

'HE WHO SET ME APART CALLED ME BY HIS GRACE'

SERIES: PAUL, AN INSTRUMENT OF THE RISEN CHRIST

by Ron Ritchie

At our discipleship group meeting last week we began talking about a prison ministry in Colombia, South America, in which this church was involved for a period. We reminisced about an incident that occurred on one of our trips that brought great joy to my heart. It occurred to me that it fits very well with what we will be talking about this morning in our study on the apostle Paul's ministry to the early church. In one of the prisons we visited in Colombia we were welcomed by one of the prisoners who was wearing a shabby suit. This was unique for a prisoner. In the Colombian prison system, however, the clothes which a new inmate happens to be wearing when he first enters prison become his prison garb for the duration of his sentence. If his clothes disintegrate over time, that's too bad for him; he must go around naked or semi-naked. Most of the men in the quad we had entered were in that condition, but not this man who greeted us. He not only was wearing a suit, he also had on a tie and a shirt. Although his clothes were filthy, nevertheless they seemed to make a statement about his circumstances, and we later discovered he had a leadership position among the prisoners.

The cell block we were entering, he told us, housed many insane prisoners. If I had a moment of weakness during that ministry it was right then, because I heard that remark just as a double set of gates closed behind us. The man in the suit asked us to share the gospel in a cell of about 20 or 25 semi-naked prisoners. The stench in the cell was overpowering. There were lice all over the place. Our friend reached under a bed and produced a number of New Testaments in Spanish and asked us to share the gospel with the men. After we had done so, and had prayed for them, many of them thanked us, although one man who seemed demon possessed began screaming and spitting at us. That made us all the more anxious to get out of the cell to safety. To our amazement, the man in the suit told us that things were really not all that bad in that cell. "Wait until I take you to one where conditions are really bad," he said. He brought us to a cell housing about ten prisoners, all of them naked and standing in their own filth. As we approached they began cursing and screaming at us. Some of them spat at us and tried to reach through the bars to scratch us with their long fingernails. "These are the really crazy ones," he told us. We left that prison, shaken at what we had seen.

Some of our group went back to the same prison the following year. When they returned home, Ed Woodhall told me what had happened to our friend in the suit. He had looked for him in the same quad as before but couldn't find him. Then he heard that the man had voluntarily entered the cell occupied by the insane prisoners, having first trained a man to take over his own shepherding responsibilities in the quad he was leaving. He told Ed, "If I don't go into their cell, who will tell them about Jesus Christ?" That man was a chosen instrument of the living God to make Jesus Christ known to a group of men the world regards as crazy, but whom God considers extremely valuable and worthy of salvation. "Greater love hath no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends."

This is what we want to talk about this morning Christians becoming chosen vessels of Christ. God chose the apostle Paul and he has chosen each one of us as a vessel to be used for his honor and glory so that many might hear the good news about Jesus Christ. That is what our lives as Christians are all about. We're not here to build better houses, buy bigger and faster cars, earn more money and make more friends. We're not here to become happy or successful. We have been placed here to become servants, channels of the love of God. Should he bless us with all of these other things, let us be thankful for those gifts, but he doesn't owe us anything. Once we were his enemies. We were living under the influence of the world, the flesh and the devil. But we have been redeemed, bought and paid for by the blood of Jesus Christ.

In our study in the life of Paul, from Acts, chapter 9, we will be looking at the visit of Ananias to the apostle. Saul has been in the city of Damascus for three days following the incident on the Damascus Road, when the Lord Jesus appeared to him in a blinding light to demand of him, "Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting Me?" Saul, the arrester of Christians, was thus himself arrested by the Lord of glory. Blinded by the light from

heaven which flashed around him, Saul was taken by the hand and led into the city, where he remained for three days, all the while fasting and praying. Later in our studies we will learn that during this time some things were communicated to him. So Saul was awaiting word from the Lord in Damascus, anticipating that God would use his life, to his honor and glory.

