

The Great Stories of the Early Church
26 - The Last Apostle, 05
The Conversion and Early Ministry of Saul of Tarsus
Acts 9:17-31

- 17 And Ananias went his way, and entered into the house; and putting his hands on him said, Brother Saul, the Lord, even Jesus, that appeared unto thee in the way as thou camest, hath sent me, that thou mightest receive thy sight, and be filled with the Holy Ghost.
- 18 And immediately there fell from his eyes as it had been scales: and he received sight forthwith, and arose, and was baptized.
- 19 And when he had received meat, he was strengthened. Then was Saul certain days with the disciples which were at Damascus.
- 20 And straightway he preached Christ in the synagogues, that he is the Son of God.
- 21 But all that heard him were amazed, and said; Is not this he that destroyed them which called on this name in Jerusalem, and came hither for that intent, that he might bring them bound unto the chief priests?
- 22 But Saul increased the more in strength, and confounded the Jews which dwelt at Damascus, proving that this is very Christ.
- 23 And after that many days were fulfilled, the Jews took counsel to kill him:
- 24 But their laying await was known of Saul. And they watched the gates day and night to kill him.
- 25 Then the disciples took him by night, and let him down by the wall in a basket.
- 26 And when Saul was come to Jerusalem, he assayed to join himself to the disciples: but they were all afraid of him, and believed not that he was a disciple.
- 27 But Barnabas took him, and brought him to the apostles, and declared unto them how he had seen the Lord in the way, and that he had spoken to him, and how he had preached boldly at Damascus in the name of Jesus.
- 28 And he was with them coming in and going out at Jerusalem.
- 29 And he spake boldly in the name of the Lord Jesus, and disputed against the Grecians: but they went about to slay him.
- 30 Which when the brethren knew, they brought him down to Caesarea, and sent him forth to Tarsus.
- 31 Then had the churches rest throughout all Judaea and Galilee and Samaria, and were edified; and walking in the fear of the Lord, and in the comfort of the Holy Ghost, were multiplied.

Introduction:

Here we have the first three years or so of Saul's Christian life and we are brought up to a sort of 'blank spot' for us because we know nothing of the time that he spent at Tarsus after his conversion. We looked last week at the impact of his conversion both upon his own life as well as the effect it had on others, specifically the unbelieving Jews both at Damascus and then at Jerusalem. Today we want to look at some of the elements of this story that can be missed if we are not careful.

First of all, we must not miss the fact that Saul's time in and around Damascus was a very

useful time for him.

He told more of the events of that time in the book of Galatians.

Gal 1:15-24

- 15 But when it pleased God, who separated me from my mother's womb, and called me by his grace,
- 16 To reveal his Son in me, that I might preach him among the heathen; immediately I conferred not with flesh and blood:
- 17 Neither went I up to Jerusalem to them which were apostles before me; but I went into Arabia, and returned again unto Damascus.
- 18 Then after three years I went up to Jerusalem to see Peter, and abode with him fifteen days.
- 19 But other of the apostles saw I none, save James the Lord's brother.
- 20 Now the things which I write unto you, behold, before God, I lie not.
- 21 Afterwards I came into the regions of Syria and Cilicia;
- 22 And was unknown by face unto the churches of Judaea which were in Christ:
- 23 But they had heard only, That he which persecuted us in times past now preacheth the faith which once he destroyed.
- 24 And they glorified God in me. KJV

A telling remark is found in v.16, “*immediately I conferred not with flesh and blood.*” Saul knew that he had been called directly by God. He must have heard of the brief history of the church at Jerusalem and how the apostles had chosen a replacement for Judas from among themselves and how that their conferring among themselves had been a part of that process.

It is clear to all who read the story that the Lord had completely circumvented His Own men and His Own institution in the calling of Saul. That fact alone cries out for some explanation and some conclusion to be drawn from it. It seems that Saul immediately deduced that since he had been called in the way that he had and since the apostles had not been involved the Lord must have something different for him and he should not pollute his calling by absorbing the opinions of others too soon.

Here is one reality that is often missed. When one is called by God to serve Him the man really needs to establish with God a full understanding of his call so that, if necessary, God can use him to correct work that is already going on. Not only that but the man must discover the uniqueness of his own calling. God does not call nor produce clones. It is men that will take those called by God and turn them into clones if they can.

