

Let's open our Bibles tonight to Acts 9:17.

Acts is the report from the Lord of the first thirty years of church history. We have approached it with two main questions. The first question is - what kind of church does God want us to be? Because if you go as close to the beginning as you can, you find the purest form of what God would intend. Second of all - what kind of people would God use? And certainly the Bible is filled with examples of (and this book in particular) those whom God raised up. And I think if you'll read it carefully, you'll find that God'll use anyone that's willing and that's available.

To quickly review chapters 6, 7, 8, and 9 through verse 16 (where we ended last time I was with you), we looked at Stephen's ministry beginnings as a man who was sent to feed some widows. We looked at how the Lord raised him up as he began to speak. He eventually stood before the governing body in Israel - the Sanhedrin - to defend his faith in Christ. It led them to murder him. As a result of his death (and there's a fellow named Saul that stood, approving of their illegal action, violently so), the church was driven out of Jerusalem. Jesus had said, back in chapter 1:8, "I want you to be My witnesses throughout the world, beginning here." But really no one had moved - they were very comfortable where they were at, and so God used this persecution to drive the church to where God wanted them to be next. As Saul (for a minute) disappears from the scene, and as the Diaspora (the dispersion) began, God showed us one of the other seven men who had been chosen to be deacon - a guy named Philip. He didn't go south; he went north to Samaria. He went to minister to a bunch of people that were half-Jewish, half-anything else. He was a Hellenist man, which means that he grew up with Greek practices though he was a Jew, which would have made, I think, the transition for him to be around those kinds of folks easier. He ministered there. There was a great revival. The apostles in Jerusalem actually sent some help to him as God began to save folks and deliver them from a sorcerer who was running the town. And, in the midst of that revival, God spoke to Philip's heart and said, "I want you to go south, down to the Sinai, towards Gaza." And, without question, Philip went; and we talked about - how do you hear God's voice? How do you know what God wants for your life? And we talked about that in terms of Philip's experience. He finally gets to the middle of nowhere. He is directed by the Lord to join himself to a chariot of a man that was

a big shot, who had come from Ethiopia. He had come hunting down the God of Israel. He was hungry, and reading his Bible didn't get the answers he needed at the Feast Day in Jerusalem. But God sent Philip to meet him in the middle of nowhere. He shared the Lord with him. He got saved. He disappears, takes the gospel to home, if you will. He's really the first Gentile missionary before, really, the Gentiles are officially reached, if you will, in our reporting from Luke. Philip heads back home towards the Gaza strip, down in that area. We will run into him, actually, in a few years (not really that long) - chapter 20 we'll run into him again.

Which then led us to chapter 9, where God speaks to us about this fellow, Saul. He is on his way to Damascus. He's there with orders to kill, to arrest, to persecute. He has done it before. He's well known for it. People are terrified of him. But the Lord, in the middle of the day (at high noon) outside on the streets leading into Damascus, God confronts him. He has a meeting with Jesus he hadn't planned, and he is struck blind by the light shining in his eyes. The Lord asks him why he has been persecuting Him. Saul says, "Who are You, Lord, that I might serve You?" He said, "I'm Jesus." And with that, Saul is directed to go into the city, where he is led by some friends, and he goes to a friend's house, where he sits for three days. He doesn't want to eat, he doesn't want to drink. He just is waiting; he's having to live with himself. In light of what he has now heard and what he now realizes, he was on the wrong side of everything when it came to Jesus.

Last time, in verses 10 through 16, we then looked at God directing a young man named Ananias towards the house of a fellow named Judas, who lived on a street called Straight in the city of Damascus. And the Lord said to him, "I want you to go lay your hands on a murderer. I want you to pray for him that his eyesight would be restored. He's praying to Me." And Ananias, as you might surmise, was more than a little hesitant to go. He said, "No so, Lord. You know about this guy, don't You? You realize he kills folks. In fact, if he's blind, my prayers have been answered. If he dies, the rest of our prayers would be answered." And so he expresses his concern to the Lord in no uncertain terms, but he knows that God's speaking to him. And we read (in verse 15) God's answer to him was, "You just go." And there's really one word of command, "Go," and then some explanation as to what God has planned for this man about him being a chosen vessel for the Lord before the kings and the Gentiles and the children of Israel and how much he's going to have to pay or suffer in the meantime.

