

WHY WE MUST NEVER DESPAIR

Acts 9:1–31

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Our Scripture tonight is Acts 9:1–31. We’re journeying along through the Book of Acts and we’re now coming to the end of the second of six major sections in the Book of Acts. In the first five chapters of Acts, we dealt with the theme of “The Birth of the Church.” In Acts 6:1–9:31, “Persecution Leads to Expansion.” There is, of course, more than one way to outline the Book of Acts. We’re using a six-fold scheme. But a more common way of outlining the Book of Acts is to look at Acts 1:8, which says, “The gospel will be preached in Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria and the uttermost part of the world.” The gospel being preached in Jerusalem is the focus, really, of the first seven chapters. In chapters 8–12, the gospel is preached in Judea and Samaria. And then, in “the uttermost part of the world” in Acts 13 and beyond.

But if we, however, stick with the outline I started with, “Persecution Leads to Expansion,” we find there are three major personalities that emerge in that section that God uses to advance His church greatly. One is the personality of Stephen, who is raised up first as a deacon. Then, because of his preaching ministry in a Hellenistic synagogue in Jerusalem, he fans the flame of the gospel by showing the implications of the gospel as it relates to the Law and to the temple. This brings about his own martyrdom, and it also brings about the persecution of believers who then begin to scatter out of Jerusalem. One of those who scatter becomes the second personality in these chapters of 6–9. That is the personality of Phillip. Then Phillip preaches through mass evangelism in Samaria, extending the gospel there, and through personal evangelism, to this Ethiopian eunuch who is on his way back south to Ethiopia.

WHY WE MUST NEVER DESPAIR

Acts 9:1–31

The third person we are looking at tonight, in this second stage, is the person of Saul, who is identified later in the New Testament as being from no mean city—namely, Tarsus. A city that is located in what is now Eastern Turkey, which at the time had the third leading library of the word. Next to Athens and Alexandria came the city of Tarsus as an important learning center. It was in that hometown where he had the best of secular learning; the fact that he had secular courses is shown later in Acts, in his Mars Hill address, where he quotes with ease pagan poets—this shows us that he had an introduction to classical literature. In that city, he grew up with this twin education of the best of the secular world and then, he was also trained as a rabbi, which means he learned a trade: tent making. He also went to rabbinic school, where he learned to deal with the commentaries and learned to deal, in the didactic sessions that he had, with rabbis. Ultimately, moved to Jerusalem, where he was trained under the leading rabbi of the day, known in secular literature outside the New Testament as the Rabbi Gamaliel. He had the best education of his day. There are those, every once in a while, who will say, “God can’t use an educated person.” That’s not always the case. Our education can’t get in the way of what the Holy Spirit wants to do. But with Paul, you have a man who, if ever a man was perfectly prepared for the mission that God called him to, he was. He says in Galatians that he was set apart by God in the womb, and his training, his family heritage, the fact that he’s able to walk both in the Greek world and in the Jewish world and have Roman citizenship—to be able to do it freely—was an incredible thing.

When you look at God’s design and planning, you see how the Lord is always out ahead of the church. One of the things I kind of want to underline in this message tonight is to give some kind of balance to Southern California and American mentality, which suggest that we must always be able to target and identify what our objectives are in the church or in the expansion of the

WHY WE MUST NEVER DESPAIR

Acts 9:1–31

church. And that we will therefore be successful if we become goal-oriented, if we establish our philosophies, our statement of mission, and derive out of that our priorities and objectives and approaches. There's nothing wrong with that. That can be of great value to the kingdom of God. Jesus said this in Acts 1:8, in giving a general objective of how the gospel was to spread. But there are some things the church can never plan or anticipate. God is at work in His kingdom doing special surprises. What is often happening in the life of the church is that, in this particular phase of the church's development, God is planning and developing a seed that will come into fruition in the next stage of development. In this stage of development, they can't even see it growing in their midst. Only God knows it's there.

For example, in Acts 1:5, growing in the matrix of the Early Church are Stephen and Philip. They are being prepared to assume leadership in the next phase of the church, which will be its expansion into Judea and Samaria. In that second stage of the church, the expansion into Judea and Samaria, there is another seed that is growing within the matrix of the life of the church, as nurtured by the Holy Spirit. It is the seed of Saul. He is going to come, not during the second phase of the church (he'll have a minor role in that), but his real position is to be on target and in place for the third step, that is the expansion of the church to the world (Acts 13–28). But in each particular phase, God is working His purposes.

