

## Acts pt 11 – SPEAK

[Pray] – “Speak, Lord, for your servants are listening.”

Over the last few months we’ve been journeying together through the book of Acts. We’ve seen how, just as Jesus promised, God poured out his Spirit on Jesus’ followers, the followers of “the Way” as they were known at first, because of Jesus’ claim that he was the Way, the Truth and the Life.

So his followers, empowered by the Holy Spirit, told everyone about Jesus. That’s what we’ve seen consistently happening all through the first 8 chapters of Acts – basically the early church was doing exactly what Jesus had told them to do, which was this in Acts 1:8

“You will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.”

And if you’re getting tired of me constantly repeating that verse every week, I make no apologies, because that is absolutely at the heart of what God’s mission for the church is. Be witnesses for Jesus, in the power of the Holy Spirit, to those in our own community, and those in the surrounding areas, and those far away. That’s what we’re told to do, and any church that doesn’t have that as one of its most basic objectives is in serious trouble.

Now, this week we’ve got to chapter 9, and we come back to a young man who we first encountered a few weeks ago when Stephen was murdered. If you were here you’ll remember that Stephen was one of the admin and pastoral care team in the early church; his job was to make sure that the food which was shared out to those in need was given out fairly. Not a particularly glamorous or frontline role – but that didn’t stop him from telling people about Jesus at every opportunity. He had a really powerful ministry, which God backed up with all sorts of signs and wonders, and the *result* was that he made enemies.

One of the things we consistently see throughout the Bible, and especially through the New Testament, is that if you do what God tells you to do, if you are a witness to Jesus, if Jesus is genuinely the Lord of your life – then you’re going to get into trouble!

I know that doesn’t sound right, does it? What we want to hear is that if Jesus is the Lord of our lives, then he’ll bless us and take care of us. And actually, in every sense that really *matters* he will, and he does. But right now, in terms of our comfort and security and safety *in this world*, we are (as the famous Chinese curse says) in for interesting times! The likelihood is that we are going to face opposition, and slander, and embarrassment, and persecution. It’s not *always* like that – praise God! Later in this chapter we read about a time when “the church throughout Judea, Galilee and Samaria enjoyed a time of peace and was strengthened. Living in the fear of the Lord [it says] and encouraged by the Holy Spirit, [the church] increased in numbers.” And when that happens, enjoy it, and give thanks to God!

But if you expect that to be the norm in the Christian life, then you’ve been badly misinformed. And let me suggest that if for you that *is* the norm in your Christian life, then you need to take a good hard look at whether you’re actually allowing Jesus to lead your life, or if you’ve locked him away in a cupboard and you only let him out when you think it’s safe.

Stephen was *all* about Jesus. He was authentic; he spoke as he lived, he led many to believe, and his murder at the hands of an angry mob was entirely the result of his faithfulness to God. But the young man who orchestrated that mob killing – the man who was behind it, encouraging it, inciting it, was in many ways just as passionate for what he believed.

His name was Saul; we know that he was raised in a devout Jewish home, and that he himself was deeply committed not just to the Jewish faith, but as part of a particularly strict sect of the Jewish faith - the Pharisees. Prayer and meditation would have been a daily reality for Saul, and the study of the Scriptures a life-long passion.

As well as being devout, he also had a brilliant mind. He came from Tarsus, which was a leading university town, and he studied under the famous Rabbi Gamaliel, which is kind of

like saying you were taught by John Stott or NT Wright – really renowned names in theology.

At the time of Stephen's death, Saul would have been somewhere around 25 or 30, and even at that young age he was clearly a rising star in Judaism. Devout, brilliant, and from a privileged background – he had both Jewish *and* Roman citizenship. In time that would allow him to travel throughout the Roman Empire, opening lots of opportunities for him and giving him additional legal protections. So, he's really a rare, privileged class of man.

So it's this privileged, highly intelligent, highly-educated, deeply devout Jew called Saul that sees his faith, and his people, and his culture, being undermined by what he sees as a lie – an outrageous blasphemy – that Jesus, the wandering Rabbi from Nazareth who had been put to death a few years before, had risen from the dead and was actually the Messiah.

And with a passion that many people today would label as "radicalism", he takes on the responsibility to stamp out this new faith by persecuting, and imprisoning, and murdering Jesus' followers. Understand: he's not doing this because he's an atheist. He's not – he believed that he was on God's mission, that God had anointed him to put an end to the following of Jesus.

We're going to hear what happened to Saul now, if you would turn to Acts chapter 9 in your Bibles. What's just happened in the previous chapter is that Stephen's murder had signalled the start of a great persecution of Jesus' followers in Jerusalem; they had been scattered all around the rest of the country, running for their lives but still witnessing to Jesus wherever they went.

[ Acts 9: 1-2 ]

Just to give you some context here, Damascus is right up at the other end of the country, over 150 miles away. In other words, Saul is saying "Can I get jurisdiction for 150 miles to hunt down Christians?"

[ Acts 9: 3-19 ]

So I've given you a bit of background to this guy Saul, because if you haven't already guessed it, he becomes quite a significant figure in Acts from here on. Now that God has knocked him down and got him on side, he becomes the central character used by Jesus in the rest of the book. You'll know him better by his Roman name, Paul; he wrote nearly half the books in the New Testament, was the early church's most famous evangelist and church planter and theologian, and is without a doubt the single most influential man – apart from Jesus - in the history of Christianity.

