

CALLING

Acts 9:3-16

Have you ever found yourself in a situation where you thought what you were doing was absolutely right and you applied yourself and all your energy into doing it only to find out later that what you thought was “right,” was really the wrong thing to do? It may be something such as turning down a wrong road or going in the wrong direction on the right road. You may be making good time, but it is no good unless it is in the right direction.

The first time we see Saul of Tarsus it is not in a very good light. We see a person so caught up in “religion” that he was missing out on what God was doing. Saul was a Pharisee of the Pharisees. In other words, he followed the letter of the law in everything he did. In fact, in some of the latter writings, he said of himself that he was blameless regarding the Law. There was nothing in the Law that said you could not or should not try to silence all other religious views that did not agree with your own.

Saul was a disciple of the great Pharisee teacher/scholar Gamaliel and he held his teacher’s view that this new movement (that we call the church) was “heresy.” Saul saw in Christianity a real threat to the Jewish religion as he knew it. What he failed to see was that the “Way” or Christianity was not an attempt to overthrow or replace what God had been doing with Israel. Instead, this new “Way” was the fulfillment of all that had gone before in God’s dealings with mankind. Therefore, it is not surprising to find Saul at the stoning of Stephen.

The stoning of Stephen started a wave of persecution that scattered Christians into many of the surrounding areas. Jesus had told them, “You will be My witnesses in Jerusalem, Judea, and Samaria and the uttermost parts of the earth.” We are still working on the last part of that combination command and prophecy. As the followers of the Way were chased from Jerusalem, they took with them the truth of the gospel. It is ironic that those who wanted so much to stop the spread of the gospel were directly involved in causing it to be spread through the persecution they inflicted on the Christians.

Not only were those members of the early Church affected by the persecutions, but some of the persecutors had their lives touched by the response of the Christian community. The death of Stephen was a testimony to the kind of love that took Jesus to the cross and had Him pray “Father forgive them.” It is the love that caused a follower of this same Jesus to pray the same prayer as he was being killed. It is a love that should have pricked the heart of a man of religious zeal like Saul who was not satisfied to persecute the Church in Jerusalem but was on his way to Damascus to find more people of the Way.

Saul Confronted – 9:3-4

³ Now as he went on his way, he approached Damascus, and suddenly a light from heaven shone around him. ⁴ And falling to the ground, he heard a voice saying to him, “Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?” Acts 9:3–4 (ESV)

You’ve heard of people who were so stubborn and set in their ways that you have to use a 2x4 to get their attention. There were plenty of opportunities for Saul to see the error of his ways. If he had been diligently seeking out the basic teachings of this group and had seriously examined the evidence of what was happening among the disciples of Jesus, then he would not have been so intent in his pursuit to stop the movement. Since he was driven by his initial passions, he did not do the due diligence of objectively examining what these so-called heretics believed. Instead, he indulged his passion. The successes he had in arresting and persecuting the followers of the Way made him more intent to eliminate this “heresy” even if it meant killing all the “heretics.”

Apparently, even the Christlike response of Stephen who asked God to forgive those who were stoning him to death did not influence Saul to examine what he was doing but, apparently, inflamed his passion to eliminate what he considered to be a challenge to his ideas about God's plan for mankind.

The incident on the road to Damascus is an example of God's application of an equivalent 2x4 to Saul. He now had Saul's attention. Saul recognized that something of a greater power than he had ever encountered had confronted him. He could have rebelled. He could have remained blind for his rebellion. Instead he submitted and indicated his willingness to follow. He asked, "What will You have me to do?" If we ever needed an example of supernatural intervention producing a sudden conversion in the life of a person, this is it.

You've probably heard it said that God will not cause anyone to be saved against his or her will. This may be technically correct; however, we see in the case of Saul, a man who had no desire to join himself to those followers of Jesus, yet God brought about circumstances that caused him to change his will. I guess that the important thing in the life of Saul before his conversion was that he wanted to do what he thought was the right thing. The problem was that he did not understand the nature and character of God.

