

AN APOSTLE'S APPRENTICESHIP

SERIES: GOD'S SERVANTS IN THE WORLD

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Acts 9:19-31 is the story of the first three years of the apostle Paul's Christian life. We also gain information about these early years in his letters and in a speech farther on in the book of Acts. We'll include these other texts as well as Acts 9 in our study. (In chapter 9 he is called by his given name, Saul, which was later changed to Paul. But for simplicity I'll refer to him as Paul throughout this message.)

At the end of 2 Corinthians Paul mentions his time in Damascus. This passage reads a bit like a résumé. He is attempting to articulate the qualifications that would make him a worthy leader for the church in Corinth, in the midst of an argument against some very dangerous, phony, self-promoting spiritual leaders. He is arguing that the Corinthians should turn away from them and listen to him. Here are some of the things he includes on his résumé: imprisoned, flogged, shipwrecked, lonely, mugged, poor, isolated, and left for dead. At the crescendo of his argument he says this:

"If I have to boast, I will boast of what pertains to my weakness. The God and Father of the Lord Jesus, He who is blessed forever, knows that I am not lying. In Damascus the ethnarch under Aretas the king was guarding the city of the Damascenes in order to seize me, and I was let down in a basket through a window in the wall, and so escaped his hands." (2 Corinthians 11:30-33)

As Paul reflected back, this particular experience was humiliating to him in a way that taught him an important lesson that would characterize his maturity and his effectiveness for the rest of his life: "I will boast of what pertains to my weakness."

Paul's conversion in the first half of chapter 9 is a story that turns on the theme of blindness. He was blind to his godlessness before his conversion. He was struck blind by a light from heaven, and in his coming to faith, the scales fell from his eyes and he was allowed to see.

The text we're about to read now has weakness as its major lesson. What do we learn about weakness that can turn to strength in God's hands? Acts 9:19b-31:

Now for several days he was with the disciples who were at Damascus, and immediately he began to proclaim Jesus in the synagogues, saying, "He is the Son of God." And all those hearing him continued to be amazed, and were saying, "Is this not he who in Jerusalem destroyed those who called on this name, and who had come here for the purpose of bringing them bound before the chief priests?" But Saul kept increasing in strength and confounding the Jews who lived at Damascus by proving that this Jesus is the Christ.

And when many days had elapsed, the Jews plotted together to do away with him, but their plot became known to Saul. And they were also watching the gates day and night so that they might put him to death; but his disciples took him by night, and let him down through an opening in the wall, lowering him in a large basket.

And when he had come to Jerusalem, he was trying to associate with the disciples; but they were all afraid of him, not believing that he was a disciple. But Barnabas took hold of him and brought him to the apostles and described to them how he had seen the Lord on the road, and that He had talked to him, and how at Damascus he had spoken out boldly in the name of Jesus. And he was with them moving about freely in Jerusalem, speaking out boldly in the name of the Lord. And he was talking and arguing with the Hellenistic Jews; but they were attempting to put him to death. But when the brethren learned of it, they brought him down to Caesarea and sent him away to Tarsus. So the church throughout all Judea and Galilee and Samaria enjoyed peace, being built up; and going on in the fear of the Lord and in the comfort of the Holy Spirit, it continued to increase.

Beginning to proclaim Jesus

These events actually took place over a period of three years (Galatians 1:11-18). During most of this time Paul was alone in Arabia (Galatians 1:16-17). The northern edge of the Arabian empire was just opposite Damascus, not far away, but it was a wilderness. Paul had begun to aggressively name the Lord, and though it is not clear in Luke's writing here, the best interpretation of what took place is that he realized he didn't know enough. He could say Jesus

was Lord, but he wanted to understand the implications. So he gathered up his copies of Scripture, perhaps commentaries and other things, and went away to the desert. There he was met there by the risen Lord Jesus. This is somewhat speculative, but Paul argues forcefully that he was made an apostle by the direct intervention of Christ, that no one else except Christ taught him the things he learned (Galatians 1:11-12). The familiar and frequently used text for the communion service is Paul's statement in 1 Corinthians 11:23: "*I received from the Lord* that which I also delivered to you, that the Lord Jesus in the night in which he was betrayed..." (italics mine). Paul was not in the upper room. He argues that he was not taught of its events by anyone else, but he received from the Lord what happened that night. As the other apostles had spent most of three years with Jesus, walking in Galilee and Judea, Paul spent most of three years in his tutelage alone in the desert.