Well, tonight we want to pick up the story, down through verse 31, as Ananias (in Damascus) makes what had to be the longest walk of his life - by faith - across town. I tried to put myself in this young man's shoes. Verse 17 just says, "And Ananias went his way." There's really no other explanation. The Lord said, "Go," and he said, "Oh, Lord," and the Lord said, "Go," and so he went. He obeyed the Lord, though I'm sure in his heart and in his mind this had to be the toughest way to go. But here's another guy. He's like Stephen. He's like Philip. He's not an apostle. He's not an early-church father or leader. He is an ordinary brother who has gotten saved, and he lives ninety miles away from Jerusalem. So he was there, but he has really nothing else of qualifying interest, if you will, except that he had come to know the Lord.

If you ask yourself - what kind of people does God use? - the answer is ordinary people. James, in chapter 5 of his little letter, said, "Elijah was a man with a nature like ours, and he prayed earnestly that it would not rain; and it did not rain on the land for three years and six months. And he prayed again, and the heaven gave rain, and the earth produced its fruit" (verses 17-18). But the emphasis was Elijah wasn't a special guy; he was just a man who loved God. And I would say to you tonight - if you want God to use you, as long as you know Him, He can use you. You qualify by knowing Him. I'm glad that the work of God requires His power, not my own. If it is my power, then I may not be qualified. If it is His power in the lives of His people, then we're all qualified, and there really is no excuse, "Well I can't, I should..." Well, no. We know you can't. We know you're not qualified. We know you don't have what it takes. And God would like to use you anyway. That's the lesson. The problem is not that God is unable to use us but oftentimes that we're just not open to His leading.

Ananias hesitated. "I don't want to go. You don't know the story." And the Lord said, "You go." Rather than saying (the next time you run into something), "Let's call a pastor," why don't you just let the Lord use you? You can lay hands on someone who's sick. You can share your faith with what God has given to you. You can speak for Jesus. You can reach for His Word. You can depend upon the Holy Spirit. Look Ananias, in this little picture here, just shows up and he disappears, but he's stretched to the max. Right? There's no further way that we can stretch this guy. He goes from obscurity - nobody's ever heard of him - to being the guy that is now sent to confront or to minister to the most hated enemy of the church, the guy who could hurt you more than anyone had and would. And yet the Lord said, "Go," and so he went.

Amos was not a prophet, wasn't the son of a prophet. His dad picked food off of sycamore trees. That was his qualification. And yet God chose him to be a prophet. Elisha was a humble guy that was just plowing the fields when Elijah came and threw his mantle of ministry over his shoulders. David was a shepherd boy who nobody would even bring in to interview in terms of, "You got anybody else left in your family?" "Just this stinking kid out back, the ruddy one, the red-headed one, the smelly one. He smells like the sheep." And Samuel had to literally beg them to bring him in. And yet that's the guy that God chose.

So, don't allow humble beginnings or your lack of experience to keep you from being available. Just maintain a willingness to go. Just go to verse 15 where the Lord said, "Go." That's all that He required - obedience to go. Laboring is easier when you begin to listen to the Holy Spirit and you let God direct you. So, "God, send me someone I can pray for. Send me someone that I can share with, someone I can welcome." I would say to you - before you run off tonight to go to your car, look around and see if somebody doesn't need a prayer or two or an encouragement. Yeah, you might not be the first one out the driveway, and maybe that'll break your streak, but it'll be worth it. God can't use you until you go. I've always been amazed in ministry that we get to talk about the most wonderful things that God does, and I thought, "What if we hadn't gone? What if we hadn't said anything? What if we hadn't opened our mouth? What if we hadn't tried?" You can never discover what God wants to do until you go.

So here's a young guy who's going. He's not excited about it. He complained. I always remember that verse that Jesus said to Nicodemus in John 3:8 when He said, "The wind blows where it wishes, and you can hear the sound of it, but cannot tell where it comes from and where it goes. So is everyone who is born of the Spirit." So there's just a willingness. Sometimes you don't get the picture of the whole thing, but God gives you the direction. So here goes Ananias. He's obeying the leading of the Lord. He's going to pray for a former terrorist. He goes by faith. He goes trembling. I suspect - I don't know, the Bible doesn't say, but I have a great imagination - if I was him, I'd knock really softly, hoping no one heard it. (Pastor Jack makes a soft knocking sound and whispers), "I can come back later if you want."

