

The Ministry of Paul  
Acts 9:20-31

Isaiah 42:1-9  
1 Corinthians 4:1-16  
Responsive Psalm 8

This morning we are going to be picking up where we left off last week, which was the account of Saul's conversion while on the road to Damascus where he was heading to gather up the Jesus followers and bring the back to Jerusalem to face trial, imprisonment, and death. But as the account goes, Jesus interfered by meeting him on the road. We discussed last week about how each Christian must have some version, or type of experience in their own lives. Not a physical encounter like Paul, but that there should be a drastic and stark change in the life of the believer who is no longer bound by sinful lusts and desires but instead now is seeking to please God. No longer being driven by self interest, but instead by the love of God flowing outward toward others. Mankind is driven by self interest, and it seems even more so today. We are even losing the ability to discuss differing ideas, for today words, and differing thoughts are being considered violence.

If you differ with someone on their lifestyle decisions, no matter what it is, or how much proofs and evidences you bring, because you are differing with their own self perception then it is you who are a bigot, and even if what you say is truly born out of love and concern, it is taken as offense. We as a society has become so self absorbed that we live in delusion, we are so driven by our own selfish desires and interests that truth has become what we feel it is, not based on any reality other than the ones that we create for ourselves. We not only live lives defined by sinful lusts and behaviors, we idolize them as superior. Even now, the answer to dealing with drug addicts the answer in our society is turning to instead of helping them out from under the addiction...we instead just offer a safe space for that addiction. By that I mean, there are cities, who offer places for addicts to get clean needles, and provide a place for them to go near to medical help in case they overdose.

This may seem like an extreme example, but it is what we are doing in our society with everything. There seems to no longer be any stance for truth, but instead it has been held hostage by the feelings of the individual. Even Doctors today are getting in trouble for telling their patients that they need to lose weight, it is now being considered fat shaming. I have even seen people asking on the Holland informed page for recommendations for body positivity doctors, who will not address that they are obese and unhealthy. We are living in a self consumed society where we are even losing the ability to discuss things that are true, for speaking words of truth is being called violence.

This creates a society who is further closed off to the gospel, for truth is what you make it to be. You have your truth, and I have mine is the common response. Since we preach a message that all of man is lost in sin and needs a savior, on its vary basis we are calling for a standard of judgment in a society today which sees all judgment and differing thoughts as an attack upon the individual. I believe that we have arrived at a point in our society where we can no longer just call for repentance and a turning away from sin....for increasingly we are losing the idea that there even is such a thing as sinful behavior. We almost need to begin to just instruct the basic idea of what sin is, before we can even begin to discuss needing a savior from it. And as this void between a society which further and further makes justification for sinful behaviors and lifestyles and believes more and more that there is no objective truth, but rather truth is what you feel or think, it will become increasingly more difficult even for church organizations to exist in this environment.

There will be rising persecution, we are already seeing it with protests being held outside churches, with buildings being vandalized, and there have even been cases of individuals with radical ideas who have gone in and shot and killed people as they gathered in their buildings to hold service. As the world is more radically embracing sinful behaviors and lifestyles, attacking the very idea of truth, and believing that anyone who confronts them, or speaks out in truth is promoting violence we will likely only see a further rise in hatred and animosity toward the church. We have not reached the levels yet in this country where we are being arrested for our beliefs, but there are those who are being killed in many places across the globe for believing in Christ. So while it may not be here in this country yet, there are many places which experience the same as the early church was here in Acts, being hunted down, dragged into the streets, arrested, beaten, and killed. In Jerusalem, and the surrounding cities it was the Sanhedrin, and the Jewish leaders who were seeking to destroy Christianity, seeing it as a threat to their own beliefs, believing the gospel of Christ, to be a perversion and a blasphemous message to the one that they had been given, being blind to the fact that it was the fulfillment of the message that they had been given.

So I guess that brings up the question...how should a Christian respond to a hostile world? What is the Christians response to persecution? Well, I think that we can turn to the account of Paul here in Acts chapter 9 to get some answers to those questions. Starting in verse 20 this morning, which is right after Ananias laid hands on Saul, and he received the Holy Spirit. (read 20-31) As we see in our text this morning, Saul faced persecution, by the very people that he was working with previously to persecute the church, yet he did not waver...he still preached the gospel everywhere he went, he still remained faithful. But it isn't as though he threw caution to the wind either, he snuck out of Damascus when it became clear that he was no longer safe there, and he returned to Jerusalem and began to debate the Hellenists. This was the very same group that previously had stoned Stephen, with Saul likely being the one who was leading them in the charge. Now he comes back, and is debating against them that Jesus is the Messiah, making the very same claims that Stephen was.

