical Christians have elected a man who is racist, sexist, and hostile toward outsiders. We can have all sorts of conversations about whether that perception is true or deserved, but it is a reality. And from a first glance, it looks like an obstacle to the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

But what if the church responded by demonstrating that those things aren't true of Jesus followers? What if the church worked hard toward racial unity and equality? What if people gave up their comfort in order to learn to love people who are different from them?

What if the church of Jesus made it clear that sexual assault is wrong and that women are valued just as much as men? We know we think that, but how will the world know unless we say it?

What if the church took seriously the call that Matt Mikalatos gave us last week to welcome the stranger? To love the foreigner? To look for people in our culture that don't feel welcome and to make it a point to reach out to them?

What if the church did these things, not just because we want to repair our reputation, but because this is who the church is supposed to be? It's not showing the world a different picture of ourselves. It's just following Jesus. Acting like Jesus did. Being who he called us to be.

Wouldn't that transform the obstacle of our reputation into an opportunity for the world to see Jesus? Wouldn't that be us witnessing to the resurrection of Jesus?

The Gospel faces significant obstacles. But there isn't an obstacle in the universe that can stand up to the power of God. He defeats them and when he does, he transforms them into opportunities. But not all by himself. He invites his people to be included. We are put to work. The very people who might have suffered at the hands of God's enemies. We are the ones put to work to carry out the work of transformation.

Conclusion

I started off with a story about a friend who became an enemy. Destruction is easy. It is quick to tear something apart.

In our story this morning, we've seen God do the much harder work. He has transformed Saul from an enemy to an ally in a flash of light. Then he began the slow work of transformation that takes much longer.

When God invites us to participate in this work, it is for the long haul. We are in the business of seeing the Gospel transform our lives, our families, and our communities. Although there are occasional brilliant flashes of light, this mostly happens over years.

So let's join with God. Let's have faith that he can and will fight his battles. Let's look for the ways that he has invited us to join with him. And let's see those obstacles turned into opportunities for the Gospel of Jesus to transform everything around us.