



PREPARATIONS FOR A LIFE OF MINISTRY

SERIES: LIFE UNLEASHED

Acts 9:19b-31

16th Message

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December 6, 2015

I. Intro

January will be the seventh anniversary of the “Miracle on the Hudson.” Do you remember that event? On January 15, 2009, a US Airways flight was taking off from LaGuardia Airport in New York and almost immediately was disabled because it struck a flock of Canadian geese. The pilot, Chesley Sullenberger, decided he could not make it to any nearby airports so he chose to land the plane full of 155 passengers in the Hudson River. Every person survived. Since that time, Mr. Sullenberger, nicknamed Sully, has become a national hero. Although described as “shy and reticent,” Sully was noted for his calmness and poise during the whole ordeal. How did he do this? How did he effectively perform his job during such challenging circumstances? His answer: preparation. Due to his preparation over many years, he was able to execute flawlessly and effectively saving all of those lives. Preparation was the key.

Compare that to the sports world where young athletes leave college (sometimes early) and are thrust into a celebrity lifestyle with no preparation—and with millions of dollars. Then we all watch in shock as their lives just crumble under the pressure and prestige. They simply cannot handle it. They have not been prepared for that kind of life.

How important is preparation? It can be everything, and it is a good focus for our text today in Acts.

II. Review

Last week in Acts, we saw one of the most amazing scenes in the entire Bible—Saul became a Christian. Saul, the persecutor and ravager of Christians in the early chapters of Acts becomes a Christian! He is probably the least likely candidate in all of Palestine at that time to become this super-missionary for Christ, which just goes to show us that no one is safe from the Holy Spirit. No one is safe. As CS Lewis said, “The atheist cannot be too careful about the books they read. There are traps everywhere.”¹ No one is safe from the Holy Spirit. This is a good reminder to us that we should not write anyone off. That person in the office or at school who is hostile to Jesus, we should be praying for. Why? Because our God is the hound of heaven pursuing them as he pursued us. He seems to take delight in turning people upside-down, in helping people make 180 degree turns.

So Saul is now a follower of Christ. And, as most of us know, he will become the “super-apostle” to the Gentiles. But right now in our story he’s a bit rough around the edges. He needs some molding and shaping before he can become the super-apostle. In other words, he needs some preparation.

This text is relevant to us because we, like Saul, have been called into ministry. Back in chapter 6, we talked about every follower of Christ being called into ministry. The only question is what ministry God has called us into. When you get up tomorrow morning, you

are going into the ministry. Remember, there is no secular work. Everything you do is sacred work, whether it is an office, at home or, for you youth, at school. For us to be on the front lines, God needs to teach us a few things too. Like Saul, we need some preparation.

So if you have your Bibles, please turn with me to Acts chapter 9, beginning with the second half of verse 19.

III. Reverence

For some days he was with the disciples at Damascus. And immediately he proclaimed Jesus in the synagogues, saying, “He is the Son of God.” And all who heard him were amazed and said, “Is not this the man who made havoc in Jerusalem of those who called upon this name? And has he not come here for this purpose, to bring them bound before the chief priests?” But Saul increased all the more in strength, and confounded the Jews who lived in Damascus by proving that Jesus was the Christ. (Acts 9: 19b-22 ESV)

Some days pass as Saul stays with the people he had previously wanted to arrest and punish. He’s probably staying at Judas’ house or Ananias’ house for a few days. Luke is not clear on how many days, but what Luke is clear about is that Saul immediately begins proclaiming Christ everywhere he goes. He has a circuit of synagogues where he is visiting and preaching Christ. Saul has discovered a new devotion, a new commitment, a new reverence for Jesus. Maybe he hasn’t figured out a lot of theology yet, but he knows one thing for sure: Jesus is the Son of God. This is what was revealed to him on the Damascus road. But what does he mean by Son of God? What he means is this: here is the one who has a unique relationship with God, who is the ultimate revealer of God and who is the authorized agent of God to bring redemption to the world.

But Saul doesn’t stop there. In verse 22 Luke tells us that Saul is growing all the more in strength, probably referring to the deepening understanding of his faith, so that he can now prove that Jesus is the long awaited Messiah. He’s not just proclaiming Jesus, he is proving Jesus’ identity to the Jews. Most likely, he is using OT scripture, which he would know very well, and his own experience to make his argument. His conclusions completely surprise and confuse the Jews.

