

Acts Series Part 24

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[0 : 00] Today I want to talk about growth, growing Christians and growing churches.

And in order to do that, I'll occupy this morning and also this evening. So this morning I want to think about growing Christians and in particular one who is presented to us in the passage we've read. But also we are presented, particularly in the final verse of our passage in verse 31, the description of a growing church. So we have a growing Christian, Saul, and a growing church also described in the passage.

Now we've read the passage in question this morning. Indeed, probably this is the second or maybe the third occasion that the passage has been read over the past couple of weeks.

We read there in verse 9, and this is where we want to focus our attention this morning. Sorry, not in verse 9, in verse 22.

[1 : 19] We read in verse 22, Yet Saul grew more and more powerful. Saul grew more and more. So here the description given of Paul is that he was growing.

And we want to concentrate our minds and focus our thoughts around this description of Saul, that he grew more and more.

We also notice, and this will occupy us this evening, in verse 31, that the church throughout Judea, Galilee and Samaria is described as growing.

It grew in numbers. But that we will leave for this evening. Now the manner in which I want to consider the question of Saul growing.

Saul as a growing Christian. The manner I want to order the sermon is by asking and answering the following three questions.

[2 : 24] The first question is, What does the description given of Saul mean? The one that we've highlighted. Saul grew more and more powerful.

That is the first thing we need to have a clear view of. What does that mean? What actually is being described? What is being said by the use of this terminology or this phrase, that he grew more and more powerful?

So first of all, what does that mean? How are we to understand it? But the second question is, why did it happen? Having established what it means, we want to ask, why did it happen?

Why is it that Saul grew more and more? Once we've understood what that involves, why did it happen? Why is it that that was true of him? I think we can state from the outset that it's not true of all Christians.

Not all Christians grow more and more. Not all who come to faith in Jesus could be described in this way, as growing more and more powerful, or growing indeed at all.

[3 : 35] So why did it happen? Why was it that Saul did grow? And so it's described in the manner that we are considering. And then finally, and much more briefly, just notice what reaction did it produce?

This growing Christian, what reaction does that generate in others who are looking on, and who are observing, and who are hearing what he has to say?

First of all then, what does the description of Saul mean? These words in verse 22 of chapter 9 of Acts, yet Saul grew more and more powerful.

If we heard that same phrase, these same words used today of somebody, then we would immediately think, I imagine, in terms of political influence or financial muscle.

To speak of somebody growing more and more powerful, that's the language you might use of somebody who is climbing the ladder of political influence, of somebody who is very successful in business, and is taking on and maybe buying out companies, and building a great conglomerate.

[4 : 52] And you would say, oh, they're growing more and more powerful. And as I say, in the political field and realm, that's the kind of language we would use. And so, when we first read that, he grew more and more powerful.

Perhaps those are the first thoughts that come to our mind. In today's world, and perhaps it's always been so, the general conception of folks is that the powerful are the movers and shakers and decision makers in society.

Those in power, we even speak in those terms, those who are in power, or certainly those who are, as I repeat, climbing the ladder of influence.

Well, was this true of Saul? Well, we don't need to spend much time answering that question.

Certainly, that was not true of Saul. He did not enjoy power of that kind.

Indeed, the picture that we have of him in verse 25, where we read, But his followers took him by night and lowered him in a basket through an opening in the wall, in apparent retreat from those who are in power.

[6 : 06] That picture would sit very uneasily with the conception of power that we've just noted.

Now, those of you who were here last week may remember that we've suggested that in terms of the chronological order of events, that description of Saul in verse 25 is actually something that occurred considerably later to the verses at the beginning of the section.

It would seem that this happened after he'd been to Arabia for two or three years and returned. So, we're not talking about the same time frame. But the point holds that this growing in power of Saul does not follow, or is not related to power as it is ordinarily understood in society.