The next part of verse 17 says he "entered the house." He went his way, and he entered the house, and there sits Saul, and he says this to him, " 'Brother Saul,' "as he lays his hand upon him, " 'the Lord Jesus, who appeared to you on the road as

you came, has sent me that you may receive your sight and be filled with the Holy Spirit.' Immediately there fell from his eyes something like scales, and he received his sight at once; and he arose and was baptized." I have to believe that the first words that Saul heard - after three days of sitting in the dark - must have been music to his ears. He didn't hear, "God's gonna kill you" or, "You loser!" He hears this, "Brother Saul." "I'm to be accepted in the body of Christ as a brother in the Lord." And Ananias confirms what Saul had been shown by the Lord as he sat, praying. Someone was coming to pray for him, to lay his hands upon him, to see him baptized in the Holy Spirit. Saved on the road three days earlier, now Saul is healed by the prayers of a young man who's faithful. His eyes opened "immediately" and "at once." It's interesting the Lord would use two words like that in verse 18, focusing, I'm sure, on the smiling face of a very, I think, fearful looking, faithful saint. I'm sure Ananias, "Don't kill me." Right?

And he, notice, arises, and he gets baptized. People sometimes ask - how important is baptism? I think it's important. It's not important to your salvation, mind you. Saul was already saved. He called Jesus, "Lord," and did what he was told. But it's important to your identification. In fact, early on the church understood that baptism was an outward pledge of allegiance to Jesus. "We belong to His group." It's like putting on the uniform, putting on the Christian cap. "He's greater than I." So Saul is baptized in water, he receives the outpouring of the Holy Spirit - both of them taking place after his new birth. Baptism without conversion is nonsense. The Lord isn't going to pour out His Holy Spirit upon you if He doesn't live within you. And so Saul is met right where the Lord has set him.

And verse 19 says, "So when he had received food, he was strengthened. Then Saul spent some days with the disciples of Damascus." So, in fellowship. Must have been quite a time. I can't even imagine how the church - fortunately the church was pretty far away from Saul, maybe they stayed away from his anger. He was only there (maybe) for the first time, so they didn't have the kind of hatred that the church in Jerusalem might have had for Saul. But in any event, he's accepted into the fellowship. He hangs around with some guys. Sweet days. God's good. Encouraging.

Verse 20, "Immediately he preached the Christ in the synagogues, that He is the Son of God." New heart, new understanding - brought about by his conversion and the indwelling of the Holy Spirit - immediately moved Saul (like most of us) to make up for lost time. I think I was saved twelve hours before I set my mom and

dad down and told them I knew how they could go to heaven. "And if you don't listen, you're goin' to hell." It wasn't very smart, but I was pretty sure they'd receive it. They did not. But he was sure that God was going to use him, and I think what you'll see in Saul (and we'll go over the timeline, which is very important, I think, for you to see) is that Saul really believed that somehow God was going to use him to reach the Jews because, after all, he excelled in the Jewish faith. Right? He loved the people. He had the best teachers. He had the most zealous reputation. He said (in Romans 9:3), "For I could wish that I myself were accursed from Christ for my brethren, my countrymen according to the flesh." So I think he was sure that now, with this miracle of God, he was going to head out. So he goes out to the local synagogues - people that would have known he was coming. I'm sure he was asked to speak. He was well known. He was a champion of Judaism. He was on a campaign to wipe out this "the Way" cult, this Christianity cult. The place is packed. And Saul stands up, and he goes, "Yeah, I just want to tell you about Jesus. He's the Son of God." And he begins to preach the gospel. He doesn't sing the company line, if you will. He calls Christ the Son of God. By the way, just between you and me, in verse 20, it is the only place other than when the eunuch speaks in Acts 8:37 where, confessing Christ, it is attached to the words "He's the Son of God." Most everyone else before this came to know Jesus of Nazareth. They knew Jesus the Man before they knew Jesus the Son of God. Not Saul. He skipped over that thing entirely; didn't know Him after the flesh. He met Him as the Savior from heaven, the shining light in his eyes, the One that knocked him down on the way into Damascus. So Saul knew Him differently, and he always refers to Him as Jesus the Christ, the One from heaven, because that's how he had come to know Him. So, he begins to preach Jesus is the Messiah. "We killed Him, but God, in His grace, raised Him up. There's salvation in His resurrection. You can come to Him by faith."

Verse 21 says, "Then all who heard were amazed, and said, 'Is this not he who destroyed those who called on this name in Jerusalem, and has come here for that purpose, so that he might bring them bound to the chief priests?' " (Plural, which shows you the corruption in the Jewish faith, at that point - more than one chief priest) "But" (verse 22) "Saul increased all the more in strength, and confounded the Jews who dwelt in Damascus, proving that this Jesus is the Christ." What happened to Saul? People were astounded by his transformation. He had furiously, with great ferocity, killed Christians, and now he was one of them. They were astonished; that's what this word says. But I want you to notice there weren't many converted. He was winning the argument, wasn't really winning the souls.

