

“BOLD PREACHING IN THE FACE OF OPPOSITION”

Having considered Luke’s treatment of Saul’s conversion last week, we come now to his account of what happened to Saul after his conversion. When we compare this passage with what Paul says in his letter to the Galatians, we can see that Luke has not provided us with an exhaustive account of these things. For one thing, Luke does not say anything about the trip to Arabia that Paul took during his time in Damascus, which is mentioned in Galatians 1:17. For another, Luke’s account does not specify that Saul’s first trip to Jerusalem didn’t take place until three years after his conversion. A person reading this passage on its own would probably get the impression that the events narrated here took place over a relatively short period of time. Of course, this does not mean that Acts 9 is inaccurate. It simply tells us that Luke was selective in what he chose to include in his account of the early church and the spread of the gospel.

All writers of history have to be selective when it comes to the facts that they choose to convey to their readers. And they make their decisions about this based upon the point they want to communicate to their readers. So one question for us to ask as we study Luke’s account of what happened to Saul after his conversion is what it was that Luke wanted to communicate by conveying these particular facts about Saul’s time in Damascus and Jerusalem. One thing

that is fairly clear is that Luke is calling our attention to the dramatic transformation that took place in Saul's life as a result of his encounter with Christ. Saul went from being a persecutor of Christ's church to a preacher of Christ's gospel. And in case we have any doubts about the genuineness of this transformation, Luke lays an emphasis upon the fact that Saul had to endure serious opposition because of his preaching. It was not at all the case that Saul found preaching the gospel to be a better gig than persecuting Christians. He paid a heavy price for proclaiming Christ. He faced life-threatening opposition at the very beginning of his ministry. And eventually, his preaching of the gospel would cost him his life.

Another thing that we can learn from these verses has to do with the nature of the church's gospel ministry. Luke's account of Saul's early ministry tells us something about the church's message and the manner in which it should carry out its ministry. *It shows us that faithful ministry is characterized by bold preaching of Christ in the face of opposition.* This theme will be our point of focus as we study this passage tonight.

In Damascus

In the first part of our passage, we see Saul ministering in the city of Damascus. And in a point of significant irony, Saul carries out his ministry by doing what he had intended to do when he first set out for Damascus from Jerusalem: he went to the synagogues. But instead of going to the synagogues to find Christian refugees to arrest and bring back to Jerusalem, he proclaimed Jesus in the synagogues. He declared that Jesus “is the Son of God.” Saul got right to the heart of the matter. He did not spend his time talking about hot-button social or political issues. From the very beginning, his preaching was centered on Christ.

Notice also that Saul did not soften his message in hopes of making it more palatable to his hearers. This is an important point for today’s Christians to take to heart, because we can easily be pressured into taking that approach when it comes to talking to people about the gospel. Just this week, I read about something that Tim Keller, a highly respected minister in our denomination, said in a recent interview with a journalist from MSNBC. Keller responded to a question about the eternal destiny of those who die apart from Christ by saying this: “if they die and they don’t have Jesus Christ, I don’t know.” Now, to be fair, Keller did lay an emphasis upon the fact that, as far as he can see from what

we are told in the Bible, people need to believe in Jesus Christ for salvation. He did say that as far as he knows there is no other way. But he softened those statements by saying that he wasn't certain about whether everyone who dies apart from Christ will go to hell forever. He has come under fire for handling the question in this way, and rightly so. I hope that he admits that he made a mistake. {Note: He did -- see this: <http://thegospelcoalition.org/blogs/tgc/2011/09/13/keller-on-salvation-outside-of-christ/>} But some of his defenders are responding to the criticism that is being leveled against him by saying that he was only trying to contextualize the gospel message and gain a hearing for it before a hostile audience.

The reason why that argument does not work is because we never see that kind of approach commended to us in the Bible. The Jews in Damascus were certainly hostile to the gospel message, as Saul would soon find out. But this did not cause him to soften his message, not in the least. We could say that he did contextualize the gospel, since he used the Hebrew Bible to prove that Jesus really is the Christ who was foretold in the Old Testament Scriptures. Nevertheless, he did not soft-pedal the gospel. To proclaim Jesus as the Son of God and the Christ was one of the most offensive things that Saul could have said in those Damascus synagogues. When Jesus made those claims about

himself, it caused the Jewish leaders to plot his death. This passage makes it very clear that we cannot be afraid of allowing the gospel to offend people. Of course, we should not be offensive in the way we talk to people about Christ, but if a person finds the message itself to be offensive, then so be it. We are called to bear witness to the gospel as God has set it forth in his Word.

Before we leave Damascus, look for just a moment at how the Christians in that city responded when they learned about the plot against Saul's life. These were the very people whom Saul had come to Damascus to persecute, but they had become so attached to Saul that Luke can actually refer to them as his disciples. Look at how they rallied to Saul's aid, putting themselves at risk in order to help him safely get out of the city. This is a wonderful picture of the reconciliation that takes place in human relationships when people come to faith in Christ.

