

The Training of a Leader

January 27, 2019

Acts 9:10-19

As we continue our study through the book of Acts, this morning we find ourselves in chapter 9, specifically vv.10-19. We are in the middle of the conversion of Saul, whom we will later come to know as the great Apostle Paul, the first great missionary, the first great missionary to the Gentiles, the writer of a great deal of the New Testament. This is how he was converted.

What strikes me about the text before us in this regard is the level of detail we are given. We are not given such detail about any other early Christian leader. Indeed, most of the early leaders were with Jesus from the beginning of His ministry, and we know only the story about how some of them were called from the life of fishing or tax collecting to being fishers of men, or building up treasures in heaven.

But with Saul/Paul it is different. His conversion was different from the rest. Why? Why this whole ordeal? Why is this level of detail in the text? It seems to me that it is not only given for its dramatic effect, but because there is significance in the way it happened. It is significant that God chose Saul, one of the leaders who most hated these Christians. God chose Saul specifically. It is significant that he was a Pharisee, the very group most often targeted in Jesus' teachings and travel. It is significant that the conversion happened as Saul was on a journey to capture and drag back to Jerusalem ANY men or women found to be a part of this "Christian" rebellion.

It is significant that Saul was blinded, that he had a verbal encounter with the risen Christ, that he had to be led to his destination, that he had to wait for three days for relief from his suffering, that Jesus had pronounced and prepared the precise person who would heal him and assist him as he began this new direction in his life. It is significant that this all happened in Damascus and not Jerusalem. It is significant that he was told he would be a leader, a light to the Gentiles, and one who would suffer for Jesus' sake. All these things and perhaps

many more are noteworthy and teach us about the importance of this event. Yes, there is real reason for us to pause over the details of Paul's conversion so that we might understand the mission before him and what it means for us as well. There is thought behind Jesus' plan for His Church.

Follow along as I read Acts 9:10-19.

Main point: God will use proud rebels for His service, but first they have to be humbled.

This point could not be made more clear in the text before us. Indeed, we are told that Saul needed to learn how much he would have to suffer for his Lord. It is also not hard to see how this might be instructive for us as well. God is willing to use brash, bold, self-assured, missional people to carry out His plan, but first He has to humble them. Until they are humbled, they are not fit for ministry. (2 parts)

I. God's plan to spread the gospel makes complete sense to Him, even if it doesn't always make sense to us. vv. 10-16

We are introduced here to a new character who shares a name we saw back in chapter 5, Ananias. The character in chapter 5 was dramatically put to death for attempting to deceive the Church. This Ananias has the honor of, or perhaps was the guinea pig for assisting this murderous rebel, Saul, become a valuable instrument for spreading the gospel. You might say that Ananias had to be convinced that meeting with Saul would not end with him losing his head. Such was the reputation of Saul of Tarsus.

v.10- In Damascus there was a disciple named Ananias. The Lord called to him in a vision, "Ananias!" "Yes, Lord," he answered.

I find it interesting that Saul's conversion takes place in Damascus, not Jerusalem. And that there were no apostles (or even members of the "food

distribution committee” like Philip) present. It is as if God made an intentional decision to disconnect Saul’s conversion from the Jerusalem church. This does not mean they would not have been supportive or appropriate. Instead, I see this as prepping him for his future role: take the gospel to the ends of the Roman empire. The Church did not send him out, God sent him out. He was not their new creation, he was God’s new creation. His Christian life began on the mission field, even though he was a Jew of Jew, a Pharisee of Pharisees. It all happened by plan.

But to happen in this far away place, there had to be someone on the other end. And in this case it was Ananias. We don’t know much about him except that he was aware of what had been happening in Jerusalem, but was probably not there personally. Here we see that he was an active listener to God. Indeed, his response to God in a vision mirrors many such encounters throughout Scripture. “Yes, Lord,” or “Here I am.” Or, as I have sometimes put it, “At your service.” Ananias, was a willing servant of His Lord.