For Saul, like the rest of us, there're usually three steps in ministry preparation. When you first get saved, like I remember, I just said, "This is easy! I'll just tell people to get saved. Pretty soon we'll go to heaven." I was pretty sure that was going to be the way it worked. When you hang around a little while, then you say, "Man, this is hard! I've got to pray and study and got to be ready for anything, and the Lord's got to work." And, at some point, you say, "This is impossible!" Easy, hard, impossible. And Saul was at step one. He had lots to learn. He was a learned guy, he was outspoken, he was feared, he was bold. He just wasn't fruitful. So he immediately went to minister, but that didn't take him anywhere. Because if God is going to use you, He's going to prepare you.

I want you to write (if you take notes at all) in your Bible, between verse 22 and verse 23, Galatians 1:15-19; and it's important because it will fill in the gap between what appears to just be one narrative here in Acts that continues uninterrupted. Let me read to you what Galatians 1 says. This is Paul, now, writing to the Galatians. "But when it pleased God, who separated me from my mother's womb and called me through His grace, to reveal His Son in me, that I might preach Him among the Gentiles, I did not immediately confer with flesh and blood, nor did I go up to Jerusalem to those who were apostles before me; but I went to Arabia, and returned again to Damascus. Then after three years I went up to Jerusalem to see Peter, and remained with him fifteen days. But I saw none of the other apostles except James, the Lord's brother." So here's Saul's own testimony: he gets saved; he knows that God's called him to preach; he doesn't have many counselors to go to or people to turn to; he doesn't go to Jerusalem where the apostles were still in power, if you will, in terms of the church structure; he goes to Arabia; he stays there for three years before he comes back here to Damascus, then goes over to Jerusalem; stays in Jerusalem for fifteen days and sees only two apostles; and then we are going to be told that he just disappears from the scene for years. So in between verse 22 and verse 23, Saul figures out for us (gives us the chronology) that he ministered, he left, three years later he would return. Saul was sure, like I said, he was going to be God's vessel to the Jews. It made perfect sense. Peter should go to the Gentiles - he's a rough guy; he's not really disciplined, he's not a religious guy (to speak about). But God had other plans.

If you get a map of the Mideast (especially in the 1st century), Arabia is where Mount Sinai was, where the children of Israel were camped, and they were given the Law. In the northwest corner of Arabia, it actually juts pretty close to Damascus. So in order to go to Arabia, you can travel a long way, but you can also

just barely cross the border and be in Arabia. Saul would not have had far to go, if you will, but, led by the Spirit, he goes to the desert for three years; which is not bad - it took Moses forty years to graduate. But Saul is home schooled by the Lord Himself, and he learns his faith. And when he had been knocked down (if you read earlier in the chapter), there were two questions that he has while lying on his back. One was, "Who are You, Lord?" And the second question was, "What do You want me to do?" Both of those questions get answered in three years of being completely off the grid. Right? He learns to know the Lord. He was able to argue (according to the verses in front of us) from the Scriptures he knew as a Jew, pretty effectively, that Jesus, indeed, could be the Messiah. It's all he had to go on. He didn't have a new believer class. He was just saved. On the other hand, he goes out and he sits before the Lord, and he learns firsthand the Bible. He learns about the cross, and he writes the book of Romans. He learns about the salvation of the Gentiles, so he writes about it in Ephesians 3. He learns about the body of Christ and how it works, and he incorporates that into the writing to the Ephesians as well. He learns about the return of Christ, and he formulates the understanding in 1 Thessalonians what will give to us in the years to come. So, seclusion before promotion. Does that make sense? If God is going to use you, you're going to have to put in the time - learn Him, to know Him, learn to hear His voice. There's a time of preparation. God always prepares you for what He's got prepared for you. It's very important. And if you're not willing to make the payment, a lot of times you're just not in a position to be ready when called. There's always a danger, and we've seen it a couple of times, when celebrities get saved - that they are immediately, because of their name recognition and popularity, thrust into pulpits. And they say, "Well, could you share with us?" and the guy goes, "Well, I got saved. That's all I got. I don't know anything else yet." But if the demand lasts long enough, these poor folks never get to grow in the Lord. They never get to sit at His feet. They never get to learn the lesson. They just are put in the limelight because of who they are. That didn't happen to Saul. He gets saved, tries to reach out, was pretty successful in arguing but not in fruitfulness (in terms of souls), and then he's gone for three years to the middle of nowhere before he returns (as Galatians says) back to Damascus.

