

Text: Acts 9:20-30

Title: Paul's Initial Ministry

Truth: Paul was an entirely new person after his conversion.

Date/Location: 12/16/2012 and 12/13/2023 at FBC

Introduction

After Saul's conversion and baptism, he spent some days with the Christians who lived in Damascus.

TIMELINE: The calling of Apostle Paul was between AD 32-35 on the road to Damascus. We'll say 34 for the sake of having a single round number.

I. Ministry at Damascus, 9:20-22

- A. After spending some initial days with the Christians at Damascus, Paul began a preaching ministry in the Jewish synagogues there.
- B. His message was characterized, though not limited by, the proposition that Jesus Christ is the Son of God. He knew *that* by experience and was able to correlate that with what he knew of the Hebrew Bible. He accepted it as truth. Whereas the Jewish leaders wanted to kill Jesus when He spoke about being equal with God the Father, Paul had shifted to a much different view, one which acknowledged the truth of what Jesus had said. Review John 5:17-18 and John 10:30.
 - 1. John 5:17-18 concerns Jesus's work on the Sabbath to heal a man at the pool of Bethesda. Jesus affirmed that the Father has been working until now, and "I have been working." God the Father did cease in one sense from work—from His creation work—in Genesis 2:2. But as He needs no rest, He could continue to work in sustaining the creation and working in the lives of its inhabitants. In that alternative sense He has continued to work all the time since creation without a break. Since Jesus equates that work to the work that He himself was doing—both all the time and both until now—what He is saying is that He has the same job, strength, capability, etc. to work as the Father. The Jews correctly understood what this meant.

2. John 10:30 – the Jewish leaders did not water down what Jesus said to make Him into “another god” or “a lesser god” or “one in purpose with God but not one in nature.” They took the phrase as He meant it—equality with God.
 3. This new apostle Paul is the one who would eventually write the words of Philippians 2:6. By then, the theology of Jesus as the Son of God was “old hat” to Paul, very familiar territory.
- B. This transformation was amazing to everyone who heard and saw it. His murderous persecution mission had been public enough that everyone knew what it was about, so when he made an about-face, it was shocking. This is like a famous atheist converting to Christianity today, or a staunch pro-choice feminist becoming a faithful Christian, or a liberal Ann Arbor leader turning to Christ and then preaching him to the masses of unbelievers in town.
- C. Saul increased in strength. Note that he did not remain static but he grew and changed and improved. His progress was evident to all (1 Tim. 4:15).
- D. “Confounding the Jews” indicates that he was giving them evidence that they could not refute. His ministry was using their own Scriptures against them, so to speak. They would be reduced to complete frustration and resort to try to murder Paul to stop His preaching.
- E. Note his preaching was centered about Jesus Christ. Ours should be too.

TIMELINE: Between 9:22 and 9:23 is “many days” which includes three years in Arabia (Gal. 1:17-18). He apparently learned more revelation about the gospel of grace, the kingdom, and the church directly from Christ in that time. Paul then traveled back to Damascus (Gal. 1:17).

II. Threat at Damascus, 9:23-25

- A. In this section, we read how Saul barely escaped death (see 2 Cor. 11:32-33). The Jews became angry against Paul and, as the next verse says, plotted to kill him. They were able to influence the governor of Damascus to go after Paul, but they were not able to

keep it a secret and so he fled the city at night in a daring escape. They were watching the gates of the city, which would be the normal exit route. Paul and his friends devised another way to avoid the gates altogether.

- B. Paul has been placed into a situation where the persecutor is now the persecuted.

II. Saul's Initial Ministry at Jerusalem, 9:26-30

TIMELINE: Paul returned to Jerusalem (9:26), after the three years, and stayed there for 15 days (Gal. 1:18).

- A. Of course, no one believed Paul had become a disciple—to his former quarry, he would seem like a spy at best, or perhaps a crazy man. It is certainly understandable for them to not be foolish and immediately welcome him into their presence. Due diligence is required in such a case. We do not have to be gullible just because we are Christians!
- B. Barnabas was the son of encouragement (Acts 4:36). He looked at the situation and got the two sides together so they could find out they were on the same side.
- C. This afforded Paul an opportunity for Barnabas to give Paul's testimony of conversion as well as to explain how he had preached in the name of Christ.
- D. Paul's visit with the apostles became a regular occurrence (coming and going, v. 28). He preached boldly in the name of Christ (v. 29) and debated with the Greek-speaking/Greek cultured Jews (Hellenists).
- E. We read again of how Paul was targeted for murder by these Hellenists but once again escaped. Note that being under threat of death was a frequent occurrence for Paul, as he indicates in 2 Corinthians 11:23ff (near death often).

TIMELINE: He left for Tarsus in Acts 9:30 around AD 37. His friends brought him there to keep him out of harm's way.

III. Saul's Years of Silent Obscurity, 9:31-11:24

TIMELINE: After Acts 9:30, Saul does not appear again until Acts 11:25.

TIMELINE: Nothing is mentioned in the Bible from the 3 year mark to the 14 year mark (Gal. 2:1). During this time, there were 11 “silent” years where Paul is apparently ministering in Tarsus and its environs (Acts 11:25), say from AD 37-48. Galatians 1:21-24 covers this time period.

- A. God sometimes takes a lot of time (from our perspective) in the development of his servants. There is nothing wrong with that.
- B. And that does not mean his servants are doing nothing in the meanwhile. Many today labor in utter obscurity, with no positive recognition from the world, *ever*. Their reward will only become evident in heaven.

TIMELINE: In Acts 11:25, Barnabas finds Saul in Tarsus and brings him to Antioch.

TIMELINE: Saul and Barnabas go on the “famine relief visit” to Jerusalem. This was 14 years after his conversion. We know it is counted from the same baseline point as the three years mentioned in Acts 9, because the Jerusalem council happened in 49 or so, and if we subtract a little time before that for when Galatians was written, and 17 years before that, it brings us back to AD 32, which would be too early for Paul's conversion if the Lord was crucified then, given that Acts 2-8 happen before Paul comes on the scene in Acts 9.

TIMELINE: Gal. 2:1-21 recount this second visit to Jerusalem at which there was some controversy.

Conclusion

Saul was changed completely “overnight” on the road to Damascus, but God had quite some work to do on him over the following years before he was ready to be a missionary. But ready he became! Perhaps the years in which you find yourself right now are years of preparation for work that God has prepared for you later.