11 The Lord told him, “Go to the house of Judas on Straight Street and ask for a man from Tarsus named Saul, for he is praying. 12 In a vision he has seen a man named Ananias come and place his hands on him to restore his sight.”

Notice the level of detail here. “Go to this particular house on this particular street, where you will find this particular person, engaged in this particular activity. And by the way, I’ve told him you are coming...by name. He will be anxiously awaiting your arrival because it will mean he will have his sight restored.” You can’t help but notice the level of detail. This event didn’t just “happen.” It was planned to be carried out exactly as it happened. Saul’s conversion happened by the precise plan of God. Yes, it involved others, from Judas the home owner, to the men who led him by the hand, to Ananias the reluctant healer. But none of them get the credit for what happened. None of them “led Paul to Christ.” It all happened according to the master plan

announced ahead of time by the Lord Himself. The same could be said for Peter, for the rest of the twelve, for all of us. We have become disciples of Christ because He has carried out His plan in our midst. No one but Jesus gets the credit for saving us. Right?

13 “Lord,” Ananias answered, “I have heard many reports about this man and all the harm he has done to your saints in Jerusalem. 14 And he has come here with authority from the chief priests to arrest all who call on your name.”

Saul’s reputation has preceded him. The disciples in Damascus had received a warning that this Saul fellow was on the warpath, and that he was headed their way with official orders to detain any and all who call upon the name of Jesus. Isn’t it interesting that this is told in such a personal way? It is as if Ananias and Jesus were standing there talking to each other. Isn’t it interesting how Ananias acknowledges the lordship of Christ over His Church. This Saul has done harm to your saints and he is coming to arrest all who call upon YOU. Can you sense how personal this is? Ananias knows the attacks are against Jesus, not them. I think this is written for our benefit, don’t you think? Just as we saw last week, when you harm the Church, you are really attacking Jesus.

But here, the emphasis is that Ananias doesn’t think this meeting with Saul is a good idea. He is not on our side.

15 But the Lord said to Ananias, “Go! This man is my chosen instrument to carry my name before the Gentiles and their kings and before the people of Israel. 16 I will show him how much he must suffer for my name.”

Ananias’ protests did nothing to change Jesus’ mind. He knew all this and was sending Ananias regardless. He knew something Ananias did not know, that

He was at work in Saul's heart, that Saul's mission had changed, and that He was in the midst of showing Saul a new way of life. Instead of inflicting pain, he would be enduring pain for the sake of the gospel of Jesus. Saul's whole life had turned around. He (and all others) just didn't know it yet.

But notice here the mention of the Gentiles...and their kings, and before the people of Israel. This mention of the Gentiles (people who are not Jewish, people like us) is highly significant. This issue of going to the Gentiles will dominate the rest of the book of Acts...and it happened by God's plan, announced before it ever began, announced on the day He set apart one particular person who would lead the effort to bring them that message. This Jew of Jews, who hated Jews who put their faith in Christ, would become the first chief spokesman to Gentiles! I think it is impossible for us to adequately comprehend how earth shattering this would be. Jesus was arranging for a Jew to become the instrument to carry the gospel to people like us. This deserved a dramatic announcement!

II. Even here, the gospel is transferred from person to person. vv. 17-19

In other words, there is significance that God used Ananias to heal Saul and baptize him and facilitate the filling of the Holy Spirit. It could have happened in a bunch of different ways, but God chose to use a person as the instrument. He always does.

17 Then Ananias went to the house and entered it. Placing his hands on Saul, he said, "Brother Saul, the Lord—Jesus, who appeared to you on the road as you were coming here—has sent me so that you may see again and be filled with the Holy Spirit."

I imagine his fear and trepidation as he entered the house. What would he find there? It probably was the first time he ever met this notorious figure, who brought instant fear among the believers. And then when he saw him as a helpless blind man, it must have sent him for a loop in the opposite direction. This dreaded strong man was humbled, helpless, deep in prayer.