I remember the fellow Joab (in 2 Samuel 18) who was David's general. And there was a young man named Ahimaaz who came to him and said, "I want to run like the other guy you just sent off with a message." And Joab said, "Well, why are you going to run when you don't have anything to report?" "I just want to run." Now, the message that was sent by Joab (ahead) to David was that the coup was over.

"You don't have to fear the coup anymore. Unfortunately, your son Absalom has been killed." It was a bad message, actually. But the guy wanted "I just want to run." Sometimes we just want to run, we don't have a message.

So God wanted Saul to have a message first. And I think that's important. So Saul spends three years in the desert getting his D.D. - not Doctorate of Divinity, just Doctorate of the Desert. And he's near where the Law was given. Isn't that interesting? He goes to the area where the Law is given, and he learns about the grace of God, and he's given a message. And, over time, he'll have a message that he can deliver. So I would say to you - if you want God to use you, be a student of the Word. Learn to pray. Learn the Scriptures. Be able to share it from your heart. Have something to share. Don't just point to somebody else.

Well, after this three-year stretch (according to Galatians 1), Saul returns to Damascus. He's strengthened by the Lord. He renews his debate with the Jews there. This time, astonishment gives way to confounded responses, and the religious leaders are not very happy, and it turns to rage and pretty soon to murder plots. So we read, verse 23, "Now after many days were past," (the three years that we read about in Galatians) "the Jews plotted to kill him." I can just see Saul saying, "Let me share with you what I've learned," and they say, "We're not interested, you traitor." I don't know who was sent to Caiaphas to tell him that their number-one son had turned, but I guess it wasn't a good message to deliver. "What happened to you?" Well here's Saul. There's the old Saul - everybody knows the old Saul. And then, by the grace of God, comes a new Saul; and the new Saul, after time, becomes a witness for the Lord, and people's lives are touched.

I was pretty rowdy in high school. I was really rowdy in high school. When I went to our ten-year anniversary (reunion), people wanted to come and find out how crazy I'd continued to be; except I'd gotten saved right out of high school. So I brought my Bible and three friends who had gotten saved, who graduated with us. And honestly, we were there twenty minutes, and nobody wanted to talk to us anymore. We went home early. But there was an old Jack, and then there was a new one. There's an old you that everybody knows, and now there's a new you.

Saul comes back. He's a new man. It's been several years. Now is the time for lives to be touched. So we read, in verse 24, "But their plot became known to Saul. And they watched the gates day and night, to kill him. Then the disciples took him by night and let him down through the wall in a large basket." Again, God's plan for

Saul was to be an apostle to the Gentiles. Saul still wanted to go to the Jews. It just wasn't going well. First, nobody was converted. Now, they're just mad. They might have been excited for Saul. He seemed to be I remember Churchill said, in World War II, "There's nothing more exhilarating than being shot at without result." I guess he liked the battle. Maybe Saul liked it, too. But what he didn't have was any fruit. So, he gets saved, tries to minister; people losing the argument, but God sends him to the middle of nowhere. He comes back three years later. He is much better informed, but yet no ministry still is taking place because the primary direction of his life (from God's point of view) is going to be different than he thinks. He's going to go to the Gentiles, of all people.

So, notice the picture here, and it's pretty interesting. They let him down a wall in a basket so he could go to Jerusalem, which happened to be the capital for the Jews. He has to escape like a lot of people had escaped from him years earlier. Right? Down in the basket. Saul needs more preparation. He's not ready yet for the work God has planned. I say that to you only to say if you're discouraged because what you believe God wants you to do isn't working out yet, don't give up. If God's called you to do it, what are you going to do anyway? Be faithful. Right? Stick with it.

Verse 26, "And when Saul had come to Jerusalem," (now, again, we know that from Galatians 1) "he tried to join the disciples; but they were all afraid of him, and did not believe that he was a disciple." You can understand that, three years later in Jerusalem, he was greeted with fear and suspicions. In fact, he supposedly got saved in Damascus, but then he disappeared. Nobody heard from Saul. Nobody known Saul. There was no experience with Saul. So, very little information is getting back to Jerusalem. I think about him showing up, and I thought, "Where is Peter, in all of his discernment?" Or, "Where is John, with all of his love?" Or, "Where is Andrew?" Andrew is the guy in the gospel who's always the guy bringing people to Jesus. He was always the go-between between the lost who needed to be saved. Three years he'd been out of the picture, and nobody's mind had been changed about him at all. "What if he's a secret agent? What if this is a trap? What if we get killed?" It was bad enough in Jerusalem. They believed God, these apostles, but not that much. Very interesting. I can relate to that. I've known people that were really bad people, and then when they got saved, I thought this, "Well, we'll see." Rather than rejoicing in the fact God had changed a life, I watched them with suspicion because I remembered what they were like before they got saved. It's really a skepticism that isn't becoming at all. Fortunately,

