

28 SETTING THE COURSE

Aurelius Augustine (A.D. 396-430) was a bishop of the church in North Africa who helped to keep the good news of the gospel good. During his youth Augustine ran from God. Augustine's father was a pagan who did not believe in God. His mother Monica prayed for her son to become a Christian, but it seemed he never would. Augustine was a student of all the philosophies competing for acceptance, but he kept Christianity at arm's length. He would not submit to "newness of life." Yet, after awhile, Augustine's life seemed empty to him. When he heard Bishop Ambrose explain Christianity, he decided to be baptized.

Four years later Augustine became a priest. Five years after that he became a bishop at Hippo in North Africa. As a bishop responsible for the church, Augustine fought false teachings that threatened the gospel. If it had not been for Augustine the church might have lost the true meaning of the gospel of Jesus Christ.

One of Augustine's opponents was a British monk named Pelagius. Pelagius disliked what he had heard about Augustine's theology. Augustine said that being saved was entirely a gift of God. Through God's grace alone people became believers. Pelagius thought no one would try to be saved if they didn't have to work for it. He said it was up to people to take the first step toward God. Augustine realized that broken, sinful people cannot take the first step. The church accepted his view and remembered how merciful God really is.

3 STATEMENTS

- People of many races and languages heard the message of the disciples and became believers in Jesus Christ.
- Paul was clear that what happened on the cross was an undeserved and free gift of God.
- Christ has set people free to be full daughters and sons of God.

the

Source

WHAT'S THE NEWS?

At his ascension, Jesus told the disciples that they would receive the Holy Spirit. This Spirit would lead them out into the world as witnesses.

The promised Holy Spirit did come to the disciples at Pentecost. The disciples were given the gift of speaking in different languages. Those who heard the disciples heard the good news of Jesus Christ in their own language.

The whole book of Acts is the story of the disciples' witnessing. It begins with the disciples preaching the gospel in Jerusalem. The book ends with one disciple named Paul preaching the gospel in Rome. The good news of God's saving action through Jesus had spread to the very center of the vast and powerful Roman empire.

People of many races and languages heard the message of the disciples and became believers in Jesus Christ. People all over the world have

heard that same message and have come to believe and trust in God.

People have been telling and re-telling the good news of Jesus for almost 2000 years. Those who wrote the books, letters, and sermons of the New Testament wrote what they believed to be most important about Jesus. They wrote and preached so that people would believe in Jesus. Through people witnessing and by the power of the Holy Spirit, others believe in Jesus and are saved.

