

# **BaptistWay Bible Series for April 8: God's plans have room for even the least likely**

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## **BaptistWay Bible Series for April 8**

### **God's plans have room for even the least likely**

- Acts 9:10-28

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Some churches can have the reputation of being self-regarding, even smug, snooty and cold. Guests have opinions within a few minutes of arrival about friendliness. When it comes to acceptance, perception is everything.

A stranger's need for acceptance may play second-fiddle to church member's preoccupation with more familiar relationships. It is personally difficult for individuals to enter strange surroundings seeking new relationships with people and with God, especially if they are not familiar with the church culture or protocol.

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Being ignored or rejected may be psychologically and spiritually destructive. The most shy and timid, the less talented or attractive, the most self-conscious and introverted struggle for significance and sometimes do not find it in God's house.

Hundreds of thousands of people will experience eternal death because some church fellowships show little hospitality to strangers who enter their hallowed halls. Millions of talented people are lost to the work of God because of hurt feelings, snobbishness and arrogant pride. Leaving someone out hurts the heart of God who shows no partiality or preference. A church should be close knit with friendship, attentive to all who enter, humble in attitude, caring in spirit, unified in purpose and holding all things in common.

Every person wants to be loved, to be accepted and to be significant. These are psychological and sociological issues but they, also, are ecclesiastical issues. People will go anywhere, and conversely stay away from everywhere they are not accepted and appreciated. Admittedly, self-worth issues of the individual come into play, but ideally, that should make no difference. Every person, regardless of sex, color, race, position, education or income, should feel at home in God's church.

In recent years, missiologists have taught that there are socio-economic barriers that attract or repel people from church, and churches should target their market area and build the church based on age, interest,

commonality, musical taste, educational level and other such factors. I have come to agree with the strategy that a church must be culturally relevant.

However, every church must go out of its way to do everything possible to include all individuals into their fellowship out of love, empathy, friendship and spiritual instruction. A person's salvation or service effectiveness usually depends upon congregational acceptance.

Fellowship is not a passive thing, but an aggressive responsibility. Fellowship has to be intentional, sincere, honest, heartfelt and inclusive. The most important person who attends the worship service is that person who sits alone, the stranger in our midst. One never knows how much a smile, handshake, conversation or offer of fellowship can mean to a person, either guest or member.

How does your church measure up? A missional church will value every relationship and seek involvement for Christ's sake, even of the least likely. God's grace comes to anyone and everyone, for Christ died to save us all.

Saul's experience with the church in Damascus and Jerusalem gives insight into the struggle of acceptance. Saul, later to become the Apostle Paul, was a pure-blood, orthodox Jew, and he was proud of it.

A native of Tarsus, Saul, though Jewish, was a Roman by birth. Bilingual, speaking Hebrew and Greek, Paul says of himself: "I was a Jew, born in Tarsus of Cilicia, but brought up in this city. Under Gamaliel, I was thoroughly trained in the law of our fathers and was just as zealous for God as any of you are today" (Acts 22:3).

He did graduate studies in Jerusalem in the school of the rabbis where he was taught a strict legalism and declared himself "... a Pharisee, the son of a Pharisee" (Acts 23:6). His linguistic ability and his background fitted him perfectly for his new role as a born-again Christian who would see the resurrected Christ as the true Messiah, the fulfillment of prophecy and the

Christ for all men, including the Gentile world.

After Stephen's martyrdom, Saul, eager and passionate, continued to persecute the new Christian church with "murderous threats" and a desire, as he went to Damascus, to make prisoners of male or female practitioners of this renegade faith. He was a man to be feared, vitriolic in attitude and action, determined to destroy the movement and expose the miracle of Pentecost. His antagonism to Christianity was legend.

Unconvinced by Pentecost, his defense of Judaism was encouraged by the high priest and the Sanhedrin. The preaching of Peter and Stephen was not sufficient to turn his heart.

A personal encounter with the risen Christ on his journey to Damascus (9:1-9) would command his attention, melt his heart, bring repentance and change his life. Saul saw with his heart what he could not see with his eyes. He made no distinction between what the apostles saw physically and what he saw spiritually as a "light from heaven" flashing around him (Acts 9:3, 1 Corinthians 9:1, Galatians 1:15).

The dramatic moment of his life took place, while those around him "heard the sound but did not see anyone" (v. 7). Blind from the encounter, Saul was led to Damascus to await the risen Christ to tell him what he must do (v. 6).

As Alexander Maclaren would say, "A wolf turned to a lamb." Paul was the least likely to become a convert and the least likely to be accepted into the "koinonia," the fellowship of believers. Any attempt to be assimilated would bring consequences of suspicion, fear and rejection.

**Hesitation because of reputation (Acts 9:10-14)**

God continued his guidance of the young church, directing Saul to a specific location (v. 6) and directing a special disciple to him, who was praying (v. 11), a disciple he had seen in a vision (v. 12). Ananias was instructed to find him and “place his hands on him to restore his sight (v. 12). Ananias was skeptical, cautious and careful, for he had heard the many and various reports about this man and the havoc he had created in Jerusalem.