Notice the physical contact, the initial address, "Brother Saul." Are you catching the significance of that term? Ananias is accepting Saul as his brother, his spiritual kinfolk, before any conversation had taken place. Saul did not have to prove himself. Indeed, we will see in the upcoming text that others were not so welcoming. But Ananias was. Their enemy was now their brother. The gospel of Jesus had changed Saul's identity. Again, I don't think we can adequately comprehend what a statement this is.

Then notice that Ananias declares definitively that Jesus sent him, you know, the One Saul was persecuting. The One He and all of the others like him thought they had gotten rid of once and for all, He sent Ananias! In other words, this whole operation has Jesus at the center. Jesus was active, not passive in this event. It is not just God centered, but Jesus centered. It is HIS Church.

And now the next step was for Ananias to bring the healing of Saul and the filling of the Spirit. In other words, Jesus' intent for Saul was not to harm, it was not for revenge. It was to heal, to fill, to give new identity, direction and purpose. His plans for Saul were good. Ananias was sent to bring GOOD news to Saul.

Once more, why did Ananias have to be involved? He was involved to show the disconnection yet connection with the existing Church. He was Ananias from Damascus, not Peter from Jerusalem. And he demonstrated the pattern that characterizes Christianity: it is spread from people to people. Imagine how different it would be if we just sat back and waited and watched to see who God might call next. No, we are called to go out and bring the good news, it spreads through people. It doesn't spread through isolated encounters between God and people lying in their beds. It happens when people who are already believers follow the leading of their Lord and go and bring the good news to others. It spreads through personal contact. This is even true with Saul.

In other words, Saul's conversion was totally unique in various ways, but in other ways it was the same as all the rest. God set up a divine appointment for one of His believers to share the good news with the person of God's choosing. That believer obeyed even if it didn't make sense to him, even if it could have ended with personal disaster. Yet he went and did what his Lord called him to do. And the results were that this former enemy of God and His people was now "Brother Saul." This is how it works!

18 Immediately, something like scales fell from Saul's eyes, and he could see again. He got up and was baptized, 19 and after taking some food, he regained his strength. Saul spent several days with the disciples in Damascus.

The emphasis here is the immediacy of the change. Ananias performed a miracle on Saul. His eyesight was restored, the impediment to his vision was removed. (Notice the detail of Luke the doctor here!) Saul had been humbled, brought low, but now he got up, he was baptized as a sign and symbol of his new identity. He was a new man.

He was still a man, he needed nourishment to regain his strength, but he was a new man, with a new identity, with a new purpose and mission, a mission purposed by God. In other words, it was not that Saul had this cool experience and now wanted to do something big and different. That was Simon the Sorcerer. This was Saul of Tarsus, new brother in the faith, hanging out with the believers, a convert of extreme proportion, designated by his Lord for a mission beyond imagination. Who could have envisioned one of the members of the Way standing before kings defending the Christian faith, with members of Caesar's household becoming brothers and sisters in Christ? Who would have envisioned at this point in the unfolding drama that there would soon come a time when the number of Gentile believers would exceed the number of Jewish believers? No one could have envisioned such a thing. But it was important for the participants to know that it was all happening according to the plan and

presence of God. It was not due to man's effort even though it involved man's participation at every step.

And I ask you, "Has anything changed with the way God works?" Doesn't he still work the exact same way? Of course he does, by His plan.

If we believe this passage is the Word of God, then what should be different about our lives?

- 1) We will listen for the prompting voice of God.
- 2) We will not try to outthink our Lord and His plan.
- 3) We will obey His leading even when it could result in our personal harm.
- 4) We will remember that He is spreading His gospel by His plan, even though He always uses us to do it.
- 5) We will accept as brothers and sisters, even as leaders, those He chooses to bring into His kingdom.