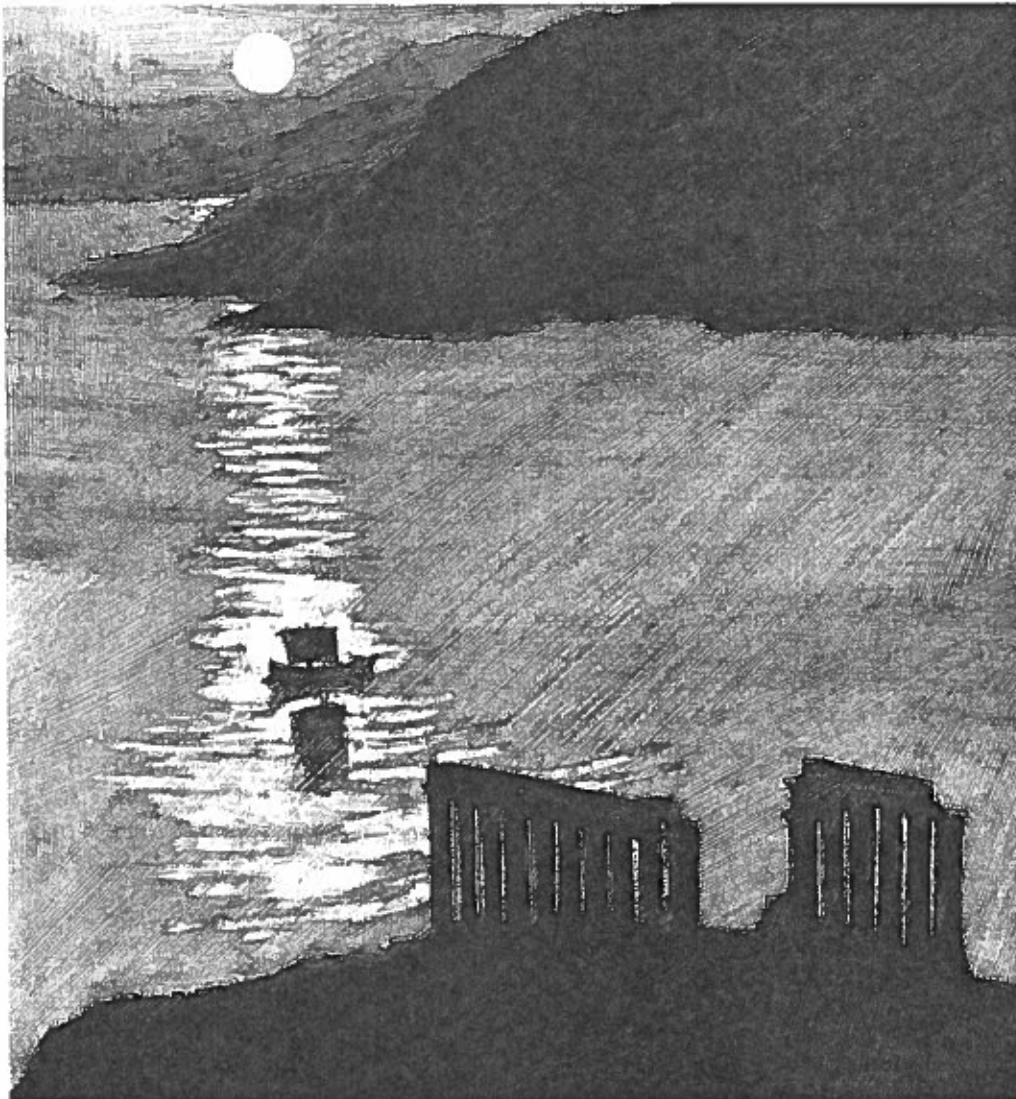
One writer whose witness has helped people in all places and times believe in Jesus is a man named Paul of Tarsus. You heard about the life and career of Paul in Session 27. Paul's message about Jesus is the focus of this session.

THE CROSS OF CHRIST

Paul was a great missionary of the church. He traveled to many different cities and countries in the area around the Mediterranean Sea during the early years of the first century. In addition to his public speaking and preaching, Paul wrote letters to the Christian congregations he helped to form. In these letters he reminded the believers of the great gift God had given them in Jesus. Once Paul wrote a witnessing letter to a congregation of Christians in Rome that he had not helped establish.

In his letter to the Romans, Paul wrote a strong and confident statement of faith. Paul was proud of the gospel and wanted others to hear it clearly. Near the beginning of the Letter to the Romans, Paul stated the theme of his whole message.

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Read Romans 1:16 below. Underline the phrase that says what the gospel is. Circle the words that say who the gospel is for.

"For I am not ashamed of the gospel; it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who has faith, to the Jew first and also the Greek."

The word *salvation* comes from the same root word as the word *save*. Paul said that this good news or gospel saves people from something. In other words, God rescues God's people from that which could harm them. God saves people from that which would keep them away from God. That is great news to hear! But the good news gets even better. Read Romans 5:6-11 and answer the following questions.

1. In verses 6, 8, and 10, what words did Paul use to describe people in relation to God?

2. Why do you think God decided to save that kind of people?

3. In verses 6, 8, and 10, what words did Paul use to describe how God saves people?

Paul was clear that what happened on the cross was an undeserved and free gift of God. It was an action of God that brought about the death of our old sinful selves and raised us to new life in Jesus Christ. The relationship between God and people first broken in the Garden of Eden is restored in Jesus Christ.

Write a statement on the lines below that you think is the most important in the message about Jesus Christ. Discuss what you wrote.

FOR FREEDOM

Dana's father brought home a brightly wrapped gift. After supper he gave it to Dana saying, "This is a gift of love, son." Dana took the gift, turned it over and over in his hands, and then put it down on the table.

"Okay, dad, what's the catch? What do you want me to do?" asked Dana.

Dana's father was very hurt. He meant the gift as a *free* gift with no strings attached. Dana turned the gift into a reward or a bribe. The joy was gone for both Dana and his father.