That's why we must never despair. If you look at this situation in Acts, you might be tempted to see the persecution of Stephen and the narrow constrictedness of the Jerusalem church, which isn't on its own going out and doing missionary work. You might tend to get discouraged by that and say, "We've got external problems and we've got internal problems." I have a deep concern for the well-being of the church because I serve as a leader in the church. There are times when I'm concerned about the formidable, external circumstances the church faces in our day and

WHY WE MUST NEVER DESPAIR

Acts 9:1–31

culture. I'm also intensely concerned about the internal problems that sometimes keep us from externally reaching out. There are times when you can look at all those problem areas and you can despair. But our human despair must be set aside. God is always at work doing His thing, even if we don't see it at the moment. He's at work developing this man, Saul, into Paul the apostle. It'll absolutely dynamite the church into its most wonderful age of expansion.

This church has yet to sing the greatest songs. The greatest hymns have yet to be written. The greatest songs have yet to be sung. The greatest sermons have yet to be preached. The greatest evangelists have yet to be called. The greatest missionaries have yet to go to their place on the field. The greatest hymn writers and mass evangelists are yet in the wings, waiting to be revealed, if Jesus tarries, in the life of the church and the world.

I'm excited about the current generation that is preparing for the ministry, if Jesus tarries, that's going to be in the year 2000 and 2010. I've got some kids that are out there, that are the church, the leaders of the church twenty years down the road. I'm excited about what God is going to do. I'm excited about all the people I can't see whom God is going to use far more mightily than anybody guesses. In fact, none of us, looking at the scene of about 33-36 A.D., would have guessed that a leader of the church ten years down the road, fifteen years, would be this persecutor, Saul—no one in their wildest imagination.

I'll tell you how unlikely it is. Can any of you envision the former governor of California, Jerry Brown, as the Pentecostal preacher who absolutely changes the whole landscape of American Christianity and brings the greatest advance under his ministry to evangelical and charismatic Christianity of anyone in the history of the American Christian church? Can you envision that today? No! Are you kidding? Jerry Brown? That's not to make any political statement, but he certainly did not take any positions when he was governor that square with the moral

WHY WE MUST NEVER DESPAIR

Acts 9:1–31

commitments of the Scripture. And he's dabbled with Zen Buddhism and eastern philosophies and those kinds of things.

Do you know where he's at now? He's with Mother Teresa. I don't know of too many politicians who are spending their days bathing dying people and staying in fifteen-dollar hotel rooms in Calcutta. Think what you will of Jerry Brown, but hats off to him. I hope this is not just a publicity stunt. But I don't think it is. I think he's sincere about caring for those people. Jerry Brown would do so much for the Christian cause, because nobody expects him to do anything and he's probably the last person most of us would pick to be the next leader of the church.

We need to keep our faith from getting ruttled, so that we can be free to expect God to do something that is beyond any one of our abilities to dream or imagine. It's God's church, and if He doesn't take care of it, it's in trouble, so why should we worry? Either He's going to build the church or it's going to fall apart. There's no way that a human being can make the church work. I'm convinced, after years of serving, it's impossible. It'll fall apart for two reasons. It's got such a formidable external task; it never has the resources to come to grips with it. And secondly, it doesn't have the internal resources, because sooner or later in the body of Christ, people, if they don't get energized by the Spirit, will start falling out of love with one another and they'll destroy themselves from within. So it always has got these formidable problems in it. And God must revive and renew the church if it's going to work.

So you have this person, Saul, who's introduced on the scene. Here's the way he comes on, in chapter 9. You have a picture of a dragon, "Saul was breathing out murderous threats" (Acts 9:1, NIV)). Saul has everything a religious bigot could ever dream of: the Law was on his side. Christianity, when it's being true to Christianity, is perhaps the only major religion that limits itself to persuading people. It does not use force to uphold its position. Islam uses force to uphold

WHY WE MUST NEVER DESPAIR

Acts 9:1–31

its position. One of the things we need to recognize about the current problems in the Middle East is that Islam has had a view, from the seventh century, that it is the superior religion and Christianity and Judaism are inferior expressions of worship of God. Therefore, when Islam takes over, there is no plurality of religious freedom. It is Islam. It is the state religion. And all other religions must either convert to Islam or pay a penalty for being that religion or off comes the head! If you don't believe that, try witnessing to somebody in Saudi Arabia and see if you don't face capital punishment. Judaism, while not that severe, nevertheless, when in control, is the same. Such as in Israel, which has passed anti-missionary laws, which make it impossible to evangelize or propagate either one-to-one or mass evangelism. It's illegal to pass out a tract in Israel, for example.