We begin our study in Acts 9:10-16. There we will see that Saul was

I. A Chosen Instrument of Christ

Acts 9:10-16

Now there was a certain disciple at Damascus, named Ananias; and the Lord said to him in a vision, "Ananias." And he said, "Behold, here am I, Lord." And the Lord said to him, "Arise, and go to the street called Straight, and inquire at the house of Judas for a man from Tarsus named Saul, for behold, he is praying, and he has seen in a vision a man named Ananias come in and lay his hands on him, so that he might regain his sight." But Ananias answered, "Lord, I have heard from many about this man, how much harm he did to Thy saints at Jerusalem; and here he has authority from the chief priests to bind all who call upon Thy name." But the Lord said to him, "Go, for he is a chosen instrument of Mine, to bear My name before the Gentiles and kings and the sons of Israel; for I will show him how much he must suffer for My name's sake."

We will focus on three persons in this passage: the disciple Ananias, the invisible but risen and present Lord, and Saul. the "chosen instrument."

Ananias (his name means "protected by Jehovah") is also mentioned in Acts 22:12, where the apostle, speaking some 25 years later, says of him, ". . . Ananias, a man who was devout by the standard of the Law, and well spoken of by all the Jews who lived there [in Damascus]." Ananias may have come to faith in Christ at Pentecost, just a few years earlier. God knew this man by his name, having placed him in Damascus to prepare him for service at a later time. Thus Ananias enters the history of the church for a moment to fulfill this very important task. The Lord appeared to him in a "vision," we are told. A vision is a supernatural presentation of a certain scene or circumstance which comes to a person while he is awake. There are many references to visions in the Scriptures. In the New Testament, for instance, we read of the vision of Zecharias, to whom the Angel Gabriel appeared concerning the forthcoming birth of his son John the Baptist; the vision on the mountain-top, when the Lord was transfigured before his disciples: the vision experienced by Cornelius when the angel told him to send his servants to Peter, who also having a vision at the same time. So the Lord appeared to Ananias in a vision and said, "Ananias." He answered, "Behold, here am I Lord." That is the response of a man who understands spiritual reality. I must admit that if I had a vision, my first response would probably be to wonder what I had eaten for supper. But the godly Ananias was in tune with his Lord, ready and willing to be used when called upon.

Notice the extremely detailed instructions which he received from the Lord: "Arise and go to the street called Straight, and inquire at the house of Judas for a man from Tarsus named Saul. for behold, he is praying, and he has seen in a vision a man named Ananias come in and lay his hands on him, so that he might regain his sight." Why all this detail? It is because God wants his disciples to be part of his plan of redemption. That is why he patiently goes through each step of the way with Ananias. Note the awareness of the resurrected Lord. He is saying to Ananias. in effect. "I am aware of all that is going on in the world. and I am doing wonderful things in this age of the Spirit I planned for my disciples to witness of me in Jerusalem, Judea and Samaria. and now I plan to open the door of faith to the Gentiles. I have a man for that task, whom I chose from his mother's womb. He is waiting for a visit from you so that he can be brought into fellowship with the followers of the Way! He is praying at this moment and I have heard his confession. his joy and thanksgiving, I have also given him a vision to encourage him that you will soon lay hands on him and restore his sight. Here, then. is his address. Now go there and minister to him."

But notice Ananias' faltering response to this word from the Lord. Although his name means, "protected by Jehovah," when he is told to go inquire about Saul of Tarsus he reminds the living God that this Saul is a dangerous individual. But, "but," he begins his response. "This man has done great harm to your saints in Jerusalem. He is here on another mission of persecution, with credentials from the high priest, and he intends to take prisoner those who call upon the name of Jesus and return them to Jerusalem with him me included. Do you think my being taken back there and stoned is the best thing for me?" That is how many of us respond when the Lord calls us, isn't it? "I'll follow you anywhere Lord, but Alaska?; East Palo Alto?" Let us not forget that as believers we are his beloved children, that we too are "protected by Jehovah."