Saul didn't go off in a huff. He stuck it out. The apostles, by the way, had a track record of being slow to believe things. Right? And slow to move out. They were still in Jerusalem. Up to now, in the years of the early church, God had used mostly non-apostles to get His work done. He used Stephen, He used Philip, He used Ananias, He used Barnabas. Now He's going to use what would become the twelfth apostle, Saul. But none of them were those early church leaders at all.

Verse 27, "But Barnabas" (I love it) "took him and brought him to the apostles. And he declared to them how he had seen the Lord on the road, and that He had spoken to him, and how he had preached boldly at Damascus in the name of Jesus. So he was with them at Jerusalem, coming in and going out." Now, Barnabas is a guy that we met back in chapter 4. Remember? His name means encourager, and he's the guy that comes to the encouragement of Saul. He comes to Saul's rescue. He risks his reputation and his life to comfort this former murderer; puts his life, if you will, on the line. He was nicknamed Barnabas by the church. Nice to have a name that means encourager, one who comes alongside to help. The Greek word is "*parakletos*." It's usually the word used for the Holy Spirit, but it's used for Barnabas. What would your nickname be if we all gave you a nickname? Would it be good or bad? Because the church gave him this one. So, whenever I read "Barnabas," I always pray, "Lord, give us more Barnabases who will take risks to support people and help them to grow." From Galatians 1, again, verses 18 and 19, we know that when Saul got to Jerusalem, he only met with two people. He met with James, and he met with Peter. So when you read he met with the apostles, he only met with two apostles because that's all that he tells us that he met with.

Verse 29 says, "And he spoke boldly in the name of the Lord Jesus and disputed against the Hellenists," (those Greek-backgrounded Jews) "but they attempted to kill him. When the brethren found out, they brought him down to Caesarea and sent him out to Tarsus. Then the churches throughout all Judea, Galilee, and Samaria had peace and were edified. And walking in the fear of the Lord and in the comfort of the Holy Spirit, they were multiplied." So Saul spent (in Jerusalem - back to Galatians 1:18) a little bit more than two weeks in Jerusalem, fifteen days, and he picks up where Stephen, who had been killed and drove the church out, left off. He's back in town, arguing with the same people - the Hellenists at (probably) the Synagogue of the Freedmen that we read about a couple of chapters ago. And if they had trouble with Stephen, I can just imagine they had their hands full with Saul because he wasn't the retiring, quiet guy; he was the aggressive, loud guy. And they wanted to kill him like they killed Stephen. Again,

there's no fruit here in Saul's ministry. He's bold, he's victorious as far as fearfulness, but he's not really taking anybody anywhere. In fact, he's causing a lot of trouble for the church, and we know that because verse 31 says when they got rid of him, there was peace. He was stirring it up way too much. It wasn't the way the church operated. So the church moves quickly to send Saul packing. They take him down to the port in Caesarea (which is where the port was), and they send him home - buy him a one-way ticket to Tarsus. "Here you go, Saul. Get out of town." Saved. Argues in Damascus. The Lord sent him to the desert in Arabia for three years. He comes back, argues for a while here, still isn't working. They want to kill him. He sneaks out. He comes to Jerusalem. Only two apostles will even see him. He's only there for fifteen days before the church..... "We can't deal with him. "Let's get him out of here, send him home." And they give him a ticket.

Now, here's the deal. For the next ten years, Saul is off the grid. From the chronology of the book of Acts, it'll be ten years from now that he'll be summoned. But for now, he drops away all together. He leaves Jerusalem, for the first time, as a persecutor to go to Damascus. He leaves, now, as the persecuted one. The next time we will see Saul will be because Barnabas, our encouraging buddy, is now in the midst of a revival at a place called Antioch. He was ministering there by himself. He's not a teacher, he's not a pastor. He really feels like his gift and his strength is propping people up, helping them be hopeful in the Lord. And he does that to the best of his ability and, in doing so, people are getting saved right and left. But he looks around, he says, "Man, I can't teach these people, I don't have that gift." So he says, "I'll be back," and he heads down the road to go to Tarsus to find, of all people, Saul. The church is filled with Gentile converts, for the most part. It's Antioch after all, Hellenists at best. "I can get a guy like Saul here. He's a talker, man. That guy knows stuff." And he sets himself aside (though the revival centered on Barnabas), and he goes to get Saul, and he's able to talk Saul into coming out of obscurity. But now it's been fourteen years since he's been saved. This isn't..... "Saul, man he got saved. Look, he's changing the world." No. Fourteen years, he didn't do anything except sit and learn and grow and be taught and wait for God to open the doors. So, in the midst of the revival, he gets Saul in Tarsus. He convinces him to come back. Soon Saul is preaching and teaching and bearing much fruit, and, all of a sudden, his life takes this huge turn to fruitfulness. He's right where God wants him to be. And it is from Antioch that he'll make those three long, eighteen-month, two-year trips into the mission field that really cover the book of Acts before Paul will be arrested and released one time and then rearrested and taken to Rome where he was eventually beheaded and