It has only been when Christianity operates in its biblical form (and I have to say that because Christianity in its historical form is often grotesque when it departs from Christ) that it offers the most freedom to everybody, because it says that we must never use force to persuade a person to faith. It is persuasion that must win them or they're not won at all. And if they're not persuaded, they must be allowed to be free to continue to exist and live. You know a person's position is strong if they can leave it to persuasion and it is weak if they must resort to force.

Saul is involved in a religious faith in which he is a prosecutor not a persuader. Evidently, there were several times in the administration of Palestine in which there was a hiatus in the arrival of a new Roman governor, and the Sanhedrin would have, for that brief window of time, more authority than they would normally. This appears to be one of those times, one of those junctures in the life of the nation when the Sanhedrin is more in the driver's seat, so it can give Saul the authority to go to Damascus, to the synagogues. If he found many men or women who belonged

WHY WE MUST NEVER DESPAIR

Acts 9:1–31

to the Way, he would take them as prisoners to Jerusalem. He's a real nice guy. He drags women off to prison too.

When you look at Paul's statement, that Christ was born in the fullness of time, you can appreciate the statement better in light of the modern context. Now you cannot go from Jerusalem to Damascus. There's no getting there. You can't fly an airplane from Jerusalem to Damascus. You can't walk it. But in the era which Paul lived, you could go anywhere in the Roman world and speak one language—the Greek language. That's why, for one reason, through roads, through laws and through language, the gospel had such a tremendously rapid spread in the first century. Now the road is cut off.

But he's going. And somewhere nearing Damascus—there are about 200 miles between Jerusalem and Damascus—somewhere along that way, there was a light from heaven flashing around him. He falls to the ground and hears a voice saying to him, “Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?” ‘Who are you, Lord?’ Saul asked. ‘I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting,’ he replied. ‘Now get up and go into the city, and you will be told what you must do.’ The men traveling with Saul stood there speechless; they heard the sound but did not see anyone. Saul got up from the ground, but when he opened his eyes he could see nothing. So they lead him by the hand into Damascus. For three days he was blind, and did not eat or drink anything” (Acts 9:4–9, NIV).

It's interesting to look at what I'd call the “redactors of Scripture”—people who would come in and edit it with their preconceptions. Of course, in liberal Christianity, which has gutted the miraculous in the New Testament, you see the revisionism in Saul of Tarsus' conversion. It is obviously the most powerful conversion. His conversion shaped more of Christianity than any other conversion in the history of the church. No question about it. But there are those who

WHY WE MUST NEVER DESPAIR

Acts 9:1–31

looked at this and did not like the miraculous elements presented. So there have been two theories advanced to try to discount the miraculous dimensions to his conversion.

One is that Saul was subject to frequent epileptic seizures. It was in the course of one of those epileptic seizures that he had this powerful religious experience.

Another view is simply that he was exhausted on his way to Damascus. It is hot in the summer time (if this was the summer). The noonday sun is brightest at that moment in the heavens. He was the victim of a heatstroke. And in the course of that heatstroke, fell victim to hallucinations that came about as a result of his conscience bothering him—because of all these men and women he'd already dragged off and put into jail and some whom he had executed, including Stephen. His conscience finally got the better of him in the midst of this visionary heatstroke. So you demythologize the Scripture by removing the miraculous. The problem with both of those views is right in the text, if you take the text seriously. That is, that there was external objective corroboration to the vision. These externals that are non-subjective, but rather objective, are the facts that others with him also saw the light and that he was struck blind and remained blind for three days until, in an answer to prayer, his eyesight was restored. That was a fortuitous circumstance. If it was epilepsy or heatstroke, that he should be blinded until the exact moment when someone should come along and pray for him and release him doesn't make sense. It was an objective manifestation he had of something real. And also, one other objective factor should be considered. No person in the whole history of religious development of any religion has had a profound influence on the history of humanity as a result of an epileptic seizure or sunstroke. So we've got to contend with some real objective events that are occurring.

One of the things we saw earlier in Acts is that the Lord, after His ascension, did not appear to anybody. He flat-out refused to present the evidence to non-believing people, the evidence of His

WHY WE MUST NEVER DESPAIR

Acts 9:1–31

resurrection. He could have strode right into the Sanhedrin and said, “Here I am. I’m indestructible. Now try to nail Me to the cross. Let’s arm wrestle!” But He refused to do that because that would be to call people to faith on the basis of sight and power rather than belief and faith. So He abstains. After His ascension, no more appearances.