Secondly, let us look at Saul, the chosen instrument. "The Lord said to Ananias. 'Go, for he is a chosen instrument of Mine. to hear my name before the Gentiles and kings and the sons of Israel: for I will show him how much he must suffer for My name's sake.'" God, who called Saul from his mother's womb, knows who Saul was in the past, and who he is now following his encounter with Jesus on the Damascus Road. Ever since that event Saul's heart had been prepared to receive the visit of Ananias, for that is when Saul had given his heart to the Lord. Speaking of his conversion some '5 years later before King Agrippa, Paul related that the Lord had said to him on that occasion:

" . . . arise and stand on your feet; for this purpose I have appeared to you, to appoint you a minister and a witness not only to the things which you have seen, but also to the things in which I will appear to you; delivering you from the Jewish people and from the Gentiles, to whom I am sending you, to open their eyes so that they may turn from darkness to light and from the dominion of Satan to God, in order that they may receive forgiveness of sins and an inheritance among those who have been sanctified by faith in Me."(Acts 26:16-18)

God had personally chosen and elected Saul to be his "vessel" to bring the gospel to the Gentiles. Writing to the Gentiles years later, Paul would make reference to this fact in these words,

But when He who had set me apart, even from my mother's womb, and called Me through His grace, was pleased to reveal His Son in me, that I might preach Him among the Gentiles... (Gal. 1:15. 16)

As they look back on their lives, Christians can see that even during what they once regarded as years wasted in unbelief. God was at work preparing them for their life in Christ. I would never want to live the first 22 years of my life over again, but those were the years when God gave me a compassion for people whom I would otherwise have ignored. Thus I can say with the apostle that I was "set apart even from my mother's womb, and called through His grace." God had my life all laid out. I was "chosen before the foundation of the world."

This is how God has worked in every generation. choosing good men and women, as well as bad men and women. to accomplish his plan of redemption. Saul had joined God's "Hall of Fame" of the chosen vessels he has used throughout history. To Abraham, the Lord said. "I will make you a great nation. I will bless you and make your name great, and so you shall be a blessing . . . and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed" (Gen. 12:2, 3). Speaking of Pharaoh. God said. For this very purpose I raised you up, to demonstrate My power in you and that My name might be proclaimed throughout the whole earth" (Ex. 9:16). To Moses at the burning bush. God said. "Behold, the cry of the house of Israel has come to me. Furthermore, I have seen the oppression with which the Egyptians are oppressing them, therefore come now and I will send you to Pharaoh so that you may bring My people, the house of Israel, out of Egypt" (Ex. 3:9). Referring to David, First Samuel 13 says, "The Lord has sought out for Himself a man after His own heart, and the Lord has appointed him as ruler over His people." To Jerusalem. the Lord said, "Before I formed you in the womb I knew you. and before you were born I consecrated you: I have appointed you a prophet to the nations" (Jer. 1:5). Time does not allow me to speak of Joshua, Isaiah, Amos, Nebuchadnezzar. Cyrus. Daniel, Nehemiah, Esther, Elizabeth and Mary, each one in turn a "chosen vessel" to accomplish a certain aspect of God's plan of redemption. Time does not allow me to single out many of you present here this morning. chosen vessels for God's honor and glory.

So Paul Joins the distinguished list of chosen vessels to be used by God in the age of the Spirit. No longer will he be working for the chief priest, leading the temple "hit squad." No longer will he be his own man, the zealous Pharisee. Now that he has submitted himself to our Lord, he will henceforth refer to himself as a "bondservant of the Lord," a "minister of reconciliation," an ambassador" and an apostle of Jesus Christ, a "prisoner" of the Lord Jesus. He had become, in the words of Jesus, "a chosen vessel to bear My name."

