**Role Reversal** Acts 9:19b-31 [www.bible-sermons.org](http://www.bible-sermons.org) June 18, 2017

One of my priorities as an elder in this congregation is to encourage you to be a student of the Word of God. That doesn’t mean simply to come and listen on Sunday or attend a Bible study, but personally to take time to be in the Scriptures daily to hear from God. As I read over our passage for today I was reminded of the old treasures I had seen in the past, but I also prayed to have revealed to me new treasures and to see what would speak to you too. Jesus said, *“Therefore every scribe who has been trained for the kingdom of heaven is like a master of a house, who brings out of his treasure what is new and what is old.”* Matthew 13:52 The Bible is filled with treasure for those who recognize that our time is better spent in God’s Word than chasing after the temporal pleasures of this world (Psalm 119:72). You will find the food for your spiritual growth in the Word of God (Proverbs 2:3-5). Mark those treasures you find and review them often. Continually search for new ones. They can be the very voice of God to you.

The first half of this chapter was on the supernatural encounter of Saul with the risen Lord Jesus. He writes about it in several of his letters (1 Corinthians 15:8-9), but the following verse seems to me to best describe his heart. *15 The saying is trustworthy and deserving of full acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, of whom I am the foremost. 16 But I received mercy for this reason, that in me, as the foremost, Jesus Christ might display his perfect patience as an example to those who were to believe in him for eternal life.* 1 Timothy 1:15-16 Paul was saying that he is God’s trophy of how gracious and patient God can be. If you think you are too bad for Jesus, or not good enough to serve Him, then look at Saul, God’s trophy for demonstrating great patience and grace to man. If God can save a Christian killer who tried to stop the early church from obeying Jesus and evangelizing the world, and then call him to be one of the greatest evangelists, and even appoint him to write most of the doctrine in the New Testament, then there is hope for you and me (Ephesians 3:7-8). Amen? Do you believe it? When we say we are too weak, or ignorant, or shy, or whatever for God to save and call us to serve Him, we are saying more about our limited view of God than we are about our weaknesses. God delights in using the weak because then we see the real source of the power is in Him (1 Corinthians 1:26-29).

*19b For some days he was with the disciples at Damascus.* Acts 9:19b The disciples must have been as amazed, as we are at times, with the incredible transformation they were witnessing in Saul. Here was this man who came to arrest them now testifying about seeing the risen Lord and being called to suffer for Him. I would imagine he asked the disciples a lot of questions and wanted to hear all about the life and teachings of Jesus. How thrilled the disciples in Damascus must have been to share with him! That must have been some truly rich fellowship. But he couldn’t hold in all that he had experienced and was learning. He had been so wrong and now could so clearly see his error that he had to tell his fellow Jews who had not yet accepted Jesus as the Messiah.

*20 And immediately he proclaimed Jesus in the synagogues, saying, “He is the Son of God.”* Acts 9:10 Eager to correct the errors of his past, Saul started preaching his new- found faith in the synagogues of Damascus. The “Son of God” was a title meaning Messiah. Remember that in John 1:34 John the Baptist testified that Jesus is the Son of God. Shortly after that, the devil tested Jesus by asking Him to do certain things if He was really the Son of God (Matthew 4:3). When Jesus stilled the storm on the lake the disciples said, “Truly you are the Son of God.” Matthew 14:33 When Jesus asked Martha if she believed He is the resurrection and the life she responded, “You are the Christ, the Son of God, who is coming into the world.” John 11:27 In other words, “You are the Messiah, the Son of God.” Saul was proclaiming that the Jews had killed their long-awaited Messiah and that He had died for their salvation as the lamb of God.

*21 And all who heard him were amazed and said, “Is not this the man who made havoc in Jerusalem of those who called upon this name? And has he not come here for this purpose, to bring them bound before the chief priests?”* Acts 9:21 Saul had a reputation among the Jewish community of spearheading the attack on people of The Way, but suddenly he has reversed himself and is proclaiming Jesus is the Messiah (Galatians 1:13). He came to arrest Christians, and now he is one of them. This a powerful testimony that Jesus did rise from death and is active in the world.

*22 But Saul increased all the more in strength, and confounded the Jews who lived in Damascus by proving that Jesus was the Christ.* Acts 9:22 This strengthening is not like that from breaking a fast as in the previous passage (Acts 9:19a), this is spiritually strengthened to testify with convincing boldness. The Jews tried to counter his arguments that Jesus is the Messiah, but he confounded them at every turn. He spent his life in the Word and knew the Scriptures well. Now that he knows the key to the Scriptures, the mystery that was hidden for ages past (Ephesians 3:6), that the Messiah would first suffer for the sins of all mankind, and now that the Holy Spirit is teaching him (John 14:26), no one can refute his scriptural evidence. How we need for God to raise up more men like this in our day! RZIM ministries is striving to do this with their new school of apologetics.1 When there is a powerful witness there is soon to follow powerful opposition.