This is the one exception that He makes. Notice that there are some particulars of this appearance that even make it possible for Saul to have the freedom to say no. Even with His appearance, it is not so overpowering that Saul doesn’t have a choice in the matter, nor can he dismiss faith as a component to his religious experience. He still must be called to faith. Jesus did not appear to him as Jesus appeared to the Twelve when He broke bread with them and ate fish with them. It was an appearance of blinding light, in which Saul saw no human visage, no human features, had no tactile communication, no touching—a blinding light and a voice, auditory communication and visual communication, without seeing anything but radiant whiteness. An effect of that appearance which knocked him down to the ground, that was it.

I would suggest to you that this would have left Paul room had he wanted to walk away from that by saying, “I still didn’t see Him. I didn’t see the nail scars in His hands or feet. I didn’t see the wound in His side.” Why does the Lord grant him such a special revelation? Powerful as it is, it is still different in nature from the revelation that the other apostles had had. He grants him that revelation, as Paul says in Galatians 1, in order to appoint him directly as an apostle to the Gentiles. Paul would need credentials. In that particular time, the Assemblies of God had not been founded nor had it begun to issue credential cards. He needed better credentials than that, anyway. He got one directly from the Lord. Since the technical definition of an apostle is one who has eye-witnessed the Lord, as being commissioned by Him to spread His message, Paul said, “I am one who was born out of due season” (1 Corinthians 15:8).

WHY WE MUST NEVER DESPAIR

Acts 9:1–31

Why does the Lord bring him into the kingdom? I think there's an answer to that historically, but I may be treading on thin ice when I say this. The church has already been in existence a number of years, and it is yet to have a direct plan of action to fulfill the Great Commission. Its missionary work has been as the result of persecution, not because it intentionally set out to fulfill the Great Commission. I think the Lord looks at the church and says, "There's got to be someone who culturally understands the Gentiles and can bring the faith to them. Saul is that man. I'll give him a special revelation, as one born out of season."

There's a lot of ways we want to know the will of God. I've always wanted to know His will in a way like this. It'd be so much easier for me if I were to be able to stand up and say to you, "The reason I'm called to the ministry was, when I was seventeen years of age, I was praying (or walking down the street) and a blinding light and a voice came from heaven that struck me to the ground. I got up and I never had a doubt about what God had called me to do. He said to go, be a missionary to Costa Mesa and Newport Beach in South Orange County." I'd like that kind of a call, but I never got that kind of a call. Almost no one else in the history of the Christian church had that kind of call or that kind of conversion. All the other conversions in the Book of Acts are by witnessing. Somebody brings the good news, they witness. I would say that, based upon Saul's experience, the people who get that kind of call only get that kind of call because they're going to go through tremendous suffering and they're going to need some staying power in the midst of that, so they don't doubt their call. If you're one of those persons who hanker for a supernatural revelation from God to you personally, I say, "Go head. Yearn for it with all your heart." But if you get it, don't be surprised if you go through a lot.

It's interesting too that verse 7, as compared to Paul's account in Acts 22:9, says of the soldiers "They heard the sound but did not see anyone" (NIV). Acts 22 says, "They didn't hear the sound

WHY WE MUST NEVER DESPAIR

Acts 9:1–31

or the voice.” What is happening is similar to what happens in the Gospel of John, in chapter 12.

There was thunder from heaven. Jesus understood the voice, but those around Him didn't. In

other words, what happens on the road to Damascus is that there is a sound that everyone else

hears, but for Saul only, is it articulated sound. To him, it's a voice. To everyone else, it's noise.

So his faith is required. When he stood up and said to the soldiers that were with him, “I know

we all saw the light, but I'd like a confirmation. What did you hear?” And they'd say, “We heard

some noise, but we don't know what it said.” Only Saul had the conversation, so his faith had to

be involved in this decision.

The fact that Paul had a genuine experience is seen by his immediate response, where he chose

not to eat or drink anything. He was stunned. He had met the Lord whose people he had been

persecuting. Can you imagine how this lived in his mind like a rerun? He could see what he did

to Stephen. He could see what he'd done to the other believers. Now, he who had been a bull

rampaging through the church was himself apprehended by the Lord.