That is the way it is for some people with the good news of Jesus Christ. In the cross of Jesus, God said, "I love you. I forgive you. I want to save you from sin, death, and the devil." But people quickly started asking, "What's the catch?" People started making lists of things that had to be done before someone could be saved.

In the early Christian church arguments arose over these lists. People argued over whose list was right. How closely did a person have to follow God's Law in order to make it? These arguments threatened to tear the young Christian church apart almost from the very beginning.

In Acts 15, Luke recorded a debate that took place in Jerusalem over who could be saved. Paul and his assistant Barnabas had preached the gospel to non-Jews (Gentiles). Some of the leaders of the Christian church in Jerusalem felt that only those who were Jews and who followed the whole Law of Moses could be saved. The apostle Peter had his opinion, also.

Read what Peter said about this question in Acts 15:6-11. Respond to the following statements by placing an X along the continuum to indicate your opinion.

1. It is up to individual people to make a decision about God.

_____ |
Agree | Disagree

Paul was clear that what happened on the cross was an undeserved and free gift of God.

2. God sees some people as being better than others.

Agree

Disagree

3. People are saved by God's decision about them, not by what they do.

Agree

Disagree

In the meeting in Jerusalem, Peter, Paul, Barnabas, and the other disciples saw that the good news of Jesus was for all people. People did not have to become Jews. The good news of Jesus was a free gift that could not be earned, even by birth.

Throughout Paul's whole ministry, he was accused of making God's gracious decision cheap. Often people would say, "Sure, Jesus died for our sins. Now we have to show God how sincere we are. We have to follow God's law."

To those statements, Paul responded with a loud "No." For Paul, Jesus put an end to the law in his death and resurrection. People are saved by God's gracious decision about them in Jesus Christ.

Paul wrote in Galatians 3:23—4:7 that God had given the law as a guardian or disciplinarian. But now in Christ there was no longer any need to be under control of the law. *Christ has set people free to be full daughters and sons of God.* The law served its purpose. Christ set us free.

This means that you can trust in God for your salvation. There is no need to worry whether you have followed God's law closely enough. There is no need to worry whether you are sincere enough in your faith. God has made the decision, not you. God made the decision to rescue you before the creation of the universe. God made it happen in the cross and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

God is the one who has done all that was necessary to restore the broken relationship between you and God. God rescued you through Jesus' death and resurrection. All that remains is for you to say "Thanks be to God!"

After that, you can ask, "What can I do in response to God's decision about me?" It is in response to God's decision to save us that we follow God's commands. That is how we give thanks.



Jim Whitmer

Shaping life

THE COURSE IS SET

Paul set the course for the Christian witness to Jesus Christ. The good news is that Christ came to save all people. No one is to be left out. The good news is also that God decided to save people even though they do not deserve it.

Read the story of Dana and his father on page 156 again. As a class, list some other responses Dana might have made to his father upon receiving the gift.

Now list some feelings that both Dana and his father might have enjoyed once the gift was given and received.

The lists of other responses and feelings can give you a clue to how Christians can live. The Christian life is one of thankfulness to God. It is a life of joy and sharing what has been given. The Christian life is lived in a loving relationship with God. We have been

named as God's children. God loves us as a loving parent loves a child.

So first of all, we see that the Christian life is one that is centered in a relationship with God. But that relationship does not end there. We have been rescued by God from being self-centered. God's saving goodness allows us to reach out to others in love.

SET FREE

"What do you have to do in order to be a Christian?" That is the question people have asked since the time of Jesus. Check the space next to the things you think are requirements to be a Christian.

- be baptized
- say prayers
- go to church
- don't use drugs or alcohol
- obey the Ten Commandments
- be sincere in your faith
- witness to others

None of the actions in the list are wrong. They are all good ways to live as a Christian. The problem comes when people begin to rely on their own actions rather than God's actions.

It seems that people have problems understanding that God chose to forgive and to rescue us from sin. Some people are always looking for the requirements. And if they think they meet the requirements, sometimes they make lists of what *others* have to do.

In the early church some thought that a person had to become a Jew first and follow the Law of Moses. Now, there is nothing wrong with the law. It is a gift of God. The problem is that the law becomes the focus, not Christ's gracious gift of forgiveness.

Even today Christians make lists of what they think people have to do to *really* be Christians.

- Some say that you have to be sincere in your heart. But how do you know if you are sincere enough?