However, if we kind of focus in a little more on what we would understand as the more religious context, if you wish, or the biblical context of this terminology of growing more and more in power, and particularly in the context of the book of Acts, we might think that this reference to power is a reference to the exercise of signs and wonders being performed by Saul.

And we know that this is certainly true. We read of Peter, and indeed of Paul, and subsequently, and of the apostles and others, performing great miracles, signs and wonders, acts of great power, and often they are described as acts of power.

And so, in the context of Acts, when we read of Saul growing more and more powerful, our mind might be brought to consider that as what's being described.

[7 : 56] Here he was, in the power of God, performing great miracles and signs and wonders, and so he's described in these terms, he grew more and more powerful.

However, I don't think that is the answer to our question, what does this description mean? And I say that because there is no reference in this passage to that kind of ministry being performed by Saul at this point in his ministry.

This is right at the beginning. He has just had his encounter with Jesus. He's only beginning in his newfound faith. And there is no reference to signs and wonders being performed by Saul.

Certainly, subsequently, he is used by God in that way. But at least in terms of what is recorded for us several years later.

So I don't think this term should be understood in that way. Saul grew more and more powerful.

Well, it's talking about miracles and signs and wonders that he was performing.

[9 : 03] What then is being described? Well, the phrase that in our version, or the version that we use, the New International Version, it speaks of him growing more and more powerful.

Another way in which the language can be understood or translated is that he increased more and more in strength. Now, that doesn't help us a great deal because we still are left with the question, well, strength to do what?

So, homing in finally on that, I think the context of the passage, and particularly the verses from the beginning, verse 19 through to verse 22, the context of that passage, and even more specifically the words that follow these words, he grew more and more powerful, answered our question.

If we do focus just on verse 22, yet Saul grew more and more powerful and baffled the Jews living in Damascus by proving that Jesus is the Christ.

Paul was preaching. This reference to him growing more and more powerful, it seems very clear, is related to and is concerned with his preaching of the good news.

[10 : 24] He grew more and more powerful in his declaring, in his proclaiming, in his preaching, the truths that he was preaching. In this manner, or in this specific ministry or gift that he was exercising, it is that he is described as growing more and more powerful, as increasing more and

more in strength.

Paul was becoming a better preacher. He was becoming a more convincing apologist for the faith. He was becoming, I am sure, a more effective communicator of these truths.

He was growing more and more powerful as a preacher, as a teacher, as one who proclaimed the good news concerning Jesus.

And you can imagine, as Paul begins, we read there in verse 20, at once he began to preach. And you can maybe imagine, and there is necessarily a measure of speculation in this, but you can imagine perhaps Saul on day one, as he for the first time enters the synagogue to speak concerning Jesus.

And you can imagine that perhaps on that first day, even given his great knowledge and depth of knowledge of the Old Testament Scriptures, even given this remarkable encounter that he'd had with the risen Jesus, even given all of these things, you can imagine that perhaps on the first day, he would have struggled somewhat in getting across what he wanted to say.

[12:04] There would have been, I'm sure, even on day one, passion in abundance, but perhaps that the content and the structure and the arguments employed would have needed refining and working on.

He wasn't, on day one, the finished article. He needed to learn, apostle though he was, a man to be greatly used by God, though he was.

He needed to learn, he needed to practice. I'm sure that he was a very fast learner, but he was a learner all the same. So Paul grew more and more powerful, very particularly in this matter, in the exercise of this gift of preaching, of proclaiming the good news.

Now we'll say a little bit more about this growth of Saul as we consider our second question. Why did it happen? Why was it that Saul grew and grew more and more?

But for the moment, before we move to that second question, let's just consider the application that we can derive from this first question or answer to it as to Saul growing more and more in this gift that he had been given by God.

[13:29] A general application, but I think worth making, is that God expects us to grow. We shouldn't see growth in our lives as Christians as something out of the ordinary or something exceptional.

That is, or what certainly should be, the norm for us. We are living organisms. We have been created and we have been saved by God that we might grow as Christians.

Saul grew more and more in this particular gift and no doubt more generally in his Christian life. And God expects us to grow.