I think one of the real marks of true conversion is remorse. That's maybe where a great part of

me rejects the easy-believism that is so rampant in our day. Where we, as ministers, try to make

it so easy for people to accept the Lord and to say, “All you've got to do is come down here and

I'll even help you say the words.” I'm not knocking it. If you've come to Christ that way, great.

It's important that you come to Christ. But that is not all there is to the gospel. It's not just

reluctantly bringing you to say some magic words that will give you an asbestos suit for eternity

so you can escape the fire. It is a life change, that's what the gospel is. If we've truly met the

living Christ, we'll look at our old life and there will be remorse about anything we've done in

our life that God is not pleased with.

WHY WE MUST NEVER DESPAIR

Acts 9:1–31

Saul goes to Damascus, and there is a disciple named Ananias. The Book of Acts is loaded with all of the occasions where you have to have the miraculous for the church to work. I said a number of times that I want to be part—in my generation—of a church experience in which what happens cannot be accounted for except that “God did it.” It can’t be accounted for by human reckoning or measurement. Only God can be the explanation for why this happened.

And that is the case with Saul. It’s going to be necessary for him to link up with the body of Jesus Christ. The Lord is going to send a prophet named Ananias to him to connect him with the body of Christ. When the Lord saves us, He hasn’t saved us to be Lone Rangers. He didn’t save Saul to found a new denomination, either. There’s one church, one true, invisible church in the world. And right away, the Lord was going to start connecting him with people who were in that church, with Ananias, and ultimately with the church in Jerusalem. He wasn’t going to found a new denomination, a new movement or a new independent ministry. It’s part of the connected body of Christ already in place.

But the Lord is doing it sovereignly. The Lord is sovereignly speaking to Ananias. As I look at visions in the New Testament, most often, the visions occur in connection with a person’s own personal prayer time. Peter—while he was praying in Acts 10. When he went up to pray, there was a vision. Ananias is told, “Go to...Saul, for he is praying. In a vision he has seen a man named Ananias” (Acts 9:11-12, NIV). Saul hasn’t yet been baptized in water. He’s still blind. He hasn’t been healed. He hasn’t been filled with the Holy Spirit. But already he’s having visions. Already, God is speaking to him. Those visions tend to be nurtured in an atmosphere of intensive prayer.

That’s again why, in our personal lives and the corporate life of the church, if we start going without prayer or our prayers become exceedingly formalistic, liturgical, and mechanical, we

WHY WE MUST NEVER DESPAIR

Acts 9:1–31

then lose that dynamic that ushers out of prayer, which is God birthing something in us that we wouldn't have seen. We would never have seen it if it had just been up to us. But as we bring ourselves in intensity before God and begin to seek His face, then God shoots something into our life.

Visions are not like taking dictation from the boss. It's sort of like getting up and saying, "Was it God or did I eat too much for supper?" Visions are always doubtable. But when you begin to walk in this in your spiritual life, you find that trial and error becomes the test as to whether or not it was a vision from the Lord or eating too much spaghetti.

"Go to the house of Judas on Straight Street and ask for a man from Tarsus named Saul, for he is praying" (Acts 9:11, NIV). Look at the characteristics of a new believer: remorse, prayer, connectedness to the body of Christ. Ananias demurs: "Lord...I have heard many reports about this man and all the harm he has done to your saints in Jerusalem" (Acts 9:13, NIV). "It's a trick, Lord. He's fooled You too!" Don't we sometimes do this to the Lord? "You can't be serious, Lord! You want me to do that?"

The Lord said to Ananias, "Go! This man is my chosen instrument to carry my name before Gentiles and their kings and before the people of Israel. I will show him how much he must suffer for my name" (Acts 9:15-16, NIV). There is the clincher. I said that if the vision is given, it will include a component to it that brings adversity and suffering. The reason for the vision is to sustain the person when they go through the tough times.

All these things, by the way, will be fulfilled in Saul, who becomes Paul. He brings the gospel before kings. In fact, one of the hidden agendas in the Book of Acts you may not see at first reading, one of the things Luke, as a historian, is doing in writing to his friend, Theophilus—we do not know if he's a Christian or not—is to show that Christians (or followers of the Way or

WHY WE MUST NEVER DESPAIR

Acts 9:1–31

disciples of Jesus) are a non-seditionary force in the Roman world. Rome, as a government, has nothing to fear from Christians. At the time Acts is written, Paul is on trial for his life before Caesar. I have a personal view that one of the ideas associated with Luke's writing Acts is to provide background court-briefing so that in Caesar's administration there can be some authentic reading of Christian history. Throughout Acts, Luke is always showing, in any engagement of Christianity with the Roman government, that Christianity has always fared well up to that time with Roman governments. It's always been ruled as a religion, not as a competing political force. That is where it's gotten the bad shake; it's been from other religions, not the Roman government.