What we are getting here is Saul’s first step in preparation, which is a reverence or new devotion for Jesus. As with all new believers, there is a glow about him. He’s in the “I wanna tell everyone I know about him” stage. Saul can’t help himself. He can’t remain silent. He must speak up about what has happened to him. He has a reverence for Jesus which inevitably leads to witness. Reverence and devotion for Jesus motivates effective ministry for him.

If you are a new believer here today, God bless you. We love it when you can’t help yourself from telling others about Jesus. Because the danger for all of us who have been Christians for a long time is

that we lose our reverence for Jesus and become complacent and apathetic in our faith. Are you complacent and bored in your faith?

Let's have some fun in illustrating this point. Churches are made up of either dogs or cats. Are you a dog or a cat? As you know, dogs are committed, loyal and devoted. They love you and will come when called. Dogs always want to attend to you and be with you. Dogs will always stick around and will only leave when they get lost. Dogs act like they are going to die if they are not with you. Their entire lives are oriented toward you.

Cats, on the other hand, are aloof. They will come to you only if they are in the mood. Cats are independent. They can take off for a few days and go to another house and maybe come back when they are ready. Let's be honest. Cats really don't need you and really don't want you. Their entire lives are oriented toward how they feel, in other words, themselves.

So are you a dog or are you a cat? If you are a dog, remember you can be any kind of dog you want to be. I'm a bit partial to Australian Shepherds myself. But if you are a cat, how can you get back your reverence for Jesus? By getting back to orienting your entire life toward him.

So that's the first step in Saul's preparation. What's the second step? Verse 23.

IV. Reliance

When many days had passed, the Jews plotted to kill him, but their plot became known to Saul. They were watching the gates day and night in order to kill him, but his disciples took him by night and let him down through an opening in the wall, lowering him in a basket. (v 23-25)

How did you start your great missionary career, Paul? "I was let down through the wall in a basket and ran away like a scaredy cat."²

Luke is vague on the time of this event. He says that it happens after many days had passed. Many commentators take this to be the three years that Saul mentions in Galatians 1:

But when he who had set me apart before I was born, and who called me by his grace, was pleased to reveal his Son to me, in order that I might preach him among the Gentiles, I did not immediately consult with anyone; nor did I go up to Jerusalem to those who were apostles before me, but I went away into Arabia, and returned again to Damascus. Then after three years I went up to Jerusalem to visit Cephas and remained with him fifteen days. (Galatians 1:15-18)

Whether Saul was in Arabia for three years or went back and forth between Damascus and Arabia, we're not sure. But after three years we do find that the confusion of the Jews toward Saul has turned into open hostility toward him. They want to kill him!

But some of the Christians in Damascus help Saul escape by lowering him down in a basket, evoking images of Rahab back in Joshua chapter 2, and how she saved the spies in Jericho by lowering them down through her window.

But for Saul this entire episode is embarrassing and humiliating. As we read in our scripture reading earlier, (2 Corinthians 11:30-33; 12:9-10) he viewed this entire episode as a weakness. This was a humiliation for him.

Remember, Saul is a man of supreme intellect, supreme education, and supreme competence. Here is a man named after Israel's first

king, "a Hebrew of Hebrews" (Phil. 3:5), and a Pharisee, the son of a Pharisee. He has all the credentials. He's a proud man, he's a smart man and an amazingly talented individual, but that's not what God needs. What God needs is an empty jar of clay (2 Cor. 4:7). In today's terms, God needs an empty water bottle that is filled with His Holy Spirit.

And for that Saul needed to be humbled. In other words, he needed to become Paul. Now he doesn't become Paul yet, but the word Paul means, "small" or "humble." Saul needed to hear Jesus' words, "Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart" (Matt 11:29). One commentator has said, "When God wants us to do an impossible task, God takes an impossible man and crushes him".³ And that is exactly what happens to Saul. He needs to be molded and shaped. He needs more preparation. The good news is that God is never in a hurry. He'll take the time to do the job right.

Did you ever think that your weaknesses and limitations may be the key to your usefulness to Him? I think a lot of the time, we look around at others and say, "well if I was more like that other person, then God could use me more." Or, "if I was just more energetic, God could use me more." Or, "if I was just a tad smarter or could speak better, then I would be much more useful." However, when we make statements like those, who are we to tell the potter what to do (Rom 9:20-21)? In actuality your limitations and weaknesses are key to your usefulness to God.

