



PREPARATION FOR MINISTRY

SERIES: *THE SPREADING FLAME*

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Acts 9:19-31

15th Message

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A friend sent me a note reflecting on last week's message. He surmised that God chose Saul because of his passion, even though that passion was misdirected. He suggested that God delights in using the personalities he gives us, rather than changing them. I think my friend is correct. Our personalities don't change that much when we become Christians. Certainly there are aspects that have to change, because they are contrary to the Christian life, but it seems that God takes that same energy and channels it in a different direction. We will see this in our text from the book of Acts.

The degree of Saul's devotion to Judaism was the same as the degree of his devotion to Christ following his conversion. In fact, comparing and contrasting his life before and after his conversion, Paul says, in Philipians 3, "I was a persecutor of the church." Later on the chapter he says, "I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus." Those two verbs, "persecute" and "press on" are the same. The determination with which he pursued the church was the same determination with which he pursued Christ. My friend put it this way in his note: "God knew that Saul of Tarsus would breathe grace just as vehemently as he breathed threats and murder against Christians."

When I think of a modern day comparison with Saul of Tarsus, the man that comes to mind is Charles Colson. Before he came to Christ, Colson was a shrewd, ruthless politician. A member of Richard Nixon's White House staff, he was known as the "hatchet man." So committed to Nixon was he that he said he would walk over the body of his grandmother if that's what it took to get his boss reelected.

As we have seen, Saul was on his way to Damascus with extradition papers in hand giving him authority to arrest Christians and take them back to Jerusalem for trial. But before he reached Damascus he was arrested himself by a vision of the risen Lord. However, it would be a mistake to think that what happened on that occasion explained the powerful influence this man wielded over the rest of his life. It was not Saul's impressive background or personality that qualified him for ministry. God had a great deal of work to do in him to get him ready for what lay ahead.

The second half of Acts 9 sets out how God prepared Saul for ministry. These verses give insight into how God prepares us as well. We pick up the story in the second half of verse 19:

Now for several days he was with the disciples who were at Damascus, and immediately he began to proclaim Jesus in the synagogues, saying "He is the Son of God." All those hearing him continued to be amazed, and were saying, "Is this not he who in Jerusalem destroyed those who called on this name, and who had come here for the purpose of bringing them bound before the chief priests?" But Saul kept increasing in strength and confounding the Jews who lived at Damascus by proving that this Jesus is the Christ. (Acts 9:19-22, NASB)

Saul never returned to Jerusalem. Following his conversion he continued on to Damascus, where Ananias laid hands on him and he got his sight back. He was baptized, and filled with the Spirit, and immediately started to preach in the synagogues there. As an esteemed rabbi, Saul would have had that opportunity—and, of course, they were expecting him. But instead of presenting his letters of authority and demanding the extradition of the disciples of Jesus, he came on a very different mission, issued by a greater ruler than the Jewish high priest. Now, as a disciple of Jesus himself, Saul announced his master's claims. According to Luke, "they were amazed" at the change that had come over him. The radical conversion of the one who raised such havoc clearly was a miracle.

The time references here are intentionally vague. In verse 19 Luke says, "Saul spent several days in Damascus," while in verse 23 he says, "after many days passed." There also seems to be a progression and growth in Saul's preaching, from verse 20, where he proclaimed Jesus as the "Son of God," to verse 22, where it says that Saul "kept increasing in strength" and was "confounding the Jews...by proving that this Jesus is the Christ." "Proving" literally means "to put together." It seems that at this time Saul was showing how the Old Testament predictions were fulfilled in the coming of Christ.