Saul is going to wind up carrying the gospel straight to kings, whether it's King Agrippa of the Jews or whether it's the king of all the mighty earth—Caesar Nero in Rome. That will be like trying to witness to Hitler. But that was his mission—to carry the gospel to that man. Nero will never be able to face the Judge of all the earth and say, "I never heard." He heard. Believe me, he heard. He had to litigate. His court, his administration, had to litigate the case of Paul, which became the trial case of Christianity in about 63 A.D.

So Ananias went to the house and entered it, placing his hands on Saul. There we see the laying hands on Saul. Right away, he accepts him. There's no probationary period, just "Brother Saul." I wonder if those words stuck in Ananias' throat. "Brother Saul, the Lord—Jesus, who appeared to you on the road as you were coming here—has sent me so you may see again and be filled with the Holy Spirit.' Immediately something like scales fell from Saul's eyes, and he could see again. He got up and was baptized" (Acts 9:17–18, NIV).

Notice there's no reference to his being filled with the Spirit on this occasion, but we can assume some things. In Acts 19, when Paul goes to Ephesus, he says, "Did you receive the Holy Spirit

WHY WE MUST NEVER DESPAIR

Acts 9:1–31

when you believed?” and they say, “No, we haven’t even heard of the Holy Spirit.” And he says, “Let me tell you about Him.” He lays hands on them; they all receive the Holy Spirit and speak in tongues. Paul, as an individual who was considered an apostle, would not have been deficient in what the apostles themselves had. Nor would he have been bringing people into an experience in Acts 19 that he himself did not have. So Luke’s silence here is no proof that he didn’t receive the baptism in the same way they did in 2:4. It is rather a silence because it’s tacitly understood by everyone; this is, of course, the way it happens.

“After taking some food, he regained his strength” (Acts 9:19, NIV). That was the practical end of it. He was fully received.

Let me quickly go through the rest, up to verse 31.

“Saul spent several days with the disciples in Damascus. At once he began to preach in the synagogues that Jesus is the Son of God” (verse 19, NIV). The only time Jesus, in the Book of Acts, is called “Son of God” is right here. That doesn’t mean the rest of the people in Acts don’t believe He’s the Son of God. But it says that the person who announces Him as Son of God in the Book of Acts, and who is the first to do so in the recorded history of the apostolic church, is the one who met Him not as the lowly Nazarene, but as the mighty one who met him in a blinding light and revealed Himself to Saul in His divine dimension. That one is the Son of God.

“All those who heard him were astonished and asked, ‘Isn’t he the man who raised havoc in Jerusalem among those who call on this name? And hasn’t he come here to take them as prisoners to the chief priests?’ Yet Saul grew more and more powerful and baffled the Jews living in Damascus by proving that Jesus is the Christ” (Acts 9:21–22, NIV). If you read the text closely here, notice two things. Notice in verse 20 that, when he began to speak, he was preaching. To preach means simply to announce the good news. It’s to be a herald. It’s to stand

WHY WE MUST NEVER DESPAIR

Acts 9:1–31

up and say, “Such and such is true!” notice, however, the word “preaching” is replaced in verse 22 by the word “proving” which is a formal word meaning “to use logical argumentation,” “to lay out one’s facts and bring persons through persuasions to truth.” It’s different from proclaiming, where you simply stand up and announce a position. It is taking the facts and, like a lawyer, pursuing them in a briefing or in a position paper or a position argument to people who need to be persuaded.

If you network Galatians 1 with Acts 9, you find that there was an interval of time when Saul, shortly after his conversion, went into retreat in Arabia and spent maybe two to three years in Arabia. I would suggest that that reference in Galatians 1:18–19 belongs in between verse 21 and 22 of Acts 9. When Saul was first converted, he stood up and did what any Christian does when they’re converted. They start telling people “Look what happened to me! Jesus is the Lord!” Someone comes along and says, “How do you justify that in light of the teaching of Isaiah 53 and the Scripture in Exodus ‘There is no God but one’”? Preaching is simply to announce. But proving is to master the facts and advance the cause.