It would really be good, I think, that a man called to the gospel ministry could be allowed to have one year at least to seek God on his own and try to come to an understanding of what it is exactly that God would have him do. Instead we ship them off to school if we can so that they can be coerced into becoming a look-alike for whoever the prevailing role model happens to be. But every call of God is an individual call and Paul knew that, so he began to take trips into the Arabian desert which began not far from Damascus. We don't have any explanation of the manner of his visits to the desert. Did he go once for three years, or did he make periodic visits,

returning after each trip to Damascus and sharing what he had learned with the brethren there.

Some have suggested, without any real warrant, that the Lord Jesus came to him in the wilderness there and more or less duplicated the three years that had been enjoyed by the 12 while He was on earth. This is merely speculation, of course, but it shows that men's imaginations run away with them when there are unexplained events or periods of time in scripture. Others have thought that it may have been here that he urgently besought the Lord for the removal of whatever the 'thorn in the flesh' was that hindered him.

2 Cor 12:7-10

- 7 And lest I should be exalted above measure through the abundance of the revelations, there was given to me a thorn in the flesh, the messenger of Satan to buffet me, lest I should be exalted above measure.
- 8 For this thing I besought the Lord thrice, that it might depart from me.
- 9 And he said unto me, My grace is sufficient for thee: for my strength is made perfect in weakness. Most gladly therefore will I rather glory in my infirmities, that the power of Christ may rest upon me.
- 10 Therefore I take pleasure in infirmities, in reproaches, in necessities, in persecutions, in distresses for Christ's sake: for when I am weak, then am I strong.
KJV

It may very well have been that many of these 'revelations,' of which Paul had many, came to him there in that solitude as he sought the Lord and verified the call upon his life.

In this man's life we have a wonderful example of the two-fold training that any minister of the gospel needs. He truly needs, as Paul had, a grounding in the knowledge of what the scriptures say. If possible, at least a basic understanding of the languages of the Bible is good as well as a valid and true history of Christianity that lies behind him. (I say that because, in our day, even the history of the church has become polluted and can lead a young minister astray.) All of these things are good and useful in the ministry but the man needs one more thing. He needs time alone with God to establish the personal basis of his ministry. Some young men go through the schooling available today and come out the other side feeling like David in Saul's armor. What they have been taught just does not fit the ministry to which they have been called. Some figure it out, but some do not, sadly.

God never calls anyone to be the copy of someone else. Saul knew that and diligently kept himself from becoming one. Eventually he would visit with Peter and verify that he was understanding the gospel the same as the apostles but they did not get to influence him too early.

It is obvious that Saul did come away from the Arabian desert with a different view of where Christianity should be going and how the gospel was to be preached than many of those who had been converted from Judaism under the apostles and within the environment of Jerusalem. Some might make the case that except for Paul the church would have become and remained merely a Jewish sect and eventually disappear. (Allowing, of course, that God had not made some other arrangement to get them out of Judea with a burden for the lost world.)

We need to understand that every man called by God has a unique voice with which he preaches. He feels certain issues differently than others and, indeed, is called to do so. So it is with every preacher of scripture. Each one believed the same set of biblical truths yet every one had his own style and his own emphasis. This is the way that God has arranged it and it is beneficial for the church. Every time men begin to imitate one another or the church begins to expect them all to be the same, the ministry suffers and someone does not live up to his calling.

Saul wanted to be truthful in what he said for sure but he also wanted to be true to the perspective that he had gleaned from his time alone with God. He was faithful in both things.

One of the great weaknesses and failures of the churches of Jesus Christ over the centuries really began at Corinth.

1 Cor 1:10-15

- 10 Now I beseech you, brethren, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that ye all speak the same thing, and that there be no divisions among you; but that ye be perfectly joined together in the same mind and in the same judgment.
- 11 For it hath been declared unto me of you, my brethren, by them which are of the house of Chloe, that there are contentions among you.
- 12 Now this I say, that every one of you saith, I am of Paul; and I of Apollos; and I of Cephas; and I of Christ.
- 13 Is Christ divided? was Paul crucified for you? or were ye baptized in the name of Paul?
- 14 I thank God that I baptized none of you, but Crispus and Gaius;
- 15 Lest any should say that I had baptized in mine own name. KJV

God does not form His men from a cookie cutter. They do not all come out the same. And, because they are different, carnal and ungodly men make a competition of the service to God by good and honest men.

Some pretend a scholarly and analytical approach, studying the methods and techniques of the man. Others, and most of the others, simply evaluate the impressions they get from different ones and determine whether they like them or not. Some are 'too harsh' and some are 'too soft' and then there is that one who, for the moment at least, seems 'just right' and he becomes their favorite.