We have the advantage of 20-20 hindsight and we know that the life, death, and resurrection of Christ were the fullest revelation of God the Father that we can possibly have. Saul's failure to learn the facts of the matter before he acted caused him to do exactly what Gamaliel had warned the Sanhedrin they might be doing in opposing the church – he was opposing God. This is exactly what Saul heard as he found himself on the ground. "Saul, Saul why are you persecuting Me?" This is a sobering message for all those who oppose and persecute the church today. That message is simply, you are not opposing men with whom you disagree, you are opposing God.

Jesus Identified – 9:5-9

⁵ And he said, "Who are you, Lord?" And he said, "I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting. ⁶ But rise and enter the city, and you will be told what you are to do." ⁷ The men who were traveling with him stood speechless, hearing the voice but seeing no one. ⁸ Saul rose from the ground, and although his eyes were opened, he saw nothing. So they led him by the hand and brought him into Damascus. ⁹ And for three days he was without sight, and neither ate nor drank. Acts 9:5-9 (ESV)

Saul's question might be thought of as ironic for a person who thought he knew God and that he was working feverishly to do what he thought God wanted done. He did not recognize the voice of God in what Jesus said to him. This was the problem most of the Jewish leaders had during the earthly ministry of Jesus. They did not recognize nor would they accept that the message that Jesus shared with them was the Word of God.

As is generally recognized, God had been revealing Himself to humanity in all the various interactions He had with people starting with the general revelation of creation itself and culminating in the incarnation of God Himself in the flesh. The creation shows the infinite might and power of God and at the foot of the Cross we see the infinite love and grace of God. The "foot of the cross" might be considered by some to be a strange place to see the power and wisdom of God; however, as we see Him on the cross dying for us, we realize this is our God Who so loved the world. This is the ultimate demonstration of God's message to Paul, "My strength is perfected in weakness."

Saul really thought that persecuting the followers of Jesus was the right thing to do. He was sincere and though he was sincerely wrong, God saw that He could use that sincerity and enthusiasm in the Kingdom of God. Part of the problem in the Church today is that many people

have the correct beliefs and doctrines – they have the truth but they are neither sincere nor enthusiastic about this truth.

Saul's conversion experience started when he encountered Jesus and realized that He was the One who died and was now alive. This encounter was life changing. He remembered it and related it many times to others. He shared that experience and its lessons with Church leaders, with Gentiles converts and with kings and governors.

Jesus' instructions to Saul were quite simple: "Arise, go into the city, listen for the next instruction." Again, we see how God operates in a progressive way. He gives us a simple instruction that we can do and if and when we are obedient, then we are given addition details.

"Arise or get up" is a good starting point for most of us. When there is a job to be done the first step in finishing the job it is to simply get up so that we can get started. Many of us have a problem in getting anything accomplished because we don't take that first step.

The directive to "go into the city" might say that God's will for our lives can sometimes involve our being in a certain location. This may also tell us that we need to be where the action is to be able to accomplish something for the Kingdom of God. Another possible lesson for the church today is that we have a tendency to practice our Christianity in the Church house and fail to take it into the city.

"Listen for the next instruction" may be the most difficult part of following God. Once we get into some project, we often will use our own wit to complete the task. We may find ourselves working to accomplish very worthwhile objectives but using the ways of the world to accomplish it. We need to be in tune with God so that we not only begin well, but also end well.

According to Paul's account of this encounter that he related to King Agrippa in Acts 26, Jesus told him additional information regarding what he was being called to do. These things included being a minister and witness of what he had and would see and experience for the purpose of opening the eyes of Jews and Gentiles so they could turn from darkness to light and receive forgiveness and be partakers in the inheritance reserved for those who have faith.

We don't have a lot of experience with being involved in such an evidently supernatural experience such as happened to Saul and those traveling with him to Damascus. The target of the encounter was obviously Saul. The direct impact left him lying on the ground while the others with him were still standing. Luke described them as "speechless." We might call this being "dumbstruck" in that they were not able to speak simply because they were terrorized.