What happened was that when Saul was first converted he did what all of us do, he testified. He announced the good news. But when he began to confound the opposition, it was as a result of having taken time to study. He spent those early years of his discipleship, not getting on the testimony circuit that we so unfairly put Christian celebrities in when they get saved. We put them on the circuit for five years and they do nothing but tell their story, their testimony, over and over and after several years; that is all they know, they haven’t grown at all as Christians. We do that unfairly to people.

Saul went off into the desert. A great Scottish preacher said, “He went into the desert with the Psalms, the Law and the Prophets in his knapsack, and he came out of the desert with Romans,

WHY WE MUST NEVER DESPAIR

Acts 9:1–31

Ephesians, and Philippians and Philemon and Colossians in his heart and on his lips.” He ate God’s Word and it became part of the warp and the woof of his personality, so that, while he took the books with him, when he came out, he had mastered the content of the Old Testament and reinterpreted all that he had believed in light of who Jesus was. So no wonder he was powerful and baffled the Jews living in Damascus when he preached in the synagogues that Jesus was the Messiah.

Now he had dished it out, he’s going to get it back. When people belong to a faith in which they don’t want to deal with you by means of persuasion, but instead want to go to persecution, it’s because their position is weak. They resort to what happened here, in verse 23, “After many days had gone by, the Jews conspired to kill him, but Saul learned of their plan. Day and night they kept close watch on the city gates in order to kill him. But his followers took him by night and lowered him in a basket through an opening in the wall” (Acts 9:23–25, NIV). Paul will use this later, in 2 Corinthians, in a fascinating way. There, he’s having a problem with all the “super-apostles,” the people who say, “I get the great crowds. I do the great miracles. I get the big offerings.” All the big stuff in the Christian celebrity circuit. Paul is vexed with all the bad theology and all these people. If what they’re spitting out is a bunch of rubbish, who cares? If it isn’t truth, if it isn’t biblical, if it isn’t right, who cares how successful they are?

Paul’s confronting this in Corinthians. He says, “Let me boast a little bit. I’m a “super-apostle,” too. To show you what a great apostle I am, I’m so spiritually strong that they lowered me in a basket over the city wall” (2 Corinthians 11:33). Why does he do that? It’s a turn of humor. He’s saying, “The big apostle here didn’t command angels to come down and break those city gates open, and he didn’t walk through closed doors. He was Mr. Chicken Little apostle who so

WHY WE MUST NEVER DESPAIR

Acts 9:1–31

ignominiously goes over the wall in a basket. That’s me, the giant apostle, Paul. A coward. They had to get me out in the dead of night and hide me away in a basket.”

There was a preacher who preached a sermon on Labor Day on this text, about Paul being lowered in a basket over the city wall. His message was, “If you’re working at a craft, whatever you’re doing, do it well. Can you imagine if the basket weaver had been careless in the performance of his duty? We would have lost an apostle of the church to a careless basket weaver.” How often our very life hangs on someone else’s productiveness as a workman.

When he came to Jerusalem, he tried to join the disciples. Again, he’s a churchman! He’s not this lone ranger—“I go out in the great outdoors and meditate on Sundays!” But he has the attitude, “I’ve got to be connected to the Body.” He tries to join the disciples. They say, “No way.” They were all afraid of him, not believing he was really a disciple. This is after three years have gone by. But Barnabas took him and brought him to the apostles—Barnabas, “Son of encouragement.” You watch a person who’s generous with their money and they’re generally generous with people. That’s how Barnabas is introduced to us in Scripture. He’s generous with his money. He sells the property and gives the whole proceeds to the church, and Ananias and Sapphira sell theirs, lie about it, and only give part. Barnabas emerges later. Ananias and Sapphira are pushing up roses. Barnabas is generous. So he’s generous in his treatment of people. Thank God for people in the body of Christ who have the ministry of encouragement, like a Barnabas. He takes him and brings him to the apostles. “He told them how Saul on his journey had seen the Lord and that the Lord had spoken to him, and how in Damascus he had preached fearlessly in the name of Jesus. So Saul stayed with them and moved about freely in Jerusalem, speaking boldly in the name of the Lord” (Acts 9:27-28, NIV).

WHY WE MUST NEVER DESPAIR

Acts 9:1–31

Notice verse 29, “He talked and debated with the Grecian Jews [Hellenistic Jews], but they tried to kill him” (NIV). What’s he doing? Who else was in dialogue with the Hellenistic Jews? In Acts 6, and as a result of his pain, he got martyred—Stephen! Stephen was preaching in the Hellenistic Jewish synagogue called the “Synagogue of the Freed Men.” Paul starts preaching the same thing Stephen was preaching and was killed for. Same result. He’s going to get killed.