Let us determine this rather. If God places a man in the place where he might minister the Word of God to us, let us decide whether we believe he truly is a man of God. If he is, then let us trust God to use him to our benefit and not go 'shopping' for someone who 'suits us' better. It may be that God's choosing is better than ours.

Also, we must realize, and I wish more College and Seminary teachers did, the man must learn his own walk with God.

There are things he can learn from others and things that he cannot, things that must be learned before God in prayer and in communion with Him. The man of God cannot copy those things

from others and the things he learns will sometimes be unique to himself and to the ministry that God has chosen for him.

Somehow Saul knew that he was going to need to find his own way with God and his own way in the world. He was 'point man' for a whole new thing, the carrying of the gospel to the Gentile world in a way that had not happened since God had covenanted with Abraham.

It is almost as if a whole new religion was beginning with the ministry of Saul of Tarsus. It was not in reality but he is almost as much the head of a religion of his own as was Moses. The Jews would struggle to understand how the uncircumcised and unclean heathen could be right with God and none of them really came forward with a doctrinal foundation for that except for Saul who was to become Paul the apostle.

He could not rely on the understanding of others because no one understood what he was called to do, not fully.

Only when he was fully assured that he knew what God would have him do did he venture to Jerusalem to consult with Peter. Look again at Gal. 1.

Gal 1:18-20

18 Then after three years I went up to Jerusalem to see Peter, and abode with him fifteen days.

19 But other of the apostles saw I none, save James the Lord's brother.

20 Now the things which I write unto you, behold, before God, I lie not. KJV

But he certainly did not spend all of his time with Peter.

28 And he was with them coming in and going out at Jerusalem.

29 And he spake boldly in the name of the Lord Jesus, and disputed against the Grecians: but they went about to slay him.

Some have suggested that Saul was not being wise here, that he was too brash and too bold, but there is no revelation as to that. Just as he had been sent away secretly from Damascus to save his life so he was sent away in a stealthy move to Tarsus, his home town, to prevent the Jews at Jerusalem from killing him.

Luke indicated, in fact, that Saul's presence was causing the Jews to make things difficult on all of the churches of Judea, a situation which ended when Saul left.

31 Then had the churches rest throughout all Judaea and Galilee and Samaria, and were edified; and walking in the fear of the Lord, and in the comfort of the Holy Ghost, were multiplied.

But what of Saul? We are pretty sure that his family was in Tarsus and operated a successful tent business there, but did he just go and make tents until he was called to come back to the ministry in Antioch (Acts 13)?

Look again at Gal 1 where Paul gave an account of this time of his life.

Gal 1:21-24

- 21 Afterwards I came into the regions of Syria and Cilicia;
- 22 And was unknown by face unto the churches of Judaea which were in Christ:
- 23 But they had heard only, That he which persecuted us in times past now preacheth the faith which once he destroyed.
- 24 And they glorified God in me. KJV

This at least hints that he was preaching in the region around Tarsus, the province of Cilicia. Antioch was also in this area and it was this region where the Judaizers came from Jerusalem causing problems for the churches. We will get to that in Acts 15.

So, what is our takeaway from this passage before us today?

1. Ministers of the gospel must have two things: an education in the Word sufficient to teach and an independent call, from God, to preach.

This does not necessarily mean that a man must have been to formal school but he must be an able student of the Word and well-versed in biblical theology. Paul would write to Timothy and Titus that he must not be ‘a novice.’

And, he must be solid in his call to the ministry, owing allegiance to no authority but God Himself concerning that ministry. He must be a man who is willing to declare, as Paul did, whatever God would have him preach, and face down any authority contrary to the Word, as Paul would do with Peter.

He cannot and must not be nor be considered an employee even though the church should make sure that he has what he needs. He serves the church but he serves God first. He is a man of humility but he will not compromise truth, seeing that the One Who called him does not compromise.

2. Secondly, he must be a man who walks with God, on his own, and can survive whatever is thrown against him.

He has both a calling from God and a relationship with God which will serve him if he finds himself all alone and deserted by everyone including those who call themselves saints. His service to God does not and must not depend upon people.

3. Finally, every believer should have something of this reality in his/her own life.

All of God’s people should be students of the Word.

All of them have a calling of service upon their lives, Eph 4.

And every one of them should have an independence about them sufficient to sustain them if all abandon them or if they find themselves suddenly cut off by persecution from all human support.

These things are for ministers for sure but not exclusively for them.