

In chapter 9, Luke recorded an event that is central to the theme of the entire book of Acts, the conversion of Saul. Saul was the Pharisee of Pharisees. In his zeal, he did everything he could do to destroy the church and the gospel of Jesus Christ. He gave approval of Stephen's murder, and breathed out murderous threats against the other believers. He went from house to house to drag Christians to jail. Saul went to great lengths to be able to travel to Damascus and arrest the believers who fled there.

Everything changed when Saul had a personal encounter with the risen Lord, Jesus Christ, on the road to Damascus. The glory of the Lord blinded Saul, leaving him physically helpless. From the midst of the light the voice of the Lord cried out, "Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?" Humbled and broken, Saul listened to the Lord's instructions to go to Damascus where he met a man named Ananias who told him what he must do. In that encounter, God healed Saul physically and spiritually, and made clear His will for Saul's life.

In our passage this evening we will read about how Saul responded to God's call upon his life, and hopefully, we will gain some insights about how to answer God's call upon our lives as well. (Read Acts 9:19b-31.)

Notice that the first thing Saul did, when he began his personal faith relationship with the Lord, was to join with the disciples in Damascus. Saul was a highly educated man, a quick learner, and an expert on the word of God. He was gifted as a leader and had great potential for success in whatever he set his mind to do, but at this stage of his life, he had many questions. He needed further instruction as to how the Old Testament Scriptures concerning the Messiah had been fulfilled in Jesus Christ. He needed a fuller understanding of the gospel, and the application of Christian faith. There was no better place for him to learn, and grow, than the local church in Damascus.

Over the years I have had many people tell me that they do not need to go to church in order to be saved. That is a true statement, but it is very hard for a believer to grow in their relationship with the Lord, and to involve themselves in productive ministries apart from the church. The church is the body of Christ. It is God's gift to believers, and people who profess Christ, but choose not to attend church, miss out on so much of what the Lord desires to do in their lives.

Saul not only joined himself with other believers, he also began immediately to preach that Jesus is the Son of God, in the synagogues. Saul went first to the people with whom he had an audience. His reputation preceded him so that he would be welcomed to speak in the local assemblies of worship, but they could not believe their ears when Saul preached the gospel.

I understand that the people that we are closest to can be the hardest to reach. On the other hand, we have greater opportunities to share the gospel with the people that we have relationships with, than we will have with strangers. Those who know us the best may be confounded by the change Jesus makes in our lives, just as the Jews in Damascus were confounded about the change in Saul, but they need to hear the gospel.

Was Saul's witness effective? There is no indication in the scripture that his witness resulted in mass conversions of the Jews. Maybe he convinced some, maybe not. Perhaps he planted seeds of faith, and got them at least thinking about the possibility that Jesus was their Messiah, and the Savior of the world. The Scripture does tell us that after many days passed, the Jews in Damascus plotted to kill him.

Here we see the continued opposition of the Jewish leaders to the gospel of Jesus Christ. Saul, who once had his heart set on killing Christians, now became the object of Jewish hatred. His life was at risk. The bible says that Saul found out about their plot, and was able to avoid the danger they posed, as they lay in wait for him night and day.

When we share our faith today, there is no guarantee that the people we try to reach will respond positively. My experience has been that only a small percentage of people that I have witnessed to have, in that encounter, come to saving faith in Jesus Christ. Over time, with consistency, God may use our personal witness to move the hearts of the people we love. We cannot save anyone. God alone saves, but we are to be his witnesses no matter what circumstances we have to face.

Notice also that Saul became aware of the plot against him, so that he was able to avoid the threats upon his life. Often when there is threat against a witness for Christ, if our hearts are right, God gives us discernment, so that we are able to avoid the danger. Many times God reveals, to the pastoral staff, a threat to our church, so that we are able to take action to avoid a potential problem. In my personal walk with the Lord, God gives me discernment, or convicts me to change my course, in order for me to avoid circumstances that might hinder my ministry.

God had a greater plan for Saul's life, and so long as Saul remained committed to God's will, and sensitive to the Holy Spirit, he lived under the umbrella of God's protection, until his work was complete. The same is true for us. We have to be smart. We have to use the discernment of the Holy Spirit. We cannot open ourselves to situations that might disqualify us from ministry, but if our hearts are right before the Lord, he protects us until He has fulfilled His purpose in our lives.

The threat was so great against Saul that his disciples took him by night, and let him down through an opening in the wall, lowering him in a basket. Notice that by this time, Saul had disciples. People were starting to follow his teaching about Jesus. He had become the leader among a group of believers who comprised a local church. When their pastor was in trouble, they came to his rescue. This should be the attitude of all the people in the church today, not just toward their pastors, but we look out for the well being of all of our brothers and sisters in Christ.

