

After the Jews killed Stephen, a great persecution broke out against the church. The ringleader in this persecution was a man named Saul. Saul approved of Stephen's murder, went from house to house arresting people who had professed Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior, and acquired written authority to go to Damascus to arrest the believers who fled to that city.

Saul was a Pharisee who was zealous for fundamental, legalistic Judaism. Christianity challenged his belief system. It stood opposed to the convictions of his faith. With everything that was within him, Saul set out to stamp out the gospel of Jesus Christ by persecuting everyone who professed faith in Him.

Saul felt that he was justified in his opposition. He believed he was doing God's will, until he had a personal encounter with the risen Lord, Jesus Christ. On his way to Damascus, the glory of God blinded Him, and a voice from heaven cried out, "Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?" "Who are you Lord?" Saul asked. "I am Jesus whom you are persecuting." Jesus told Saul to continue on to Damascus and that he would be told what to do.

God humbled this bold zealot, and reduced him physically and spiritually. Broken and helpless, Saul had to be led by the hand into Damascus, where he fasted and prayed, awaiting a word from the Lord. In tonight's passage we gain additional insights into understanding God's will for individuals, as the scriptures introduce us to a man named Ananias. Let us see how God works by observing the interaction between God, Ananias, and Saul in Acts 9:10-19.

In our previous passage Jesus appeared to Saul, a non-believer, and in this passage He appears to Ananias, who was already a disciple of Christ. The result of Saul's encounter with the Lord left him broken and helpless. In Ananias' encounter, the Lord revealed Himself personally, told Ananias what to do, then encouraged and empowered Him to carry out His will.

Both men had a vision. Saul, at first, did not know whom it was that spoke to Him, but there was not doubt in Ananias' mind that it was Jesus that spoke to him, so he answered, "Here I am Lord." Just as Ananias recognized Jesus, voice when He called, it is important for us to be able to recognize the Lord's voice when He calls.

Sometimes people miss the Lord's call, and sometimes they convince themselves of God's call when He hasn't called them at all. People enter the ministry for many reasons. During the Viet Nam era, many went to seminary to avoid the draft, and I fear that the church has been made weaker today because of pastors, preachers, and ministry leaders who serve but were never called by God. People sometimes fantasize how wonderful ministry must be, or they are sick of their job, and think of ministry as meaningful vocation without hearing God's call upon their life. Still others understand God's call upon their life, but they run from it because the cares of this world, or the desires of their flesh overpower them.

The question we have to ask is, "How do I know if God is calling me into vocational ministry or not? When the Lord called me, I went to my pastor, Bro. Carl, and I told him that I thought that the Lord was calling me into the ministry. He tried to talk me out of pursuing ministry, because he understood that without God's true calling, I was destined to fail. So he asked me, "Is there anything else I could do to support my family?" After a moment's reflection, I answered no.

The common thread between my call into ministry, Paul's call into ministry, and Ananias' calling to what seemed to be a very dangerous task, was that it was unmistakable that the Lord spoke directly to our hearts to reveal His will. In my case, I had not dreamed of

becoming a preacher, but I knew that I could do nothing else, if I wanted to be in the center of God's will.

Up until the time of my calling into ministry, I tried to walk in the center of God's will, the best I could, without having such a dramatic experience. I found God's will for my life by being open to whatever God wanted me to do. I looked for doors of opportunity for service. I asked the Lord make His will clear to me. Unless He stopped me, I walked through those doors and invested myself. This is how I grew in my relationship with the Lord, so that when He called, I knew that I knew what to do.

God's call upon my life was specific. He said, "Go to New Orleans to prepare yourself." I knew in my heart everything that meant and implied. God's call on Paul's life was specific, and God's call to Ananias was specific. He was to go and lay his hands on Saul that he might receive his sight, and tell him what God wanted him to do.

When God calls, it can be pretty scary. Saul was afraid because his encounter with Jesus left him a blinded and broken man. Ananias feared for his life, because of Saul's reputation for persecuting Christians. I feared that to answer God's call would turn my life upside down, and it did. To go to seminary meant I would have to quit my job, and Debby and I would go from two incomes to one, and take on the added expenses of a seminary education. I never was a good student in school, and did not believe that I was up to the task, but when God clearly reveals Himself and His will, we really have no other option, if we hope to continue to grow and mature in our faith, so that we can be useful and productive in the years to come.

To answer God's call we must take a step of faith. If we are going to be a part of what God is doing, we must be obedient to His revealed will, no matter what doubts we might have, or what obstacles the devil might throw in our way. Saul, who was also known as Paul, went to Damascus where he fasted and prayed until God further revealed His will. Ananias overcame his fear and he went to Saul, and laid his hand on him so that he could receive the Holy Spirit. Against all odds, I went seminary to prepare myself. In every case, God worked it all out, as He always does when we are obedient to His revealed will.

From this we can see how important it is for us to recognize the Lord's voice when He calls, and then follow in obedience. If we enter a ministry where God has not called, we might find ourselves working against God. We resist God's will and become counter-productive to what God is doing, but when each one of us does his or her part, according to God's revealed will, God goes before us, and works all things according to His purpose.