In Jerusalem

This brings us to the second part of our passage, where Luke tells us about Saul's time in Jerusalem. Try to imagine yourself in Saul's place as he made his way back to the holy city for the first time in three years. The last time he was there, he had gone to the high priest to get letters of extradition so that he could

go after the Christians who had fled from Jerusalem when persecution erupted. But a lot had happened in Saul's life since then, and news of what he had been up to certainly would have made its way back to Jerusalem by this time. Saul was like a man without a country. To the Jews, he would be seen as a traitor. To the Christians, he would be a man whom they would have found very difficult to trust. They would not have forgotten the fact that Saul had given his approval to Stephen's execution and had dragged other Jerusalem Christians off to prison.

This is where Barnabas comes into the story. Luke briefly mentioned him back in chapter 4, where he related the story of how Barnabas sold a field that belonged to him and gave the proceeds to the apostles to distribute to those who were in need. Luke also noted that the name Barnabas means "son of encouragement," a name that he would live up to on a number of occasions, including his response to Mark when Paul had given up on him. Here in our passage, Barnabas encouraged Saul by being his friend and supporter at a time when he was all alone.

The next thing to point out about Luke's account of Saul's time in Jerusalem is his emphasis upon the fact that Saul preached with great boldness. We might be inclined to think that this boldness was a natural character trait for Saul, but this is not in keeping with what he says about himself in his letters. For example, in 1

Corinthians 2, he says, "I was with you in weakness and in fear and much trembling." (1 Corinthians 2:3) And he asks the Christians in Ephesus to pray "that words may be given to me in opening my mouth boldly to proclaim the mystery of the gospel, for which I am an ambassador in chains, that I may declare it boldly, as I ought to speak." (Ephesians 6:19–20) Paul's boldness to proclaim Christ came from Christ himself. He prayed for boldness and he asked others to pray that the Lord would grant him boldness.

We too should pray for boldness, both for our personal witness to Christ and for the work of those who labor in the gospel ministry. This is one prayer that the Lord loves to answer. We see him answering it back in Acts 4, where the Christians responded to an outbreak of persecution by saying to the Lord, "grant to your servants to continue to speak your word with all boldness." And then, immediately after their prayer was over, Luke says that the Christians were filled with the Spirit and "continued to speak the word of God with boldness." If the Lord wants us to be bold for him, then he will surely grant us boldness when we ask him for it.

As in Damascus, Saul's preaching in Jerusalem incited his opponents to plot against his life. But once again, God delivered him. It was not yet the Lord's appointed time for Saul to be martyred, though that day would eventually come.

And so, as we are told in chapter 22, Jesus appeared to Saul in a vision and instructed him to leave Jerusalem. God's deliverance of Saul serves as an example of how he preserves each one of his children until his purposes for us in this life are brought to their completion.

The Church at Peace

This brings us to the last part of our passage: Luke's summary statement in verse 31 about the status of the church. The first thing to note about this is that Luke refers to many local churches, churches in the regions of Judea, Galilee and Samaria, as "the church." This reminds us that, while there are many individual local expressions of the church, there is ultimately only one church of Jesus Christ. Even though the church is not always visibly united, all true Christians belong to the one body of Christ.

Luke tells us that the church in these regions enjoyed a period of peace and prosperity at this particular moment in time. We know that this peace did not last forever. The early church had to endure waves of serious persecution up until the conversion of Constantine in the 4th century. But for the time being, the chief persecutor of Christ's people had been subdued by Christ and was transformed into a bold preacher of the gospel. As a result, the church enjoyed a

period of flourishing. In his providence, the Lord sometimes grants such periods of peace and prosperity to his church. There are moments in church history when the church's major opponents are removed and its ministry is especially fruitful. Those times do not last forever, but they are a blessing that is to be received with heartfelt gratitude.

Luke also tells us what it was that fueled the success of the church's ministry during this period of peace. It was not due to some new program or method that those Christians dreamed up. It was due to the fact that the church was walking in the fear of the Lord and in the comfort of the Holy Spirit. They were not trying to preserve peace and promote success by coming up with their own innovative ideas and strategies. They were simply living in reliance upon the Lord, and they were worshipping him with reverence and awe. We are called to do the very same thing.

This passage shows us that Paul's early ministry was characterized by the same kind of attitude that we see him express in his first letter to the church at Thessalonica: "But just as we have been approved by God to be entrusted with the gospel, so we speak, not to please man, but to please God who tests our

hearts.” [1 Thes. 4:2] Paul preached the gospel boldly in the face of opposition because he was chiefly concerned with pleasing God, not man. There have been other examples of bold preaching of Christ throughout church history, and in all of them we find the same conviction that it is more important to please God than please man. We find one example in John Knox, the great Scottish Reformer. Listen to what Knox said when he was confronted by Mary Queen of Scots, who was trying to make Scotland Roman Catholic again. He said, “Madam, as right religion took neither original strength nor authority from worldly princes, but from the Eternal God alone, so are not subjects bound to frame their religion according to the appetites of their princes.” [Bond, *The Mighty Weakness of John Knox*, 22] It is a miracle that Knox was not put to death for saying such things, and he did have to endure significant opposition, but he stood his ground. May God grant his church today grace to do so as well.