*23 When many days had passed, the Jews plotted to kill him, 24 but their plot became known to Saul. They were watching the gates day and night in order to kill him,* Acts 9:23-24 It seems that a number of the Jews of that time had a motto, “If you can’t beat ‘em, kill ‘em!” They had stoned Stephen and now they believed they had to kill Saul. It reminds me of the effort to kill Lazarus. People were believing in Jesus because of Lazarus’ resurrection so the leaders figured they would stop that by seeing that he was killed (John 12:9-11). Now that is desperation! What if he rose again? They even tried to kill the resurrection and the life (John 11:25). That didn’t work so well. Why would they think they can stop His followers? They should have taken Gamaliel’s advice, “Let them alone lest we be found to be opposing God!” Acts 5:39 If we don’t get some kind of resistance from family, friends, or others, we are probably too silent about our faith. We try not to be offensive, but we should seek the salvation of those we love, and sometimes that will offend them (Matthew 10:36).

The providence of God made the assassination plot known to Saul. God had a plan for Saul’s life as He has a plan for yours and mine. Man or devil cannot stop us until that plan is completed. We don’t have to worry about the time of death, it is in God’s hands (Psalm 139:16). Man usually thinks it is too soon, but God knows the details of what would happen had that child or adult lived longer. He brings us home in His perfect time for our good.

*25 but his disciples took him by night and let him down through an opening in the wall, lowering him in a basket.* Acts 9:25 This was the first of many escapes from danger that Saul will have to make in his obedience to the call of God on his life (Acts 23:12). We can see the intensity of this spiritual war. Men were waiting at the gates of the city day and night with daggers under their cloaks hoping to stop the powerful witness of the former Christian persecutor turned apostle.3 The only way out of the city was through an opening in the wall. City defensive walls had rooms in them and sometimes a window looked to the outside of the wall for ventilation. The disciples tied a rope to a big basket, had Paul get in, and lowered him at least several stories, and probably more. Windows couldn’t be close to the ground or invaders or thieves could enter them.

What happened next is recorded in Paul’s letter to the Galatians. Paul went into the deserts of Arabia for three years (Galatians 1:17-18; that is Syrian Arabia and possibly Petra). We have no record of exactly where or what he did there, but we can imagine he went through the Scriptures with the help of the Holy Spirit to unlearn some of what he had been taught and to learn what they truly meant while also evangelizing the area. He met Jesus in the Word. Three years with Jesus in the Word and you are bound to be transformed. I believe that is where he developed all the doctrine we see in his letters. They came right out of the first covenant seen in the light of the reality of Jesus as a fulfillment of all the shadows that came before (Hebrews 10:1). “Real ministry is made in the closet of prayer; God’s men and women are made in secret. Their lives and their profoundest convictions are born in their secret communion with God.”2

*26 And when he had come to Jerusalem, he attempted to join the disciples. And they were all afraid of him, for they did not believe that he was a disciple.* Acts 9:26 The disciples knew of his role in Stephen’s death and his mission to imprison them. They probably thought he was trying to pretend to be one of them to find out their hiding places. “How could someone change so quickly?” they may have thought. Had they forgotten what happened to themselves? Once again, God provided.

*27 But Barnabas took him and brought him to the apostles and declared to them how on the road he had seen the Lord, who spoke to him, and how at Damascus he had preached boldly in the name of Jesus.* Acts 9:27 We were introduced to Barnabas at the end of chapter four (Acts 4:36-37). We were told his name means “Son of Encouragement.” He must have fled persecution in Jerusalem and gone to Damascus where he met the transformed Saul. Barnabas told the apostles that Saul was truly changed. He told the apostles about Saul’s encounter with the Lord and how he preached boldly in the name of Jesus proving He is the Messiah. Risking your life for Jesus is a pretty sure sign you are truly a disciple.

Once again we have to go to the letter to the Galatians to get the rest of the story. Saul met with Peter for two weeks and conferred with Jesus’ brother James (Galatians 1:18-19). James had a lot in common with Saul. He was devout Jew. He didn’t believe his half-brother was the Messiah until after the resurrection (John 7:5). He was suddenly confronted with the risen Lord which threw his whole world upside down, just as had happened to Saul (1 Corinthians 15:7).