killed for his faith. So fourteen years, though, of obscurity to get ready to do what God wanted him to do.

For now, we read in verse 31 that Saul's departure left the church in Israel with peace. And we mentioned Judea - that's in the south; Samaria's in the middle of the country; Galilee's in the north. Suffice it to say the country now had peace and a time of refreshing, and the persecution stopped. Growth continued. Edification took place. The fear of the Lord, the comfort of the Spirit, multiplying salvations. There was a time of real struggle, but now there was a sweet time of being built up.

By the way, the word "churches" in verse 31 (though it says "churches") is singular in Greek. Luke knew there were lots of meeting places all over town, but he viewed the church as one church with many members. I think the closer you get to Jesus, the better you see just one body. I'll tell you the people who had problems seeing one body are the Corinthians. They were of Paul, they were of Apollos, they were of Cephas (1 Corinthians 1). And Jesus said (Matthew 16:18), "I'll build My church" (singular), "and the gates of Hell won't prevail against My church." Why? Because you can't join it. You have to be born into it. We have a lot of different denominations in our country. I was in Nashville this week with some friends, and I think, for me, the hardest thing about Nashville (or even the south) is there're lots of churches that are thousands of people that never use a Bible. It's, "Bless your heart" and where's the Bible? They don't have one. I'm committed to working with some folks and sending them some tools. I want to see if we can't plant a church in Nashville. We'll see if the Lord will allow us to do that and send somebody there. But they need to be taught. We rode around with a lady for a week, talking with her, and she listens to us on the radio every day. And she said this, "Can I ask you questions?" And her questions were not the kind of questions you ask if you're saved for ten years. It's stuff you should know. "Do you have a Bible?" "Yeah." "Do you bring it to church?" "No. We love the pastor, though, and the fellowship is great. But there's no teaching." So, look, denominations can be very helpful. I appreciate that we have many different denominations that preach Christ. They meet different needs for people that we can't meet. There are folks that come here and say, "The music's too loud, I can't handle it. I want to go somewhere else." And I get that. Then go somewhere else, and enjoy the hymns or whatever it is that you like. You know? Or, "It's not loud enough." Well, we can't help you with that either. I'm old enough to not like it that loud. I think our best bet as a church is to fish in the biggest pond. By that, I mean try to be as open to as many

cross-cultural people as you can. Try to meet people in the middle so that you can reach the most. Denominations tend to isolate people. When driving around Nashville the other day, there're several signs in the country that say, "Cowboy church meets on Sunday." They have cowboy churches in barns. I guess if you're not a cowboy, you're really not welcome there, you know? If you don't have a ten-gallon hat and some cowboy boots, don't bother comin'. I taught a few years ago at a church up north that was really occupied solely by Harley riders. They did it out at the campgrounds (which I hate camping - I think Hilton was born so I don't have to camp). But, in any event, we go to this place where there're three hundred guys and girls living in the dirt, and they have Harley church. And I went to teach. It was great. I mean, I enjoyed the excitement of the people. But they kind of limited their outreach. If you didn't ride a bike, you really weren't invited. So, the best thing to do is be a church that can reach as many people as you can. Try to find the middle ground of things that matter very little, if you will. So, whether it's color or background or age or gender, those things are unimportant to the Lord. The gospel is for everyone.