Then he returned to Damascus, and with these new insights he began to preach, proving that Jesus was the Christ. His arguments were sharper, his insights greater. His ability to see Christ in every text of the Old Testament was more profound, and so he was winning arguments, defeating anybody who would stand up against him. But all that served to do was enrage those who argued with him, to the point that they plotted to put him to death. He had to be lowered out of the city in a basket to save his life. At this time Paul headed back to Jerusalem (having left that city as a persecutor of Christians before his conversion) after "many days had elapsed." This reference includes his time in the wilderness as well as the days before and after in Damascus.

Paul spent only fifteen days in Jerusalem, as we learn from Galatians 1:18. Once again he preached fervently, stirred up trouble, and was invited by his new friends to leave. So he traveled to Tarsus, his hometown. We know from Galatians that ten more years elapsed before he entered the story again as a mature servant of God.

Acts 22:21 tells us that during the time that Paul spent in Jerusalem, Jesus appeared to him once again and told him he was not to focus his ministry on Jews, "for I will send you far away to the Gentiles."

Now that we have in view the events that took place, let's come back to our central question: how did this experience make Paul understand weakness in a way that made him a man of faith, and how can we learn that lesson as well? Why did Paul label the experience in Damascus as weakness? It's a strong word in Greek that means feebleness, infirmity, or sickness.

Weakness that leads to faith

Paul can't have labeled this experience weakness because his preaching was opposed by those who didn't believe. In Acts and every other place in the world, when the gospel is forcefully declared, it stirs up enmity. Peter, John, James, and others in Jerusalem quickly got themselves roundly clapped in jail, ridiculed, and forbidden to speak. Most profoundly of course, Jesus was hated, spat on, and executed by those who rejected what he said. So that is not evidence of inadequacy.

Additionally, we know from Acts and other scriptures that those who are rejected or opposed are sometimes dispersed because of their witness. At the beginning of chapter 8 it says that God scattered believers because they were faithful. In Steven's case it led to his death. Paul's having to leave Damascus also was not evidence of inadequacy or weakness.

When I am aware of my own inadequacy, failure, or feebleness, most often the thing my mind turns to is failure in courage. Perhaps I will be embarrassed, or I am going to suffer being misunderstood, or there will be some resistance, some social discord that will occur. I don't want to live with the consequences of speaking up boldly, so I don't do it. I look back later and feel ashamed in such cases. But that was not Paul's problem. He never once backed down from a fight in Damascus, and rarely ever later. He was not afraid of the consequences. It was not his courage that failed him.

I also too often find another kind of weakness in myself—laziness. I've been at the Christian life long enough that I can fake it, rattle off platitudes to maintain a façade of seriousness or thorough discipleship, when something more is required. But again, that weakness was never Paul's problem. He was passionate to the core day and night, seven days a week, without any personal pampering that he might look back on later as weakness. If anything, he was overwhelming in his thoroughness, in the depth with which he engaged the Scriptures and the energy with which he engaged people in relationships.

What, then, did Paul learn from being let down through the city wall in a basket and sent by himself to Jerusalem? I believe that Paul discovered that fleshly confidence in his training and his intellect were in fact a great weakness. He had not learned dependence on God. He was self-confident, convinced of his own gifts and strengths.

But what's wrong with pride and self-confidence? Just this: our best contributions are completely inadequate. What we have been called to do is far too difficult for what we have to offer. We battle with darkness that comes from hell when we proclaim the Lord Jesus. We are attempting to minister to people who are in bonds so strong that nothing we can do will break them. And if we imagine that we have the wits to take on the lies of the devil and with our clever speech persuade people not to listen, we are fools. If we think our energy and passion can shed light into dark places where people are hurting, we are great fools. What is required is the presence of Jesus. Light comes from the face of Jesus. Hope comes from the words of Jesus. Power comes from the Spirit of Jesus. It is critical for servants of the Lord to realize that whatever strength they bring to bear will get nothing done. We must yield ourselves in order to be made useful to him, to allow him to touch other people through our lives and do what only he can do. He is the only one who is a match for the devil. He is the only light that can dispel the darkness.

Paul won all the arguments in Damascus. No opponent to the gospel was a match for his dynamism, his genius, his energy, his passion, his personal strength. But no one was converted. Paul's strengths created anger and discord and loss of opportunity, until he finally learned to give up and let the Lord use him.

Most new pastors charge out of their training thinking that finally for the first time somebody is going to get it right. They're going to start a church, or go to a church with problems and solve them. They're often convinced that they see things more clearly than the rest. But of course churches have the same sad struggles with these new pastors that they had with others before them.