*28 So he went in and out among them at Jerusalem, preaching boldly in the name of the Lord.* Acts 9:28 Saul was now one of the Jerusalem disciples. In the very place he was commissioned to arrest Christians, in the seat of Judaism, he is boldly proclaiming the name of the Lord. That means he is telling people that Jesus is Lord of all, the Messiah, now seated at the right hand of the throne of God! That is the teaching that caused the council to sentence Jesus to death and Stephen as well (Matthew 26:64; Acts 7:56). In fact, Saul heard it from Stephen’s lips and at that time plugged his ears and ran screaming toward him to see him stoned (Acts 7:57). Now Saul is preaching the very language he despised. What reversal! That is the transforming power of the Spirit. He can make the shy become bold. He can turn haters of Jesus into devoted followers. He can take self-worshiping egomaniacs and make them selfless servants of God. There is nothing He can’t do with a surrendered life. What is it He wants to make of you?

Did you notice that Luke described Saul as a bold preacher in each of the last two verses? Saul was an all or nothing personality, and God didn’t change that. He was zealous for Judaism, and now he is just as zealous for the message of salvation in Jesus, if not more so (Galatians 1:14). God made us all uniquely. Some people need a bold witness that gets right in their face. Others need to see the persistent love and patience of a believer demonstrating the life of Christ. Others need a powerful intellectual defense. That is why we all have our unique gifts and talents. Saul’s uniqueness was both boldness and intellectual insight. But as I said earlier, that kind of a witness stirs up strong resistance as well.

*29 And he spoke and disputed against the Hellenists. But they were seeking to kill him.* Acts 9:29 Here we go again. These were the very ones that had Stephen stoned. Now Saul is supporting Stephen’s message and telling them they made a terrible mistake. They really are hard-hearted, stiff necked, uncircumcised in heart and ears, and always resisting the Holy Spirit, as Stephen declared (Acts 7:51). Well, they didn’t accept the message any better from Saul. The response was the same. “Kill him!”

*30 And when the brothers learned this, they brought him down to Caesarea and sent him off to Tarsus.* Acts 9:30 Caesarea is northwest of Jerusalem on the ocean. If you recall, Philip ended up there (Acts 8:40). I would think these two evangelists met, though we have no record of it. From there, they wanted Saul to go to evangelize his home town of Tarsus, the capital of Cilicia, now in south-central Turkey. It was a Greco-Roman city with its own academy. A lot of trade passed through Tarsus which made it a good location for evangelism. Scholars say he was there about three years before being drafted by Barnabas to help with the church in Antioch (Acts 11:25-26).

*31a So the church throughout all Judea and Galilee and Samaria had peace and was being built up.* Acts 9:31a The church began with a period of relative peace as thousands were converted and taught. Only the leadership was occasionally imprisoned and ordered to stop preaching, but nothing was done when they continued. Then Stephen was martyred and a period of persecution drove them to take the message to other areas. Since that persecution was headed up by Saul, his conversion and then departure from the area quieted things down again. We see these periods of persecution and then peace throughout church history. Peaceful times allow the church to be built up through discipleship and to gain local converts. The times of persecution scatter us to take the Gospel with us to new areas. Persecution also strengthens our resolve to stand for Jesus regardless of the consequences. We’ve seen that in the Middle East, and also seen the fruit that martyrdom has in touching many lives, just as it touched the life of Saul.

*31b And walking in the fear of the Lord and in the comfort of the Holy Spirit, it multiplied.* Acts 9:31b Luke gives us three important factors involved in church growth. The first was in the previous verse, being built up. We need to grow in our faith through fellowship, the study of God’s Word, and prayer (Colossians 2:6-7). We need to walk in the fear of the Lord. That means to have a reverence for what God has told us. We don’t flirt with compromise because we know that what God tells us is for our good. We know that as father, He disciplines us for our good when we disobey (Hebrews 12:7). To walk in the fear of the Lord means to live a holy life, refusing to compromise with sin (Proverbs 16:6).

The third factor was walking in the comfort of the Holy Spirit. We all fail to be Christ-like at times. Our hearts condemn us at times. But if we know the work of the cross is a completed work and that it covers all sin, the Holy Spirit gives us great comfort. God is greater than our emotions and disappointments in ourselves (1 John 3:19-20). When we hear the comforting words of God’s love for us in prayer, we are strengthened in our love for Him. Whatever disappointments we face, the Holy Spirit can comfort our hearts and help us to be thankful and to rejoice in all things (Philippians 4:4). He shifts our eyes and hearts from the temporal to the eternal. With these three, being built up and walking in the fear of the Lord, and comfort of the Holy Spirit, the church didn’t just add new converts, it multiplied! May God help us to experience the same.

Questions:

1 Who is God most likely to call?

2 What did Saul preach?

3 What was the response? Why?

4 Why couldn’t Saul be killed?

5 Why was the hatred toward Saul so vehement?

6 What did Saul likely do in Arabia?

7 Where are God’s men and women made strong?

8 Why do you think Saul was so bold?

9 Who did Saul meet with in Jerusalem?

10 What three things caused the church to multiply?