Where did Saul get this knowledge that confounded the Jews? Certainly not in Ananias's morning Bible study, or in a home fellowship. It was Jesus himself who taught him. Jesus alone, and no one else, taught Saul. Paul is clear about that in other New Testament passages. That is what gave him his authority as an apostle. Galatians 1:11-18, for instance:

For I would have you know, brethren, that the gospel which was preached by me is not according to man. For I neither received it from man, nor was I

taught it, but I received it through a revelation of Jesus Christ. For you have heard of my former manner of life in Judaism, how I used to persecute the church of God beyond measure, and tried to destroy it; and I was advancing in Judaism beyond many of my contemporaries among my countrymen, being more extremely zealous for my ancestral traditions. But when He who had set me apart, even from my mother's womb, and called me through His grace, was pleased to reveal His Son in me, that I might preach Him among the Gentiles, I did not immediately consult with flesh and blood, nor did I go up to Jerusalem to those who were apostles before me; but I went away to Arabia, and returned once more to Damascus. Then three years later I went up to Jerusalem to become acquainted with Cephas, and stayed with him fifteen days. (Gal 1:11-18)

Paul insists he received no instruction from anyone, not even an apostle. He went to Jerusalem not to learn from Peter, but to tell Peter what he himself had already learned.

It appears that after preaching in Damascus for several days, Saul then went to Arabia, to the southeast, and remained there for three years. (That period of time possibly came between Acts 9:21 and 9:22). During that time, Jesus taught him all the historical facts and the theological data he needed, those distinctive truths about Jew-Gentile solidarity in the body of Christ which Paul would later call the "mystery made known by revelation."

That is why Paul could speak with authority about events that he did not participate in. For instance, in 1 Corinthians 11 he wrote, "I received from the Lord also what I delivered to you...that on the night our Lord was betrayed." He received that directly from the Lord. Those events took place in the Upper Room, with only the eleven disciples present. Paul knew what happened in that room because the Lord had told him. It is significant that he was in Arabia for three years; that was about the same time that the Lord had with the disciples.

Returning to Damascus after three years, Saul thought his ministry would have a powerful impact. It did, but not in the way he imagined.

When many days had elapsed, the Jews plotted together to do away with him, but their plot became known to Saul. They were also watching the gates day and night so that they might put him to death; but his disciples took him by night and let him down through an opening in the wall, lowering him in a basket. (Acts 9:23-25)

He began to preach, but his ministry met with such resistance that the Jews hid at the city gates to ambush him. Saul escaped, only because someone in the church had a home on the city walls, and he was lowered in a basket through an opening.

So Saul returned to the city he loved, Jerusalem, where he was such an eminent success, probably thinking that things would go better there.

When he came to Jerusalem, he was trying to associate with the disciples; but they were all afraid of him, not believing that he was a disciple. But Barnabas took hold of him and brought him to the apostles and described to them how he had seen the Lord on the road, and that He had talked to him, and how at Damascus he had spoken out boldly in the name of Jesus. And he was with them, moving about freely in Jerusalem, speaking out boldly in the name of the Lord. And he was talking and arguing with the Hellenistic Jews; but they were attempting to put him to death. But when the brethren learned of it, they brought him down to Caesarea and sent him away to Tarsus. (Acts 9:26-30)

Three years having passed, Saul had much to say to the Jews. This was an emotional time for him. While he probably knew that his former associates would shun him, he wasn't prepared for the fact that the church would have nothing to do with him. They wondered if they could trust him, remembering all too well the terror he inspired and the wounds he inflicted. Was his conversion real? Was he a spy seeking to infiltrate the inner ranks by faking a commitment to Christ? Where had he been for three years?

It might have remained that way except for verse 27, which begins, "But Barnabas." We have already encountered Barnabas and his servant heart. Once more he plays a supportive role here. "But Barnabas." This is another of the great "buts" in the Scripture. Hearing Saul's story, he is convinced by the genuineness of his faith. Beginning a lifelong friendship, he takes Paul by the hand and leads him into the church meeting. As a result of Barnabas's care, the disciples listen to Saul and accept him as a brother. Galatians records that Saul's stay in Jerusalem lasted only 15 days. Luke gives the reason: his preaching in the synagogue did not go well.