And interestingly enough, notice the apostles aren’t being persecuted at this point. They’re all preaching the Resurrection, but it’s Stephen who got in trouble, and it’s Paul who got in trouble.

I say that’s still the case today. You can preach the name of Jesus, but sometimes you start getting where the rubber hits the road and start talking about the implication of Jesus as it affects our everyday life. For example, you cannot be racially prejudiced and be a true believer. You’re going to have to grow out of that if you’re going to be a believer. In some parts of the world, if you preach this truth, you’d get a rise out of people who wear the name “Christian.”

Paul was reading the implications of the gospel; it gets him in trouble, and gets the whole church in trouble. “When the brothers learned of this, they took him down to Caesarea and sent him off to Tarsus” (Acts 9:30, NIV). For all practical purposes he’s done. He’s back home and out of the way, and he’s put on a shelf for ten years.

If you’re on the shelf, don’t despair. Some of you may feel that you’re at that time in your life.

You felt that, at one time, you were more effective for God. But some things have happened.

And what in the world are you doing at this moment in your life? What’s going on? Don’t get too worried about that. If you know, in your heart of hearts, that you’re doing your best, and that’s all you can do, don’t get all shaken up.

WHY WE MUST NEVER DESPAIR

Acts 9:1–31

Saul is in Tarsus. He would have died there, but the Holy Spirit had other plans for him. If the Holy Spirit has other plans for you and me, He'll get us out of our cubicles of Tarsus and get us into the mainstream, where He wants us. Don't despair.

“Then the church throughout Judea...” and I noted last week that when we started this section, at the end of chapter 5, the church was only in Jerusalem. But now, as a result of persecution leading to expansion, Luke adds the summary statement. The church is now throughout Judea, Galilee and Samaria. It enjoyed a time of peace.

Notice the church did not have peace when Saul was around—neither when Saul was a non-Christian or when he was a Christian. Either way, the church didn't have peace as long as Saul was around. He was one of those guys who just lit a match to everything and demanded you take a stand. The church didn't settle down again for a while, until Saul was back in Tarsus. The church again has peace. We need that. Sometimes a person is always out on the cutting-edge through a prophetic voice in the church, and that's another thing that sometimes makes me nervous...someone who feels that it's always their calling to announce the prophetic word that's going to stir everybody out of their nest—sometimes the church just needs a time of peace. It doesn't need to be hammered on all the time on some issue.

Saul's back in Tarsus. The church has peace. Can the church grow in peace? Does it always need persecution to grow? It can grow in peace. It was strengthened and encouraged by the Holy Spirit. It grew in numbers, living in the fear of the Lord. The church doesn't have to have persecution to grow. I hope we don't have to have persecution to grow. If that's the only way we can grow, send it, God! Let us know there's a price to being a Christian. If that will galvanize the saints, here we are, Lord! It's ok to pray for peace also, and the Lord will work.

I want us to, again, open ourselves to the Lord. Receive from Him His direction.

WHY WE MUST NEVER DESPAIR

Acts 9:1–31

Closing Prayer

Holy Spirit, we wait upon You now as a believing community. There are other people in our society, in our community, in our family, in our neighborhood that we have written off. We've said within ourselves, by our conduct, if not by our words, "That person will never become a believer." Lord, help us to write no one off, whom You have not written off. Help us to believe that You work beyond our human instrumentality. You have people in this community that are every bit as lost as Saul. We pray that whatever it takes to reach them, whether it be through our witness or supernatural revelation, You will raise up Your church, strong and powerful, in this area. Help us, in our own personal lives as members of Your body, to be tender in Spirit with an Ananias and a Barnabas, who are sensitive to You in prayer and who are looking around for people to encourage. Help us to believe You for the next stretch in history of the Christian church; to believe that Your Spirit is upon this generation; that the greatest revival was not the Welsh revival. The greatest revival was not the apostolic ministry. The greatest revival was not Azusa Street. The greatest revival is yet to be. Do that in our hearts and our life. Build our faith to believe You for a great ingathering of Your church. Where we, as a church, are asleep at the switch, too, settled down in the comfy coziness of our Christian friendships, disturb us out of those relationships, so that we will get on the cutting-edge of what Your Spirit is about in this world. To bear witness to Jesus and advance His name among those who do not believe. Do that, Lord, in us. Help us to be a community of the Spirit. In Jesus' name. Amen.