Then eventually it became apparent that the too wanted to have him killed, so again he flees that city and goes to another, preaching the gospel on the way. In this account we are getting a small glimpse of what God told Ananias about Saul, when he says, "I will show him how many things he must suffer for my names sake." Christianity does not bring with it a promise of a peaceful life on this earth, in fact scripture tells us otherwise. Jesus tells his disciples "But watch out for yourselves, for they will deliver you up to councils, and you will be beaten in synagogues. You will be brought before rulers and kings for My sake, for a testimony to them, but when they arrest you and deliver yo up, do not worry beforehand, or premeditate what you will speak. But whatever is given to you in that hour, speak that; for it is not you who speaks but the Holy Spirit." Those are encouraging words are they not? That even when faced with trial and judgment that God is with them and will give them the words to speak. No need to worry how you will react, or what you will say..for God will work in you through the Holy Spirit to proclaim his name, so that even kings, and judges may hear the gospel.

He goes on, and says, "brother will betray brother to death, and father his child; and children will rise up against parents and cause them to be put to death. And you will be hated by all for my name's sake, but he who endures till the end shall be saved." This doesn't sound like a promise that you will have your best life now does it? Or we have the words of Paul, this very man who's life has been defined by the words of God..."for I will show him how much he must suffer for my name's sake." he writes to the Romans,

“Who can separate us from the love of Christ? Shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword? As it is written, For your sake we are killed all day long; we are accounted as sheep for the slaughter.” Again, not a very good promise that your Christian life is going to be problem free as some may teach. But he doesn't leave it there....because despite all of the external events that may happen, there is the internal, eternal reality that we are safe and secure in Christ as he writes, “Yet in all of these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am persuaded that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities nor powers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor height nor depth, nor any other created thing, shall be able to separate us from the love of God which is in Christ Jesus our Lord.”

Here is a man whose life reflects this very statement, for he was imprisoned, he was beat, he was stoned....and in all these things he was more than a conqueror for God used him in a mighty way to bring the gospel to the gentiles. This man who was a persecutor of the church, who was screaming blasphemies, and seeking the blood of God's people....is now called to suffer for the same cause that he set out to destroy. With God, there is no hopeless case, there is no one who is too far gone to be saved. If you are God's, then he will call you, he will draw you, and he will make you a new creature to love the very things that you hated, and to hate the very things that you once loved. To live for him, and yes, if called to do so...to die for him, and each whether alive, or dead is all to the glory and purpose of him.

The stark reality here, as much as we like to believe that we are our own person, the truth is...you are either God's, or you are Satan's. That is kind of a sobering thought isn't it. Paul called himself a bond-servant, a slave of Jesus Christ. But Christ is a master who loves you, not as slaves..but as his children, we are bond servants in that we owe him our all and can never repay for the price he paid to free us from the bondage of Satan. There is this imagery in scripture of this transaction, that all of mankind are a slave of Satan, bound in our sins, driven to despair and hopelessness, living in darkness. And Christ comes, and purchase us, he buys us, but the currency isn't money, but his own life...and now that we have been purchased, he says...you are my son's, you are my daughters..this day I have begotten you as my own children, not to be slaves to me as you were before, but as a free people who will desire to serve, not to gain merit, but because of love. And we do so, For he is not our slave master, but he has become our father, and like loving obedient children we will follow him.

Our lives are not our own, we are either a slave of Satan, or the freed children of God. And it is this reality that is the driving force behind the ministry of the Gospel, for it has the power to save souls from God's wrath, to be made free from the bondage of sin and despair. This reality fills us with such hope, that no matter what we may be called to face in this world, we can do so for we are more than conquerors for we are the Son's and the Daughters of the most high God. Our hope does not lie within this world, it does not lie within this life, but rather it lies in the fact that we are justified by the blood of Christ having been reconciled back to him as children, and heirs of the ever lasting kingdom. That is why Paul wrote, having suffered all these things we have read about this morning..and then some throughout his ministry said, “What shall we say to these things? If God is for us, who can be against us? He who did not spare his own son, but delivered him up for us all, how shall he not freely give us all things? Who shall bring a charge against God's elect? It is God who justifies. Who is he who condemns? It is Christ who died, and further more is also risen, who is even now at the right hand of God, who also makes intercession for us.”