A few years ago there was a church in the foothills of the Sierras that was being destroyed by anger and division. There was a pitched battle going on over how to divide up property and money and members between them. They asked for help in their negotiations, because they didn't want to go to court. I was asked to help mediate, and Scott Grant went along with me. I remember thinking on the way up how savvy they were to have called on someone like me. I had had such good experiences here at PBC, and I had been disciplined by great men of God, and I had read a lot of books... I was pretty sure that if I were attentive and caring, I could cut to the core of these problems and resolve their difficulties.

We walked in and there were numerous cameras and tape recorders. Both sides were determined to use anything that came out as evidence against the other side. It was a really terrible church schism. In retrospect, I wonder what I thought I had to offer, what great insights they hadn't gotten around to discovering yet. Well, of course, the end of the day came and we left, and they were as bad off as they had been before. The only hope was that somebody in that room would seek Christ, would hear a word of conviction from the Spirit about how ugly and destructive their behavior was. The only hope was that the Lord would do something. But the visiting servant of the Lord who imagined he would achieve peace in a few hours was a fool.

Paul learned that although he had much to offer, it amounted to nothing in the final analysis. Being yielded to Christ is what really brings about change and what passes on life.

There are three things I want to highlight that I think Paul learned during this period and that brought about changes in him later as he reflected back.

Having less self-confidence

First, winning arguments by itself doesn't change lives. Out-dueling the opposition, having a clear answer to every objection raised, and sweeping the field with rhetoric all accomplish nothing, unless there is love, humility, invitation, a sense that you're a recipient as surely as you're a teacher. Paul was a brilliant speaker whose words yielded little evidence of change. In fact, the most telling statement in this text is that when he finally *left* Jerusalem after stirring up trouble there, having already done the same in Damascus, Luke says, "So the church throughout all Judea and Galilee and Samaria enjoyed peace, being built up; and going on in the fear of the Lord and in the comfort of the Holy Spirit, it continued to increase." You can win the verbal battle and lose everything if you're not careful.

The second thing Paul learned at this time was the need for team ministry. When we see Paul return to the story in Acts and begin effective church planting and Bible writing, he will always minister with a team. (There is an exception in Athens, but it's forced upon him by circumstances.) He will never again plan to minister on his own. No matter how gifted an individual is, nobody has all the gifts. We need to have folks who are different from us, wise in different ways, who can contribute things we can't. We need to combat problems together in order for any good to happen.

The third thing Paul learned was that he didn't know the arena best suited to him. He was sure that with his rabbinical training he would be the ideal man to win the Jews. But when Jesus appeared to him in a vision during these days in Jerusalem, he said, "No, you will go to the Gentiles." Paul learned that the assumptions we make and the conclusions we draw from our experience, as if we were smart enough, may be wrongheaded. We don't naturally know what we are best for. We don't know what constellation of things God is going to take out of our experience and use to fit us for ministry. We all have a place to serve, but we don't know what it is until we are dependent enough to listen.

There are two stories in the remainder of chapter 9 that we will not take the time to read. They are the stories of two ordinary people, a man named Aeneas in Lydda and a woman named Tabitha in Joppa. These are not prominent, talkative people. They both experience suffering. Both are used to lead others to Christ. Paul won the arguments in Damascus and Jerusalem without bringing anyone to faith. Aeneas' and Tabitha's stories both reinforce the lesson of dependence on the Spirit instead of the flesh.

Paul now leaves the stage. Until we get to chapter 13 we are going to find very little reference to him. In chapter 13 Paul returns and will dominate the rest of the teaching of Acts to the end. For ten years he will live in his hometown, perhaps teaching Bible studies, learning, listening, growing, working through his brokenness, and being made ready for something great that is yet to come.

There are people who never learn that self-confidence is not real strength. They never learn it because they are afraid to risk failure, because their love for the Lord has never been strong enough for that. They've never done something badly and learned from the experience. The first disciples, with Peter as their champion, were too impressed with themselves. You see Peter at the end of Jesus' life vowing, "I'll never leave you, you can count on me," raising his sword in the air, chopping off a servant's ear. He had to go through the terrible discovery that he wasn't who he thought he was. There really is no other way to learn than to go forward and expect that God will teach you what you need to learn along the way, including lessons about yourself.

In 2 Corinthians 12:9b-10 Paul writes this:

"Most gladly, therefore, I will rather boast about my weaknesses, that the power of Christ may dwell in me...when I am weak, then I am strong."

This is the kind of man or woman we ought to invite into spiritual leadership. This is the one whose resume ought to attract us.

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