He expects you to grow. We are to grow in many ways, to grow in knowledge, to grow in love, to grow in holiness. And as we particularly apply this example of Saul, to grow in the exercise of the gifts that God has given us.

Growth is to be the norm. We are to grow more and more, as was the case with Saul. And even that language of growing more and more, I think, introduces a truth that's worth noting.

[14:46] And it speaks of growing continually. That language, he grew more and more, has that idea in it, that this is a continual thing.

This is a permanent thing. This isn't a spurt of growth at the beginning when he's full of the joys of his newfound faith. And so he's sprinting away. And for the first few days and weeks and months, all is growth.

And then, well, he kind of settles down to another pace altogether. And perhaps even no growth at all. No, to grow more and more speaks of growing continually.

I've never been content with where we have reached in our discipleship, in our service for God. I think if we're honest with ourselves, there is, for all of us, that temptation or that tendency to sit back.

We are prone to do that, to sit back, to get in a rut, to be satisfied with where we are. And that is not as it should be. We are to grow more and more as Christians.

[15:59] As we come to the end of a year, it's a good time to reflect and to evaluate and to examine ourselves and say, well, here I am. I'm into December of 2009.

And how have I grown as I look towards this year? Where am I today compared to where I was in January? Have I grown in knowledge, in love, in holiness?

Have I grown in the exercise of the gifts that God has given me? Have I identified the gifts that God has given me? Am I using the gifts that God has given me?

We'll notice in a moment how that is fundamental to growing, the part we play in identifying and using our gifts.

But for the moment, simply to note these basic, in a sense, but fundamental truths that we can draw from this example of Saul, that he grew more and more powerful.

[16:57] As he grew, so that is what God would have for us. That is what God does have for us and expects of us. So that, I think, helps us perhaps just to be clear as to what is being described.

Then in verse 22, where we read that Saul grew more and more powerful. Very specifically, it would seem to be a reference to his exercising this gift of teaching, of preaching, of proclaiming the good news.

He grew more and more in this. But then, moving on, why did it happen? Why did Saul grow? Now, while growth is or should be the normal experience of the Christian and his ministry, his service for God, it's not something that just happens.

It doesn't just happen automatically. It's not that, well, we become a Christian and so, necessarily, we will grow. That's just the way it goes. No, there are contributing elements.

And what I want to do is, in this passage, notice three actors. Three actors who contribute to Saul's growth. Three actors who are necessary so that it can be the experience of Saul that he grows more and more powerful.

[18:19] And these three actors continue to be the actors involved in the growth of all Christians, in your growth as a Christian. And who are they?

Well, they are God, the church, and Saul himself. And let's notice each in turn, briefly. First of all, God. God is involved in Saul's growing more and more as it is described.

And he's involved in a number of ways. And we really must simply note them without delving in any great depth into these ways.

First of all, it was God who granted Saul his mission. It was God who called him and commissioned him. And so, in that way, he is fundamental in the growth of Saul.

He calls him in the first place. And that is true, of course, for you. If you are a Christian, he has called you. He has commissioned you. But of course, God does so much more for Saul and for us also.

[19:24] It was God who provided Saul with his message. He is growing in this gift of proclaiming the good news. But the good news is not something of his own imagination or invention.

It is a message that God has given him. The message that it proved so powerful and so persuasive was not of Saul's making.

God's message, God's good news, it was a message concerning God's one and only son. And though the message was an unchanging one and continues and remains an unchanging one, it was a message that Saul needed to grow in his understanding of it.

The message comes from God. God provides the message for Saul, but Saul must grow and develop in his understanding of it. What was the message that Saul was preaching?

And here again, there would be merit in spending considerable time in considering the message, but time does not allow. But we can just notice the two statements that are made to, I suppose, in summary, encapsulate the message that Saul was announcing.

[20:35] There in verse 20, he began to preach in the synagogues that Jesus is the Son of God. And then at the end of verse 22, proving that Jesus is the Christ.