Now, he came to Damascus with authority from the chief priests “to arrest all who call on your name” (v. 14). Every church person has had the experience of reluctantly accepting people who walk the aisle in decision, reluctant because of reputation, looks, demeanor or mental state. Such hesitation is human nature, but can be overcome when a person proves worthy. Failure in spiritual growth will occur if the individual does not find acceptance, love and significance.

In Saul’s case, Ananias was correct in being suspicious of a ruse, a trick. On a recent mission trip to China, an American business man, familiar with the underground Christian church, refused our interest in attending because of the danger such would pose for the faithful body of Christ. Nothing could be done that might give away the meeting place or identify the congregants for fear of their lives, punishment or incarceration. The reputation of the police was notorious for persecuting the Christian movement.

### **Confirmation through a commission (Acts 9:15-16)**

Ananias was totally aware of the change to one’s heart that Christ made at conversion, but he had to be sure the conversion of Saul was real, not contrived, and that Saul was genuine. God spoke again to Ananias saying: “Go! This man is my chosen instrument to carry my name before the Gentiles and their kings and before the people of Israel” (v. 16). God had a

plan, a commission for Saul, and had hand-picked him for the awesome responsibility of the missional task of the church that was propelled with the death and resurrection of Christ, restated at the ascension, confirmed by the coming of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost and continuing with the preaching of those scattered from Jerusalem under the persecution of the Jewish leaders.

Saul would understand that his calling was essential and would incur much suffering (v. 16). Saul, by his conversion, was to be added to the church to carry out a specific task for which he was uniquely gifted and prepared. It always has been amazing to me who God uses in his work. Saul, however, was much more qualified than most or all of the other apostles.

### **Authentication through the Spirit (Acts 9:17-19)**

Ananias is obedient and strikes out for Saul's temporary living quarters to check out the spiritual status of this rumored mean-spirited Pharisee. How powerful it is to see Ananias begin the greeting with "Brother Saul, the Lord—Jesus ... ." There are many ways he could have greeted Saul, but this one spells out the acceptance of Saul and the spirit of Ananias.

Approaching Saul with a positive relationship, he directs his attention to "the Lord," the one "who appeared to you on the road...." (v. 17). Saul had a remarkable experience, and a spokesman from the Lord Jesus would be immediately identified and accepted. Blind Saul felt the hands of Ananias on him, and the blindness went away (vv. 12, 17) and the Holy Spirit filled his empty life. Discipleship without the filling of the Holy Spirit and without baptism is provisional at best.

Ananias was convinced that Saul's conversion was genuine and Saul was baptized. God's Spirit was upon him, filling him, just like at Pentecost. The Spirit in Saul was enough to certify the brotherhood with Ananias. The

mysterious Spirit of God had done his work well and dramatically changed the life of Saul.

### **Verification through action (Acts 9:20-22)**

With the infilling of the Spirit, “At once” Saul “began to preach in the synagogues that Jesus is the Son of God” (v. 20). How interesting. When the Spirit controlled his life, he preached with ease and with power; again the first proof of the Spirit-filled life is intelligent proclamation, not speaking in tongues.

Though completely bewildered that the man who “raised havoc in Jerusalem” and who was thought to come to Damascus to do the same, Saul continued to “baffle” them “by proving that Jesus” of Nazareth was the Messiah, the Christ. Accepted into the fellowship of the disciples of Damascus, Saul astonished them with his passion for preaching.

There had been a complete about face so that rather than Saul trying to murder and arrest Christians, the Jews sought to kill Saul for preaching Christ (vv. 23-25). The hunter became the hunted. In every way, Saul proved himself to be one of them, a disciple of the living Christ.

### **Affirmation through an encourager (Acts 9:26-28)**

Saul set out from Jerusalem for Damascus to arrest and destroy Christians but came from Damascus back to Jerusalem serving Christ and seeking to “join the disciples” (v. 26). Fear and skepticism ruled, causing disbelief that he had changed. Barnabas, Mr. Encourager, took it upon himself to stand up for Saul, affirming Saul’s conversion, giving testimony of his fearless preaching in Damascus and seeing him for what he could be. Barnabas

turned the tide, bringing credibility so Saul could move “about freely in Jerusalem, speaking boldly in the name of the Lord” (v. 28).

Years ago, I received the statement that Christians are not judges but fruit inspectors. The young church in Jerusalem and Damascus had observed the fruit of Saul’s life and could not ignore his change of heart and his new direction. Saul had much to overcome, much to regret and a rebellious life to change, but it all happened in the twinkling of an eye. Saul gradually worked his way into the fellowship of the church and ultimately became the church’s greatest theologian and interpreter of Christ.

I have always been grateful the Damascus church did not ask him to come forward, fill out a card and sit on the front pew. Had it done so, Saul may have sat there for the remainder of his life. For most Christians, this is the essence of their Christian service—join a church, sit down and then come again next Sunday to sit some more.

Missional churches must welcome everyone into their fellowship, examine the fruit of their lives, give them opportunity to express their spiritual gifts in ministry and expect them to be missionaries on the go, helping them to make a decided impact upon their world.

### **Discussion question**

- How effective—really—is your church in including “outsiders” in your fellowship?

News of religion, faith, missions, Bible study and Christian ministry among Baptist churches, in Texas, the BGCT, the nation and around the world.