Just as in Damascus, the church had to find a way to protect both Saul and the church. They put him on a ship at night and sent him home to Tarsus. He falls out of sight for another seven to ten years. Galatians records that he preached during those years, in Syria and Cilicia, but it was mostly a time of reflection and growth for him. He learned to live out the gospel in his hometown—the hardest place to do that. This was a lonely, difficult time for Saul. He was a Pharisee, a member of the strictest sect in Judaism. They must have rejected and disinherited him. He was cut off from all he knew. He possibly lost his wife also. Marriage was a requirement for a member of the Sanhedrin. Perhaps that is what Paul meant when he said that he suffered the loss of all things for Christ.

Luke says an interesting thing in verse 31, which actually begins with a conjunction: "So," or "Therefore,

for this reason,” explaining that what followed was a result of all the above.

So the church throughout all Judea and Galilee and Samaria enjoyed peace, being built up; and going on in the fear of the Lord and in the comfort of the Holy Spirit, it continued to increase. (Acts 9:31)

Having gotten rid of the agitator, who no longer was involved in persecuting the church or stirring up trouble in the synagogues, the church “enjoyed peace, being built up...and continued to increase.”

The apostle Paul’s ministry did not have an auspicious beginning. What can we learn from this account? Here are three reflections about God’s preparatory work in Saul’s life—and in our lives as well.

Ministry flows out of our personal relationship with the Lord

A lonely stint in the Arabian wilderness was the first step in God’s preparation of Saul. He spent three years sitting at Jesus’ feet, learning who Jesus was, and rethinking the Hebrew Scriptures that he knew so well. He also spent his first ten years of ministry in virtual isolation, learning about himself and the work that God had for him. Saul was prepared for effective service through time spent alone with God.

This process is repeated throughout the Scriptures. Moses was shaped in the wilderness for forty years. Jesus spent at least eighteen years preparing for three years of ministry. At the beginning of the three years, he spent forty days alone with the Father, and during those years he had numerous extended times with the Father. How can we be of help to others without it?

Ministry grows out of worship. The gift that we have to give others is merely the fruit of our own relationship with Christ. Sometimes the greatest enemy of ministry is what we describe as our own “ministry.” Pastors, missionaries and others in ministry become so tired they often say they have no time for God. Henry Nouwen once asked Mother Teresa what he could do to be more effective in his ministry. With characteristic simplicity she said, “Henry, spend one hour a day in devotion to Jesus and you will be all right.” So many get caught up with the frantic pace of ministry they have no time for adoration, devotion and worship.

As a child I used to love to play on those spinning wheels at the public park. You just jumped on and someone pushed the wheel to make it go around. The safest place on that device was right in the center. If you stood on the edge, you could be thrown off. We need to keep close to the center. Jesus put it this way, “Abide in Me, and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit of itself, unless it abides in the vine, so neither can you, unless you abide in Me. I am the vine, you are the branches; he who abides in Me, and I in him, he bears much fruit; for apart from Me you can do nothing” (John 15:4-5).

Bearing fruit is found in abiding, not in effort and activity. Fruit happens! What is important is not what we do but who we are. Fruit bearing is the product of the life of the vine penetrating the branches so that something useful is produced. There can be no fruit apart from the vine. Abiding is complete dependence, drawing on Christ for all that we do. It means sitting at his feet in solitude and surrender, listening for his voice, asking for his counsel, waiting for his impulses in intercession and action, and then walking through the world, trusting, resting, and asking for his help.

Busy lives do not foster abiding. When we allow ourselves to be swept up in every cause and concern; when we surrender to every demand; when we give ourselves to every worthwhile project; when we try to be all things to all people all the time, there is little time to abide. Then we are useless. Like broken and detached branches, we wither and die and are good for nothing.

Frenzy destroys the fruit because it disconnects us from the root, the source of goodness and wisdom that makes us useful. Let us learn to be quiet and abide in Christ,

Ministry flows out of our weakness, not our strength

Being a historian, Luke doesn’t offer much commentary on the text; he simply gives the facts. Writing about this period of his ministry many years later, in 2 Corinthians, Paul says,

If I must boast, I will boast of the things that show my weakness. The God and Father of the Lord Jesus, who is to be praised forever, knows that I am not lying. In Damascus the governor under King Aretas had the city of the Damascenes guarded in order to arrest me. But I was lowered in a basket from a window in the wall and slipped through his hands. (2 Cor 11:30-33, NIV)

Paul describes this event as “weakness.” It was a humiliating experience for him when the church in Damascus had to get rid of him. They lowered him in a fish basket and he ran for life in the darkness of night. But he says, “because of what it taught me, I now boast in my weakness.”