At the heart of his message is the person of Jesus and the identity of Jesus. Who is Jesus? Well, he is the Christ. He is the promised Messiah. Who is Jesus? He is the Son of God.

Again, this is interesting in that this is the first occasion in the book of Acts that Jesus is so explicitly described in these terms. And that merits consideration that we're not going to give it this morning.

This message concerning Jesus, concerning his identity and his work, his saving work, is a God-given message. And of course, God also, as we consider his role in Saul growing more and more, it is God who granted Saul the gift to preach.

He granted Saul the enabling by his Spirit to exercise his gift. You see, it's not simply that Saul is given the gift to preach and then told, well, I've given you the gift, now you get on with it.

[21:44] No, even in the exercise of that gift, even in using that gift, God is active and involved by his Spirit enabling Saul to use that gift usefully and profitably and we see with blessing also.

So, God is involved in Saul's growth, in Saul growing more and more. And what about us? Well, I think we all would be agreed that God continues to fulfill his part in helping us grow. He has called you. He's enabled you with a message to tell. He has given you a gift and he is ready to help you and to enable you to use that gift.

God fulfills his part today as he did with Saul that Saul might grow more and more. So, too, we cannot point the finger at God and say, well, he's not helping me.

He's not playing his part. He continues very resoundingly to play his part in our lives as well. The first actor, then, that would explain why it is that Saul grew.

[22 : 57] Well, God was helping. God was involved. But also, a second actor that we note and we meet in the passage is the church. very briefly, we can refer to that because the reference to it is also very passing and brief.

There at the beginning of the passage, in verse 19, the second part of verse 19, we read, Saul spent several days with the disciples in Damascus. And then, we read, at once he began to preach. Now, in this preaching in the synagogues, though it is not stated in the passage, it seems entirely reasonable to conclude and to presume that Ananias, certainly, and the leadership of the church in Damascus would have been involved in encouraging Saul to exercise his gift.

Perhaps you're thinking, and I would certainly agree with you, that Saul, in all probability, did not require much encouragement. There would have been a great desire on his part to preach this good news and to go to the synagogues.

I suspect he didn't need much pushing or prodding. Nonetheless, it does seem entirely reasonable to presume that the leadership there in Damascus, Ananias very particularly, would have been involved in encouraging Saul in this direction.

[24 : 20] Certainly, as we continue to read concerning Saul's ministry, and as he becomes known as Paul, we notice that in spite of his very special calling, in spite of his apostleship, Saul or Paul did not consider himself above the church, as one who could exercise his ministry independently of the church.

The place of the church, as I comment in this passage, isn't so evident or so clear, but certainly the next time we meet Saul, and the next time we meet him is several years later, in chapter 13 of Acts. And there, what do we find? Well, we find him being commissioned and being sent together with Barnabas by the church in Antioch. And so, though he is an apostle, and though he has a very special calling, nonetheless, the exercise of this gift that he has is exercised in the context of the church that he is part of.

And as we comment there, on the next occasion we meet him, the church at Antioch, very formally and officially, as it were, commission and send him to continue exercising his gift.

So, the church is an actor in Saul's growth, in Saul growing more and more. Now, if that was true of Saul, then it is most assuredly true for us.

[25 : 49] And the application of that, I suppose, goes in two directions. The application goes to those who are in leadership in the church. And in this congregation, the minister and the elders very particularly, we have a responsibility to encourage all in the exercise of their gifts.

We have a responsibility to seek to involve all in the ministry of the congregation that you might grow in your faith, that you might grow in the exercise of the gifts that God has given you.

That is our responsibility. And we will have to give account for how we fulfill that responsibility. If we are careless and not seeking to give opportunity, if we perhaps lead to the side or allow folks with gifts not to be given the opportunity to use them, then we are failing in our duties as leaders in the church.