Remember the words of Gamaliel? When they brought Peter to the high council...he said, "Keep away from these men and leave them alone, for if this plan or this work that they are doing is of man, it will come to nothing, but if it is of God, you cannot overthrow it, lest you even be found to be fighting against God." It would seem that he did not heed this man's wisdom, for at this point they seemed even all the more determined to silence those who were speaking the gospel of Christ. Yet, Gamaliel's words proved out to be true, for no matter the pressure, or persecution being put upon that early church we see the repeated theme of Luke's writing here in chapter 9 as well in the last half of verse 31, "And walking in the fear of the Lord and the comfort of the Holy Spirit, they were multiplied."

If this ministry be from God, it can not be overthrown, it can not be thwarted, slowed down or stopped. Even as we talked about last week, the very thing that was intended to strike fear into the fellowship of believers did nothing more than cause them to spread the gospel even further, increasing the outreach, and causing the fellowship of Christ to grow exponentially. In the words of Gamaliel is found the simple proof of the legitimacy of the Christian faith in the early church. For this faith did not wither and die as many others which he had mentioned came before, Theudas, claiming to be someone rose up and about 400 men joined him. He was slain and all who obeyed him scattered. Gamaliel also mentions Judas of Galilee who rose up and drew many people away after him as well, but he also died and all who followed him dispersed. These were all false prophets who arose, lead people astray and then were killed and their people disbanded and scattered. It would seem that this was the way of the Religious leaders in Jerusalem to deal with such men, yet when they did this with Christ and his followers it had the opposite effect, proving out that Christ was sent from God, for the tactics used to destroy the others, only emboldened, and bolstered and cause the fellowship of Christ to grow.

So, what does that all mean for us today? How are we as Christians to look at this account of Saul's conversion, ministry, and persecution? I think first and foremost the thing that stands out in our passage this morning, is that God is sovereign, and in all things working out his own will. And that the salvation of God brings about a true change as we see in the example of Saul. One who has gone from as verse 1 says, breathing threats and murders against the disciples of the Lord, to now one who is boldly ministering and sharing the very message and gospel he sought to destroy. He called himself the chief of sinners, yet God broke in and saved him, a man quite literally seeking the death of all who follow Christ. We can take great hope in this as well, for with God there is nothing that is impossible, it may seem that there are those in our lives who are hard hearted, callous, and may even openly claim to hate God.....but they are not beyond the saving faith of God if God so wills it. This should encourage us to remain faithful in ministering to them, for we do not know who God has predestined before hand to call his son's and daughters.

Vic tells of his own conversion, how he got sick of the 2 guys always sharing the gospel with them to the point that he tried to scare them off by cussing them out...and it worked, they stopped coming by the house, until his car broke down and he needed to call them to come and help. And which of course, they took that opportunity to continue to share the gospel with him as they worked on his car...and he said, conviction set in...and he died, God used the faithfulness of those men to reach Vic, despite his hatred for anything to do with God. We do not know how God will use us in his ministry, we do not know if those he puts in our path who are the most vehemently opposed to this faith may indeed one day turn to him. This is the whole point is it not? To be a minister of the light, and the hope that is in us? The only answer to the darkness and despair of this world.

Saul was seeking and hunting down Christians, yet they still spoke the gospel, they still shared the word, and the same happened to him, they began to seek him to silence and kill him as well...but that did not stop him from the ministry either. None of us have yet faced death for our faith, but we may face mockings, we may seem to lose friends, or family because of it, but that should not be our concern, for Christ warns us, that brother will turn against brother, and father against son, and children against parents.....yet we are to still remain faithful, we are still to preach the word for in so doing God maybe pleased to bring even the most vehemently opposed to belief. He did it with Saul, he did it with us, there is no thwarting, or overthrowing this God. It is God who adopts, just like in the secular world, adopted children don't have much to say in the matter of choice as to who adopts them, so to it is with God's election. And if we are to be his adopted children, then there is no one, or nothing that will change that. For it is God who calls, and it is God who saves, and we should praise him for it.