- Some say that you have to speak in tongues to prove that you are a Christian. But what if you don't speak in tongues? Are you still a Christian?
- Some say that Christians are always happy and that nothing bothers those who *really* love Jesus. But what happens when you do feel sad or depressed?
- What are some other things people might say you need in order to be a Christian?

There is a story about a time when Martin Luther was depressed. He felt that Satan was really after him to destroy him. The story goes that Luther saw Satan in his room one night. Luther threw his ink bottle at Satan and said, "I am baptized!"

Claiming your Baptism as the source of your faith means that you say that it was God who did all that was necessary to restore your relationship with God. Doing things for others, reading Scripture, saying your prayers,

FURTHER

opportunities

Mishna minutes

One of the clearest explanations of the benefits Christ gives to us was written by Paul in Ephesians 2:1-10. Read these verses once or twice each day in the next week. As you read, write down your thoughts about what God has done for you. You also may wish to design a poster that expresses your thoughts. Memorize Ephesians 2:8-9. It is one of the most grace-filled passages in Scripture.

Activity 1

Compose a prayer in which you thank God for the freedom you have in Christ. Use the Bible passages in this session for help. Consult your pastor or other resources for ideas.

Christ has set people free to be full daughters and sons of God.

and witnessing to others are all good things. But you must remember that those things are done in *response* to what God has done. They are not requirements.

God has set you free to be his daughter. God has set you free to be his son. You are a loved child of God, free to live and to tell others. Now your course is set.



Then use the prayer by yourself or with the rest of your class.

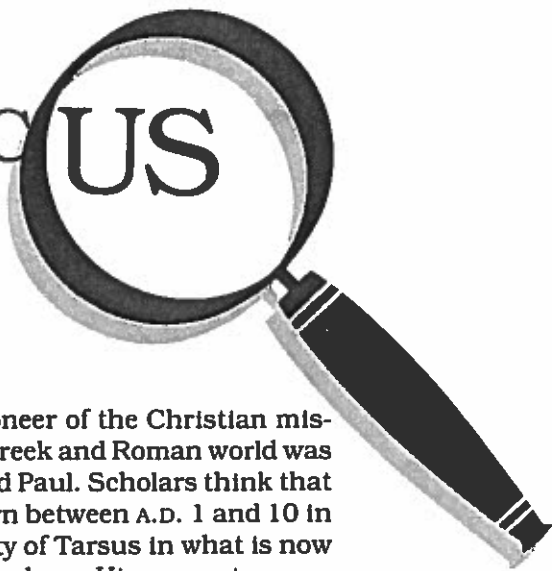
Activity 2

Find three pictures of Jesus and study the expression on Jesus' face. You can find these pictures in books, on posters, or in stained-glass windows. Write a brief sentence about what the expression on Jesus' face in each picture makes you think about Jesus. Which picture do you like best? How do these pictures help you understand Jesus as a graceful Lord?

Activity 3

Make a special effort to be friendly. Accept people for who they are. Think of some ways you can continue to reflect God's grace for the people around you.

FOCUS



ON PAUL OF TARSUS

The pioneer of the Christian mission to the Greek and Roman world was a man named Paul. Scholars think that Paul was born between A.D. 1 and 10 in the Greek city of Tarsus in what is now southern Turkey. His parents were practicing Jews and raised their son in the Jewish tradition of the Pharisees. At the same time, Paul's father had Roman citizenship. This gave the family superior legal and political standing in the community. At home he was Saul, named after the first king of Israel; in the community he was Paulus, a citizen of Tarsus and Rome.

Having grown up a Roman citizen in the Greek city of Tarsus, Paul was familiar with Greek and Roman thought and culture. His formal education was in Jerusalem under the famous rabbi Gamaliel. Paul was a well-educated man

who could speak Greek, Aramaic (the language of the Jews at that time), and Hebrew (the language of the Jewish Bible). Thus, he was a man who was familiar with the Greek, Roman, and Jewish worlds.

These two sides of Paul (the Hebrew Saul and the Roman Paul), never seemed able to live in complete harmony inside the same person. Paul seemed always at conflict with himself. Perhaps this is what gave Paul the physical and intellectual energy he needed to proclaim the gospel of Jesus Christ.

Jerusalem



Robert Fric