The scriptures are silent about Ananias after this account, but him going to Paul was an important part of God's plan. As far as we know, Ananias was not used of God as dramatically as Paul, but that is not important. What is important is that he did what God called him to do.

Over the years, well-meaning people, usually newer folks, in our church, have approached me, and said things like; I should be pastoring a church myself, rather than serving here as an associate pastor. Please hear my heart on this. I have no ambition apart from God's revealed will for my life. With all my heart, I believe I am right where God wants me to be, and am doing exactly what He wants me to do. If God wants me to go somewhere else in the future, I am positive that He will reveal His will to me an unmistakable way. Until then, I am content and happy in the knowledge that I am living and serving in the center of God's will. It is important that we do not fail to answer God's call, and fall behind His will, but it is equally important that we do not jump ahead of God, and step outside of His will.

When I was in seminary, I had several of my fellow students confide in me that they once had their dream ministry in a church where God was powerfully at work, only to see their

ministries dissipate when they succumb to the temptation of the bigger better deal. A bigger church and more money is tempting to the flesh, but these things are a trap of the devil if they are not accompanied by God's calling. Not every opportunity is a calling from God, but every call comes with great opportunities.

In our church, there are many opportunities for ministry. They are all important. Every member of our church can find meaning and purpose by finding his or her place of ministry. Sometimes there is a need, and God will speak to your heart, that this is something that you can do in the background to support other ministries in the church. But when opportunities arise that carry greater responsibilities, and more visibility, we must ask ourselves, in the light of the Holy Spirit, do I want to be a part of this ministry to be seen by others, or am I taking a step of faith in obedience to the Lord's revealed will.

Church members generally respect and admire godly ministry leaders, but we do not engage in ministry to build ourselves up in the eyes of others. Everything we do is to lift up the name of Jesus. Notice in verses 14, 15, and 16, there is an emphasis on the name of Christ. If you call yourself a Christian, you bear the name of Christ. When called to a ministry, we serve as a representative of Jesus Christ. We do not act under your own authority; rather we serve under His authority. We do not serve in ministry so that people will see us, we serve so that others will see Christ in us, and through the things we do, and say.

In verse 15, the Lord revealed His will for Saul, "Go, for he is a chosen instrument of mine to carry my name before the Gentiles, kings, and the children of Israel." We know that a major part of God's calling upon Paul's life was that he was to be an Apostle to the gentiles, but here we see that while his ministry would emphasize Gentiles, Paul would be a witness to all people. Later in Acts we will see Paul witnessing to Felix, Festus, King Herod Agrippa, to the Emperor's household, and probably to Nero himself before he had Paul beheaded. We also learn that in every town where Paul invested himself in ministry, he reached out to the Jews in the Synagogues of that city first. The lesson for us today is that no matter what our individual calling may be, we are all called to be the Lord's witnesses, and we are to openly share our faith with all the people that God may send our way.

Ananias overcame his fear, and with the Lord's help, he went to Saul, just as the Lord commanded. There he explained God's will, and laid his hands on Saul so that he could receive the Holy Spirit. Already we have seen the Holy Spirit come at Pentecost on those who were already Jesus' disciples. The Holy Spirit then came on those who trusted Jesus as a result of the Apostle's testimony. The gospel then spread to Judea, Samaria, to the Ethiopian eunuch, and now we see that Jesus died for even the hardliner Jews who persecuted the church.

I believe that it was important for Saul to receive the Holy Spirit through the laying on of hands, so that Ananias could be a witness to the fact that Saul was really saved, and not a spy who was still bent upon destroying the church. The presence of the Holy Spirit was essential to Saul's spiritual growth, and for preparation and empowerment for the ministry that lay before him. As Saul was filled with the Holy Spirit, we too should seek to be filled with the Holy Spirit as we take our steps of faith to fulfill God's revealed will for our lives.

With the reception of the Holy Spirit, Saul received healing from his blindness, and was baptized. He followed the Lord in believer's baptism to identify with the Lord, and with the body of Christ and then he ate in order to regain his strength. Remember that he had been fasting for three days, praying that God would reveal His will. When God answered, he ate, to regain his strength, and to ready himself for ministry.

In the passage to follow, we see Paul immediately began to preach in Jesus' name. When God clearly reveals His will to us, it is time to go to work. It is time to take that first step of faith. It is time to become the people God has called us to be. He brings new meaning and purpose to our lives. He empowers us with His Holy Spirit, and expects us to go and do what He has commanded.

The journey of the discovery of God's will for our lives must begin with the understanding of God's will for every person's life. God wishes that none should perish, but that everyone should come to Jesus in repentance and faith so that they might be saved. Jesus was God in the flesh. He came to offer His own life as a sacrifice for our sins. Through repentance and faith God forgives us of our sins, seals us with His Holy Spirit, and gives us eternal life. He brings new meaning and purpose to our lives. As we discover His will we are able to live in the blessings of His grace, and share His love with others. If there are any here who want to accept Christ as your personal Lord and Savior, please come and talk with me right after we dismiss.