Another difference in what happened to Saul versus his companions was that only Saul lost his sight. Also, only Saul understood the words that were spoken. The others heard the voice but did not get the message. Additionally, the other men did not "see" anyone. Apparently, Saul did see Jesus. It is not explicitly stated here that he saw Him, however, there are statements that Paul made later regarding this event that give testimony that he did see Christ. We find evidence that Saul did see Him in these six verses: Acts 9:17, 27; 22:14; 26:16; 1 Cor. 9:1; 15:8.

On the road to Damascus, Jesus directly intervened in the life of Saul. While such a dramatic intervention is rare, all of us have experienced interruptions in our lives that were unplanned. Saul certainly did not plan on being blind and having to have someone lead him by the hand. It may have seemed ironic that Jesus' message to him mentioned opening eyes of the blind and then he experienced blindness for three days.

Gloria Gaither stated "I'm coming to the conclusion (more and more the longer I live) that God's will for our lives is the interruptions." How would we respond to such an interruption of our lives? The two extremes of possible responses would be rebellion or submission. Saul

realized that he was into a situation that was far beyond anything that he could control. This may have been the first time in his adult life that he realized that he was not in control. He was astute and wise enough to realize just how powerless he was when he encountered what was an absolutely certain supernatural power that had grabbed the reins of his life. As a student of how devout people in the history of Israel dealt with grave crises in their lives, he fasted and prayed as a demonstration of his submission to God and as a means of seeking to know what God would have him do next.

As we know, God already had everything planned out and He had someone in Damascus who would be a link in the process of Saul's conversion from persecutor and prosecutor to preserver and proclaimer of the good news. Ananias was a follower of Christ and he was used in a special way to accomplish the will of God. It is not often that we distinctly hear the voice of God directing us to do something. Most of the time, when God speaks to us it is in ways that are not as clear. In this case, God did not want to leave anything to chance. In fact, God not only prepared Ananias to minister to Saul, he also prepared Saul to receive the ministry. I think that it is important for us to pray that God would prepare the hearts of those to whom we would minister or share the gospel so that it will be received in the proper way.

Purpose Given – 9:10-16

¹⁰ Now there was a disciple at Damascus named Ananias. The Lord said to him in a vision, "Ananias." And he said, "Here I am, Lord." ¹¹ And the Lord said to him, "Rise and go to the street called Straight, and at the house of Judas look for a man of Tarsus named Saul, for behold, he is praying, ¹² and he has seen in a vision a man named Ananias come in and lay his hands on him so that he might regain his sight." ¹³ But Ananias answered, "Lord, I have heard from many about this man, how much evil he has done to your saints at Jerusalem. ¹⁴ And here he has authority from the chief priests to bind all who call on your name." ¹⁵ But the Lord said to him, "Go, for he is a chosen instrument of mine to carry my name before the Gentiles and kings and the children of Israel. ¹⁶ For I will show him how much he must suffer for the sake of my name." Acts 9:10–16 (ESV)

Ananias had serious concerns about what God had asked him to do. He knew what Saul had come to do and he was concerned for his own safety. But God had already taken care of Saul's hostility and had replaced it with a spirit of submission. Ananias could not imagine why God was interested in helping this man who had done so much damage to the cause of Jesus. If it had been left to Ananias, he would have just left Saul alone in his blind condition. We need to always be in touch with what God is trying to accomplish and not try to implement our own agenda.

We need to be obedient to the leading of the Holy Spirit as God does His work through us. As Ananias found, our judgment of whom God can use might be faulty. God had plans to do great things through Saul of Tarsus. God saw the potential in this man and we must view people through the eyes of God and the great potential they can have once they have surrendered their wills to the will of God.

Saul's conversion did not diminish his zeal; however, that zeal would come under the direction of the Holy Spirit. God can use people who are involved and take initiative and want to make a difference with the life and opportunities God has given them.