So quite apart from anything else in this story, what we've just read here is the probably the most radical life turn around ever. God had taken someone who was effectively a state sponsored terrorist, whose life was dedicated to *destroying* the followers of Jesus, and turned him into someone who lived his life entirely for, and in the service of, Jesus. A story of truly amazing grace. So we're going to see lots more of Paul when we get to the second half of Acts.

But having said all that, today I don't want to think about Paul or Saul, so much as I want us to think about what happened both to him and to the other man we read about, called Ananias. Both of them experienced something that we often quite rightly long for, which is that God spoke to them.

I said that we often long for God to speak, and one of the most common questions that Christians ask is: just *how does* God speak? So given that we've got two very explicit examples of God speaking to people here, I thought we could do a little exercise to see some more of this.

The Bible is full of examples of God speaking to people. So here are just some of them: some of these you'll know, and others you might not, but I'd like you to briefly just try to imagine each one in turn. Don't look them up now, but if you're taking notes you can check the references later:

- Moses – encountered God at burning bush (Exodus 3)  
[Moses saw that though the bush was on fire it did not burn up. So Moses thought, 'I will go over and see this strange sight – why the bush does not burn up.'](#) When the

Lord saw that he had gone over to look, God called to him from within the bush, 'Moses! Moses!' And Moses said, 'Here I am.'  
'Do not come any closer,' God said. 'Take off your sandals, for the place where you are standing is holy ground.' (etc)

- Aaron – told to use Urim and Thummin (Exodus 28:29-30)  
"Whenever Aaron enters the Holy Place, he will bear the names of the sons of Israel over his heart on the breastpiece of decision as a continuing memorial before the LORD. Also put the Urim and the Thummim in the breastpiece, so they may be over Aaron's heart whenever he enters the presence of the LORD. Thus Aaron will always bear the means of making decisions for the Israelites over his heart before the LORD."
- Gideon – via an Angel (Judges 6:11-12)  
The angel of the LORD came and sat down... where his son Gideon was threshing wheat in a winepress to keep it from the Midianites. When the angel of the LORD appeared to Gideon, he said, 'The LORD is with you, mighty warrior.'
- Samuel – a young boy, heard God calling him as he lay in bed (1 Sam 3) God kept calling "Samuel!", and poor little Samuel kept thinking it was his master Eli who was calling him; then after the third time it happened: Eli realised that the LORD was calling the boy. So Eli told Samuel, 'Go and lie down, and if he calls you, say, "Speak, LORD, for your servant is listening."' So Samuel went and lay down in his place. [and again the Lord calls, and Samuel answers this time.]
- Elijah – in hiding on Mount Horeb, there's a great wind, and then an earthquake, and then a fire, but then after them came a gentle whisper – a still small voice. (1 Kings 19)
- Jeremiah heard God through symbolic actions (Jer 18:1-10)  
This is the word that came to Jeremiah from the Lord: 'Go down to the potter's house, and there I will give you my message.' So I went down to the potter's house, and I saw him working at the wheel. But the pot he was shaping from the clay was marred in his hands; so the potter formed it into another pot, shaping it as seemed best to him.  
Then the word of the Lord came to me. He said, 'Can I not do with you, Israel, as this potter does?'

- Saul – blinding light, fell to the ground and heard God’s voice
- Ananias – God spoke to him in a vision

So, lots of examples of God speaking to people. Here’s my question for you: In terms of how God did it, what do all those examples have in common?

Answer: nothing! When God speaks to someone, the experience is usually unique to that individual. (Yes, *sometimes* God speaks to several people at once, and *sometimes* God uses the same dream or the same vision or the same passage of Scripture to speak to different people) But the point is that usually, God will speak to us in different and unique ways.

Why is that important? Because we have a habit of trying to put God in a box, and limiting his creativity, and trying to make somebody else’s experience into ours. If Moses had been alive today, he would have been tempted to write a book called “My Burning Bush Experience”, and then everybody else would have gone out to look for their own burning bushes. And then we miss what God is actually saying, because it’s not in a burning bush.

Don’t spend your time looking for a burning bush, or an angel, or a potter’s wheel, or a blinding light from heaven. Spend your time developing a love relationship with God, a relationship where you will know God’s voice when you hear it, in whatever way he speaks.

Because the important thing for all those people is not *how* God spoke, or how God speaks to us today. The important thing is *that* God speaks.

And still thinking about Saul, and Ananias, and all those other examples that were on the screen: one other truth that I think is clear from Scripture – if anyone can tell me a case where this isn’t true, please tell me, but I think this is right. Whenever God spoke, the person knew what God said. God is clear. Moses knew exactly what God was telling him to do. Gideon knew that God was calling him to lead Israel’s army. Jeremiah knew exactly what God’s message was for Israel. Paul and Ananias knew exactly what their instructions were. I’m sure they didn’t like them – each for different reasons – but they were entirely

clear. I haven't found any examples of when God speaks *vaguely*. Nowhere does God give *suggestions*, or say "you could try this, or try that".

We're trying to get better as a church about prayer, about being more intentional and more disciplined about praying both individually and corporately. But "prayer" doesn't just mean us talking to God. We need to get used to *listening* for God's voice; because God will speak to us. And then who know what might happen?

I said earlier that Paul was the most influential person in the history of Christianity. But this guy Ananias, who we don't know anything else about – this passage in Acts 9 is the only time we ever hear of him – if Ananias hadn't listened to what God said, and despite absolutely understandable instincts to do just the opposite, if he hadn't gone to meet Saul, and welcomed him, and baptised him, and all the rest of it, doing what God had told him to do – Saul might never have gone on to do what he did! So who was the most influential?