But I guess I would like to finish tonight in verse 25. It's an important verse because it literally says Saul had to run from town. He didn't make it. Right? "Get in the basket, run for your life." Fifteen days in Jerusalem. "Get in the boat, run for your life." Nobody wanted him around. They wanted to kill him in Damascus. They wanted to kill him in Jerusalem. And for the next ten years, he's nowhere. Statistics are kind of a funny thing. I was reading the other day that 1 in 1,000 people will be a murderer in the U.S. Think about that if you're at a baseball game next week, where there're 40,000 people there. (Laughing) Forty of them could kill you. Just doin' the numbers. One in every 200 people in our country goes to prison. Seven out of ten start-up companies fail in the first year. Nine out of every ten people who try to lose weight gain it back in the first year. Which means 70% of all businesses go belly-up and 90% of all diets go belly-out, I guess. (Laughing) But I'm telling you what. One out of every one person is going to be disappointed in what is happening in their lives. And for me, even all of this introduction for Saul (before we look at his ministry) sets before us a guy that was so zealous to kill people - he was so right, found out he was terribly wrong. He spent three years doing penance, I think, learning. Came back to want to serve God and make it right and couldn't fit in anywhere - couldn't fit in with the Jews, couldn't fit in in Jerusalem. The church did this, "Just go home. Here, we bought you a ticket. Just go away." And he wants to serve. He wants to make it right.

And it isn't until fifteen years in that he is able to become that man that God wants him to be.

Listen to what he wrote in the 2 Corinthian (11:30) letter about this experience. This is what he wrote, "If I must boast, I will boast in the things which concern my infirmity. The God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who is blessed forever, knows that I am not lying. In Damascus the governor, under Aretas the king, was guarding the city of the Damascenes with a garrison, desiring to arrest me; but I was let down in a basket through a window in the wall, and escaped from his hands." But he introduces this (which we just read) by saying, "If I'm going to boast, I'm going to learn to boast in my infirmity because I'm the strongest when I'm weak." And he said he began to learn it here, that he was on the run. He glories in the setbacks. He was far from being let down like he'd been in a basket. Same thing happened in Jerusalem for fifteen days. Here's what Saul says (in Acts 22:17) to the Jerusalem crowd that wants to kill him. This is how he relates this, and this is what he says, "Now it happened, when I returned to Jerusalem and was praying in the temple, that I was in a trance and saw Him saying to Me, 'Make haste and get out of Jerusalem quickly, for they will not receive your testimony concerning Me.' So I said, 'Lord, they know that in every synagogue I imprisoned and beat those who believe on You. And when the blood of Your martyr Stephen was shed, I also was standing by consenting to his death, and guarding the clothes of those who were killing him.' Then He said to me, 'Depart, for I will send you far from here to the Gentiles.' " Saul eventually understood what God's plans were. But it took him a long time. But when he found it, man, God could begin to use him mightily.

Jesus said, in Matthew 11:28, "Come to Me, all you who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest." And the question always is - give you rest from what? And because of the way that it is introduced with laboring and being heavy laden, the answer obviously is God'll give you rest from your own plans, give you rest from your own ideas, give you rest from your own efforts. When we're saved, we are set free to walk in God's ways and to get to know His heart.

So, for the next ten years or so (seven to ten anyway), Saul will be in Tarsus being yoked to Jesus. He's got nothin' to do. He's not doing anything except saying, "Lord, Your will be done." And after years of vision and plans and ideas (and ten years'll take that out of you), Paul was able to say, "Lord, whatever You want, I'll just do whatever You want." And so here comes - from the wilderness, from Tarsus to Antioch - a man who's going to, in the next thirty years, turn the world

upside down. The greatest preacher the world has ever seen, next to Jesus; the most influential guy that you will ever read in the Bible anywhere. But he first had to endure years of obscurity and then intermittent doors closing in his face before he could find that place of service. So don't be discouraged and don't throw in the towel. Because sooner or later, you're going to have your Antioch - where God's going to open the door, and you're going to be ready to go - if you're ready to go. If you're ready to go. Who knows what God is going to do? I started teaching three years after I was saved, and I took a home study of 90 people, and I whittled it down to three. By myself. Without any help. So discouraged. And two of the three were from the same family, and the other person lived in the house we were meeting in. (Laughing) So discouraged. But I had a good pastor friend in Long Beach that said, "If you are willing to give your life for three people, God can use you. If you're complaining there are not enough people to teach, you can go home now, don't come back." Be ready. Let God prepare you.

We will, before we continue with Saul, have this whole inset of Peter's life - Peter going to the Gentiles, Peter's ministry. He will be the subject of the rest of chapter 9, chapter 10, chapter 11. And it isn't really until we get to the middle of chapter 12, where Peter is released from prison, that we will say goodbye to Peter, and we'll then pick up with Saul/Paul for the rest of the book of Acts. So, that's so hard to outline, but next week we'll pick up with Peter and join him as the Lord sends him on the road.

Submitted by Maureen Dickson
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