So the application goes in the direction of those who lead, ministry, but it certainly also goes in the direction of all of us as Christians, that we will seek to exercise our gifts within the context of a church and under the authority of a local congregation and accountable to those who are leaders in a congregation.

And we won't be lone rangers doing our own thing, fulfilling our own ministry and doing things as we see fit, but rather we will seek to use and exercise our gifts within the context of the congregation where God has placed us.

[27 : 30] So the church is also an actor in the growth of Saul and ought to be in the growth of all Christians. But what is the situation here for us?

And I ask you as one who is part of this congregation, are you given the opportunity to serve God in this congregation? Is it a case that you're not given the opportunity or is it a case that you don't take the opportunity?

I'm not answering those questions. I'm posing the questions that you would consider them and answer them for yourself. Or perhaps there's much that could be said on that.

But I want to move on to the third actor who is involved in Saul growing more and more powerful, as the phrase we're directing or concentrating our thoughts around.

The third actor who contributes to Saul's growth is Saul himself. Saul himself. Yes, God called him. Yes, God gifted him. Yes, the church identified his calling and gifting and granted him the opportunity.

[28 : 38] But at the end of the day, Saul had to take the opportunity. And we're told that he did so. He did so at once. Verse 20, at once he began to preach in the synagogues.

And not only does he take the opportunity, but he looks to develop his gift, to learn from his mistakes, no doubt, to examine himself as to how he's exercising his gift, to seek the advice and constructive criticism of others.

I'm sure in those early days, and again we don't know this for certain because we're not told, but it seems entirely reasonable to presume that in those early days, the likes of Ananias and maybe others would have had occasion to take Saul aside and say, well, that was interesting what you were saying today in the synagogue.

That was helpful. I like this point. I like that point. But do you not think you could have said this differently? Do you not think that wasn't maybe the best way of broaching that particular subject? I speculate.

But I'm sure Saul would have been more than happy to listen to those words of advice and to develop the gift that God had given him. So Saul himself is involved.

[29 : 48] You see, God can do so much as regards our growth as Christians. He can lay it all out for us. He can provide us all the opportunities.

He can give us the gifts that we need. He can call us. But if we don't respond, if we don't take the opportunity, then we have to take responsibility for that.

Saul grew more and more powerful. And he himself is a fundamental actor in his own growth as a Christian, as a servant of God, as one who has a gift that he has to exercise in God's kingdom.

But what about us? I think if we are honest, we'd have to say that many of us fall down at this point. We are fearful of taking the opportunity given to us. We hold back from exercising the gifts that God has given us.

And what is the result? Well, the result is that we don't grow more and more powerful. Saul grew more and more powerful, not because he was special, not because he was any different to you fundamentally as a Christian.

[30 : 55] He grew more and more powerful for the reasons identified. You too. And I too. We can and should grow more and more powerful in our life as Christians, in our service for God.

And often it is this element that is lacking. Our contribution, our taking of the opportunities, our developing the gifts and exercising the gifts that God has given us.

Even as we think of opportunities, even in these days, simple opportunities perhaps, but ways in which we can maybe explore what our gifts are. And as we serve God, learn and grow and develop as believers and in our service for God.

In the intimation sheet this morning, you each received a couple of tracts, simple gospel tracts. You know how for so long these tracts have been used and sometimes people say, oh, well, they don't have much impact.

People don't read them, people throw them away. But there's an opportunity for you to think of who you might give that to and maybe then seek an opportunity to speak to concerning the good news.

[32 : 11] This week, on Tuesday and Wednesday, we're going to be visiting around the neighborhood, inviting folks to the services, handing out this leaflet that gives the services, the times of the services in different city center churches.

And it's a simple thing. And yet that's a way. It's an opportunity to serve. It's an opportunity to maybe try something that we haven't done before and see if that's an area of service that we can involve ourselves in so that we don't say, oh, well, there's no opportunity given for me to serve God.

And no doubt we could multiply the examples, but we'll leave it at that for the moment. So we have then an answer to our second question.