It seems ironic to me that Saul fled the persecution in Damascus, and went straight to Jerusalem where the persecution against the gospel began, and where it was still the greatest. When he arrived in Jerusalem, he tried to join the Apostles, which makes perfect sense. But the Apostles were afraid of him, thinking that he was not a true believer, but worried that he planned to infiltrate, and destroy them. So, at this time, the believers, as well as non-believers, rejected Saul.

You cannot fault the Apostles for their skepticism. They did not know if Saul's faith was real or not. In the same way there is a tension whenever new people desire to join a local church. We must be open and accepting of anyone who professes genuine faith in Jesus Christ, but on the other hand we must protect the body from people with ulterior motives.

In our church, one tool we use is the Discovery Class, which I teach on Sunday mornings. In this class we go over what we believe, why we believe it, and how we do church. During the six-week course, prospective members have an opportunity to discover who we are, and hopefully will discern if it is God's will that they join with this body of believers. It also gives us a chance to discern their hearts, and to see if they are of like faith. Not everyone who attends the Discovery Class completes the course, but most of the people who do, wind up becoming members.

At this point the scripture introduces us to a man named Barnabas. Barnabas means son of encouragement. This is the first of many times in the book of Acts that we see Barnabas used of God to direct Saul's life and ministry. Apparently he came to know Saul during his time in Damascus, and stood up for him. He formally introduced Saul to the local church in Jerusalem, and testified about Saul's personal encounter with the risen Lord. He explained to them how faith in Jesus changed his life, and that he was an eyewitness to the fact that Saul became a preacher of the gospel.

The bible does not tell us specifically, but implies that the Apostles, and the church, accepted Barnabas's testimony, and they received Saul as a fellow believer. At this point Saul does what we will see him do throughout the book of Acts. Everywhere he went, Saul boldly preached in the name of the Lord, and everywhere he preached, he faced danger and grave opposition.

The bible says that his preaching opposed the Hellenists, and their beliefs. The Hellenists were Jews, and a faction of the Pharisees, who accepted Greek culture and philosophy. They are the same group that opposed Stephen, and were directly responsible for his death. Earlier in Acts, Saul and the Hellenists were on the same side, now they were at complete odds with each other.

Just as He did in Damascus, God delivered Saul from danger using the people in the church to affect his escape. They snuck Saul out of town, took him to Caesarea, and from that city, sent him off to his hometown of Tarsus. We do not hear of Saul again until chapter eleven where, years later, we read that Barnabas invests himself in ministry at Antioch, and then goes to Tarsus to get Saul to help him in that ministry.

While the bible does not say it, we can be certain from context that Saul continued to preach the gospel and share his faith in Tarsus, and the surrounding areas. Saul shared the gospel everywhere he went, and thus he becomes an excellent role model for all Christians today. Before his first missionary journey, and before he penned his first inspired scripture, Saul was faithful right where he was. He continually witnessed and ministered in Jesus name. After many years of faithfully serving the Lord, God used him in the powerful ways that will read about in the later chapters of the book of Acts.

Saul did not know that he would become the great Apostle Paul; he just loved Jesus with all of his heart, and committed his life to His Lordship. In the same manner, we don't know what God may have in store for our future, or how He might choose to use us in the days ahead. If we did, it probably would scare us to death. The truth is that when we faithfully serve the Lord right where we are, He is in the process of growing, maturing, and preparing us for His will in the days ahead. Only through disobedience and unfaithfulness will we disqualify ourselves from future service. Through complete submission to the Lordship of Jesus Christ, He can do God-sized things in us, and through us.

In verse 31, we read that after the church sent Saul away, it enjoyed a season of peace. It was being built up in the fear of the Lord and the comfort of the Holy Spirit, and people everywhere in the region turned to faith in Jesus Christ. As a pastor, I have come to approach the Lord with great thanksgiving whenever the church enjoys a season of peace. From time to time the devil raises his ugly head and threatens the church, and its people. We have to face spiritual challenges, and sometimes we have to take strong stands in order to stay in the center of God's will. Almost always, when the storm passes, God gives us a season of peace.

It is a time when we can heal, and grow in our relationship with the Lord. It is a time when we reflect on God's goodness, and look back and see how His hand worked in our lives

and circumstances. It is a time when we can testify to others as to God's goodness and His power in our lives. Then, when the next crisis arises, we are better prepared to meet the challenge.

Paul's life gives us a picture of the Christian life today. Our own experiences may not be as dramatic, but a walk with Christ will include a series of challenges and victories. In the midst of the circumstances of life, we experience the presence and power of God, and become a part of something greater than ourselves. If you are a born again Christian, embrace everything that God has for you. If you have not come to saving faith in Jesus Christ, even now God calls you to repentance and faith. Won't you respond to Him while he speaks to your heart?