A few years ago Caedmon's Call, a Christian band, sang a song called "Thankful."⁴ It speaks directly to what we are talking about:

So here I am
thankful that I'm incapable
Of doin' any good on my own

'Cause we're all dead in our transgressions
Now we're shackled up to the sin we hold so dear
So what part can I play in the work of redemption
'Cause I can't refuse, I cannot add a thing

It's by grace I have been saved
Through faith that's not my own
It is the gift of God and not by works
Lest anyone should boast

So here I am
thankful that I'm incapable
Of doin' any good on my own

Are you thankful for being incapable? Saul has to learn that he can't rely on his intellect or his education or his competence. He must learn to rely on God and on God alone. This is why Jesus begins the Sermon on the Mount with "Blessed are the poor in spirit," in other words, blessed are those who rely on him. He has to start there because the rest of the sermon, which is his new law, is useless unless we are reliant on him.

We must also learn this reliance. And is this ever difficult in this valley where the majority of people have supreme intellect, supreme education and supreme competence? This is hard in a country where we grow up with the ultimate desire of achieving the American dream. We've been taught all our lives that we can do anything and everything if we just put our minds to it. And if we don't make it, well, we just pull ourselves up by our bootstraps and try a little harder. And then, when we do make it, we become proud, self-absorbed and independent. In other words, we become useless to God!

Jesus says that his grace is sufficient for us, and his power is made perfect in our weakness. What does that mean? It means that when we boast in what he is doing in the midst of our brokenness, inabilities, and in the fact that we are incapable, Christ bubbles to the top. Christ becomes the focus, not us. God does everything possible to do away with our fleshly independence in order to teach us that we can do nothing without him.

Remember the story of Joseph. Pharaoh had a dream and found out that Joseph was the dream man. So, he sent for Joseph and Joseph went in before Pharaoh. And Pharaoh said to him, "I hear that you can interpret dreams." What were Joseph's first words back to him? "I can't do it but my God can" (Gen 41:16).

I'm reading a book called *Finding God in Silicon Valley*. It's essentially the stories of Christians who are in upper management of companies here in the Bay Area. One story caught my attention this week. It's the story of Michael Halloran, the founder and president of NES, National Exchange Services. Michael, a successful businessman, is a present-day Saul. He is a man of supreme intellect, supreme education, and supreme competence. But in 2001 the company he was leading at the time was on the verge of bankruptcy, which put his own personal finances in a bind. On top of that he faced a medical issue that required major brain surgery. Without going into too many details, his company ended up declaring bankruptcy, and he ended up personally declaring bankruptcy. Totally humiliating. The only good news was that his brain surgery was so successful the doctors couldn't explain what had happened. But through those humbling experiences he says this, "I started to realize that God had stripped away how I had defined myself. The money was gone—that was my security. Suddenly my security was God."⁵ Michael had found reliance on God through very humbling experiences.

How's your reliance on God? All of our limitations and humiliating experiences are there to drive us to our knees in reliance on Him. This is part of our preparation for ministry.

Now Barnabas reappears to help out Saul in verse 26.

V. Relationships

And when he had come to Jerusalem, he attempted to join the disciples. And they were all afraid of him, for they did not believe that he was a disciple. But Barnabas took him and brought him to the apostles and declared to them how on the road he had seen the Lord, who spoke to him, and how at Damascus he had preached boldly in the name of Jesus. So he went in and out among them at Jerusalem, preaching boldly in the name of the Lord. And he spoke and disputed against the Hellenists. But they were seeking to kill him. And when the brothers learned this, they brought him down to Caesarea and sent him off to Tarsus. (vv 26-30)

A famous conductor was once asked what he believed to be the most difficult instrument in the orchestra to play. He responded, "Second fiddle."⁶

When you examine the life of any great individual, you soon discover an entire section of second fiddlers, support people, who are gifted encouragers.

Ananias from the beginning of chapter nine was such a man. Barnabas, from this text, is such a man. If it weren't for these two men, the whole course of church history may have been very

different. Three years after Saul had left Jerusalem to go to Damascus to arrest followers of Jesus, he now returns as not only a follower of Jesus, but as one who has encountered Jesus and been commissioned by Jesus to preach the Gospel.