Paul had returned from Arabia feeling good about himself. He had just been “one-on-one” with God. He had received his D.D. (Doctor of the Desert) degree. He was God’s man for the job. Given the power of his intellect, he probably thought he would convince everyone in Damascus. He was a brilliant man, having studied theology from the time he was twelve. Gamaliel, one of the great intellects of that period, was his teacher. Paul possessed a strong personality and had many great assets. He had a great fervor for God. Returning from Arabia, he thought he would turn Damascus upside down. And he did. He started a riot. He won all the battles but lost the war. Not a single convert is recorded. Although he could conclusively prove that Jesus was the Messiah—his logic was indisputable—no one bought it. And he was hurting the church.

Then he went to Jerusalem, where he was known. Things would be different there, he imagined. The center of Judaism was where his ministry would take off. There he would begin to preach and evangelize the Jewish nation. But the church there would have nothing to do with him. A humble saint had to run interference for him. When he preached, the Jews sought to kill him. Again the church had to ask him to leave. Only then did it experience peace and start to grow.

Having spent ten years in virtual isolation, Paul learned an important principle that we too need to learn: our natural abilities don't matter to God. Paul would later express it this way, in 2 Corinthians, "But we have this treasure in jars of clay to show that this all-surpassing power is from God and not from us" (2 Cor 4:7, NIV). It took Saul, as it does us, a long time to learn that truth. He had to learn, as we do, through difficult circumstances, that our natural abilities do not impress God. In fact, sometimes they are more of a liability than an asset.

All our lives we are taught that everything depends on us. "When the going gets tough, the tough get going," we are told. It is our zeal, our energy and our efforts that get the job done. As a result, we start believing in ourselves, our I.Q., our academic training, our personality. While God can use these things, Paul had to learn that apart from reliance on Christ, these are worth nothing. Jesus put it this way, "It is the Spirit who gives life; the flesh profits nothing" (John 6:63). The "flesh" is what we are apart from God, the way we are made up as men and women—our personality, our make-up, apart from God. As David Roper has said, "Unaided humanity is useless."

What God did with Saul is what he does with us: he frustrates the energy at the source. He wears down our resolution, using the frustrations, the disappointments and defeats of life. He lets our projects fail, our dreams shatter, so that we learn our inadequacy. Then he shows

us his adequacy. When we learn that "we can't," he shows us that "He can." Our weakness and failure become the arenas where we discover God's strength, adequacy and power. Then we can say, with Paul, "we are afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not despairing; persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed" (2 Cor 4:8-9).

Ministry flows out of community

Look at the ministry of Barnabas. He does for Paul in Jerusalem what Ananias did for him in Damascus. Were it not for these two men the whole course of church history might have been different. Last week we made some observations about conversion. Perhaps we should have made another: conversion always results in church membership. In this text we see that it is not just that new converts should join a Christian community, but that a Christian community must welcome new converts.

There is a great need in the church today for people like Ananias and Barnabas, men and women who will overcome their fears and hesitations and reach out to befriend newcomers. Barnabas was able to forgive Saul, put aside the past and trust him, despite his past sins. He was always the interceder, the reconciler, the peacemaker. What a ministry! The result of his kindness and sensitivity was that Saul met James, the Lord's brother, and spent time with Peter. Oftentimes it is through the counsel and care of others that we are prepared for ministry.

Barnabas's ministry is a beautiful thing. That is where we will find fulfillment: giving a word of encouragement, confirming the gifts of others, reconciling believers, and promoting others people's ministries.

May God prepare us the way he did Saul. May we allow him to teach us, mold us, humble us, and continually remind us of our own inadequacy, and his strength.

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