Just very, very briefly, we'll notice the third question that we've highlighted. But just to recap, first of all, we asked, what does the description of Saul mean, that he grew more and more powerful?

And we noted that it's in particular reference to his exercising his gift as a preacher. We then asked, well, why is it that he grew more and more powerful?

[33 : 20] And we've noticed that there are three actors involved. God himself in a number of ways. The church is also involved, but also Saul himself is involved in taking the opportunities that present themselves.

And now, finally, and much more briefly, what reaction did it produce? And we find the answer to that, at least part of the answer, at the end of verse 22.

Well, actually, in verse 21, there's also a reference to reaction. We read in verse 21, and all those who heard him were astonished. And then in verse 22, yet Saul grew more and more powerful and baffled the Jews in Damascus by proving that Jesus is the Christ.

Even without going into the details of what kind of reaction, it's worth just noting that it does produce a reaction. Now, the kind of reaction, as we kind of draw this immediately to the application to ourselves, will, of course, vary depending on our circumstances.

The reaction that is produced by Saul growing more and more is evidently a function of who he is and of who he was and of his background and his personal history.

[34 : 32] Why were people astonished? Well, they were astonished because they knew he was the chief persecutor. And now he's preaching about Jesus. So, evidently, that will produce a reaction. People will be astonished. Now, as we grow as Christians, the manner in which people respond will be different.

It will be a function of how they've known us before. And so, we're not going to take Saul's example and say that it must be exactly the same. In the case of Saul, his witness, his very person, caused astonishment to the crowds.

But then also, in verse 22, and this is more related specifically to his exercising his gift, we find that the crowds were baffled. They were confounded.

And why were they baffled? Why were they confounded? Well, we're told they were confounded by the fact that Saul could prove that Jesus is the Christ. See, this concept for them was so bizarre that this Jesus of Galilee would be the Messiah.

It was bizarre. It was something that they wouldn't give a moment's consideration to. And yet, this man, Saul, confounds them, baffles them by proving that it is so.

[35 : 40] And how did he do so? Well, again, he took from his vast store of knowledge and understanding the Old Testament Scriptures. And he went to the Old Testament Scriptures and he said, look, this is the one who was prophesied.

And he'd go through the prophets and he would say, look, this is how these prophecies are fulfilled. What I'm saying to you, though it may seem lunacy to you or you thought it just completely bizarre, it's actually true.

He proved to them. He showed them that it was so. And they're confounded. They're baffled that he can make such a strong case. Now, not all believe. Not all say, oh, well, I want to follow Jesus.

But all are confounded by the cogency and the coherence and the power of the case that he makes. They're confounded. They're baffled that these things could possibly be true.

And so, his growing more and more, his developing in his gift of preaching the gospel has this effect. It produces this reaction. Now, as I've stated, and I'm not going to develop this any further, for each of us, the reaction that will be produced by us growing more and more in our Christian lives, in the gift that God has given us, will be different.

[36 : 54] Depend on the gift that you have. It will depend on how you exercise it. It will depend on the kind of person you are and the history, personal history that you have. In that sense, it will be different for all of us.

But what is a constant is that there must be a reaction. If we are growing more and more as Christians, if we are growing more and more powerful in the exercise of our gifts, in our service for God, it's inconceivable that there would be no reaction.

There will be those who take note. There will be those who will be astonished. There will be those who are baffled and confounded by the lies we live and by the service we render to our Master.

And so we pray that it would be so that we also, individually as Christians and collectively as a church of Jesus Christ, would provoke and generate a reaction and that men and women would look and say, why is this so?

Who are these peoples? What is this message that produces such an impact in their lives? So as we close, a growing Christian, Saul grew more and more powerful.

[38 : 07] And this we can be sure of. Where there are growing Christians, there will be growing churches. But more of that this evening. Let's pray. Sowe just look a little bit more.

You're going to keep going. Hope. And then■■■. We don't.

So, this selenium lion, great. Why ■■■■ are very importantsal is going to TWEET