Luke doesn't tell us why Saul is going to Jerusalem. But in that Galatians passage we read earlier (Gal 1:18), Paul says that he goes to Jerusalem to get acquainted with Peter and stays fifteen days. But no one trusts him. Would you? These Jerusalem disciples had probably heard of his Damascus road experience, but that was a long time ago. That was three years ago, and besides, Saul had probably arrested, imprisoned, and interrogated many of them.

"But, Barnabas...." What marvelous words! Barnabas, the son of encouragement, lives up to his name. He takes Saul by the hand and leads him to the Apostles. You can imagine Barnabas and Saul walking into the house—"they Peter and James, you can come out from under the bed. He's one of us now." Barnabas vouches for Saul's integrity, and though we don't know why Barnabas initiates, he is the one that accounts for Saul's integration into the Jerusalem church.

Saul then stays for two weeks, preaching boldly all over the city. But during this time he meets resistance in the form of the Hellenists, Greek-speaking Jews, who have adopted the Greek culture. These are probably the same people who were led by Saul in arguing with Stephen back in chapter six. They couldn't withstand the wisdom and spirit with which Stephen spoke back then, and they can't withstand the wisdom and spirit with which Saul is speaking now. Saul is in danger for his life.

Once again, the believers save him; but this time, it's by sending him back home. They take him to Caesarea, the coastal city 70 miles northwest of Jerusalem, and put him on a boat for Tarsus.

Saul's next step in preparation is integration into the new family of believers. He has to be rooted in new relationships in order for his ministry to be effective. Throughout the book of Acts, we have seen over and over again the importance of the fellowship of believers. We have seen how this early church thrived due to the devotion of the individuals to the larger group. You cannot get away from how foundational it is from the very beginning of the church for each believer to be rooted in the larger community of believers. Our faith is a community faith.

As I've said before, the New Testament knows nothing of a solitary Christian. There are no lone ranger Christians. We were never meant to go at it alone. When God calls you, he calls you into new relationships, a new family called the church. He also calls other people alongside you, people like Ananias and Barnabas. Effective ministry requires being integrated into the family of believers. If we are to be effective in our ministry, we must be rooted in a church community, surrounded by second fiddlers, or first fiddlers, or even a whole orchestra who can encourage us in our walk.

A few weeks ago we had Robert and Siakor Sundah here from Liberia sharing with us. They were in the states for 6 weeks, their longest stay in the states. The first few weeks here were good fun for them as they had three meals a day and could go shopping and get whatever they wanted. But after six weeks here, they were really surprised at how Americans make no time for relationships. They were ready to go back to Liberia because of that.

If PBCC is your home, are you making time for relationships here at our church?

At the end of our text today Luke gives us one of his summary statements which he periodically inserts throughout the book of Acts.

VI. Remember Peace

So the church throughout all Judea and Galilee and Samaria had peace and was being built up. And walking in the fear of the Lord and in the comfort of the Holy Spirit, it multiplied. (v 31)

Saul, the great persecutor of the church, has been converted. This early church, which has been under attack for these last few chapters of Acts, is finally at peace. It's as if Luke gives us this brief summary, so we can finally catch our breath.

Peace: that word that allows us to take a breath, but it can be a difficult word to come by during the advent season. Am I right? Advent—this holy time of preparation, preparing our hearts and minds for the coming of the Prince of Peace. Reverence, reliance, and relationships take on an even greater significance during this time of the year. But let me give you one more R word: Remember. Remember peace during this season of anxiety. Remember that the reason for the coming of our king is to bring peace: peace with God, peace with each other, and peace with ourselves.

So during this advent season, do yourself a favor: remember peace and take many deep breaths.

VII. Benediction

Now may the peace of Christ, which surpasses all understanding, guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus during this Advent season.

1. Lewis, C.S., *Surprised by Joy* (New York: Harcourt, 1955), 191.
2. Wright, N.T., *Acts for Everyone*. (London: Westminster John Knox Press, 2008), 155.
3. Hughes, Kent, *Acts: The Church Afire*. (Illinois: Crossway, 1996), 136.
4. Caedmon's Call, *Thankful*. (Album: 40 Acres. 1999)
5. Vaccarello, Skip, *Finding God in Silicon Valley*. (San Diego: Creative Team Publishing, 2015), 153.
6. Swindoll, Charles, *Paul: A Man of Grace and Grit*. (Tennessee: Thomas Nelson, 2002), 109.

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