Saul is give a three-fold commission that has a conditional clause. The first part of that commission, Jesus says, is to "bear My name before the Gentiles." What a job description for Saul, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of the Hebrews and a Pharisee to bear the name of Jesus to the hated Gentiles! Why not to the Jews? we wonder. Have you ever toyed with the idea that if only a certain individual came to Christ he would make a wonderful witness among a certain segment or class of society? Think of Chuck Colson, for example, the "hatchet man" of the Nixon White House. He was caught up in the Watergate scandal and was sent to prison, where he became a Christian. Colson would seem to be a logical candidate to send back to Washington. Now a transformed man, he could be used by God to lead many in commitment to Christ. But God had quite a different ministry for Chuck Colson. Through him he began Prison Fellowship, a ministry to prisoners throughout the United States that has just celebrated its tenth anniversary of service. Here is part of what Chuck wrote about it in their recent newsletter:

This ministry was born and raised in prison. Its initial vision came when I saw God's power so clearly in the Christian inmates around me. The vision became a reality when Federal Prison Director Norman Carlson suddenly allowed us to furlough inmates from prison for discipleship seminars.

What caused Carlson to take such an unprecedented risk? Not political influence or my persuasive powers, but the impact of an unknown inmate's prayer for him a few weeks earlier in a prison chapel.

Our in-prison seminars began in a similar way. In 1977, when we wanted to furlough dChristian inmate from prison to attend a Washington seminar, Warden George Ralston flatly refused. "If you guys are so good," he challenged, "why don't you bring your teaching team into our prison?"

So we did. Not in triumphal strength, but with our knees knocking and God used that first attempt to launch a program that after 10 years of ministry has reached 91,000 inmates with the Gospel.

Chuck Colson did not return to the corridors of power in Washington to become a spokesman for God among the mighty. He returned to the prisons of this country, where he had his own "Damascus Road" experience, to share Jesus Christ with lost and hurting prisoners.

The second part of Saul's commission is that he must witness to Christ before kings." That would not have been part of Saul's plan either, but God would use him to address state officials and governors such as Felix, King Agrippa, and finally Nero, the supreme ruler of the Roman Empire.

And thirdly, Saul would witness "before the sons of Israel." Whenever he he did so, of course, he always found trouble. He was run out of several cities and synagogues; he was beaten and stoned, and finally arrested for his testimony to the Jews. Nevertheless, in Romans 9:3 he bares his heart as to his feelings for his fellow-countrymen:

For I wish that I myself were accused, separated from Christ for the sake of my brethren, my kinsmen according to the flesh, who are Israelites . . .

On his missionary journeys, Saul always made a point of seeking out the Jews first to minister among them.

The conditional clause is stated in the words which Jesus spoke to Ananias following this three-fold commission: . . . for I will show him how much he must suffer for My name's sake." Here Jesus is not saying that Saul will be paid in kind for the suffering he cause among followers of the Way. It is not time for Saul to pay his dues, in other words. Why, then, did Jesus include this condition of suffering for Saul? We find the

answer in Hebrews. God became man in Jesus Christ so that,

. . . through death he might destroy him who had the power of death, that is the devil, and deliver all who through fear of death were subject to lifelong bondage. (Heb. 2:14)

Suffering is a necessary part of the battle with evil. We live in a fallen world, and Jesus' decisive defeat of Satan inspires sacrifice to remove the deepest cause of suffering. Luke says that our Lord had to "suffer many things, and be rejected by the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and be raised up on the third day" (Luke 9:22). As followers of Jesus, we too must expect to suffer for his sake. Those who choose to love the Lord, and who demonstrate that love by serving others, must expect to suffer. Service for Christ's sake runs counter to the aspirations of this world. As we walk each day in a dark and fallen world, we will find ourselves involved in spiritual warfare, as we seek to snatch out by the power of the Holy Spirit men, women and children and lead them to Christ. Hatred, jealousy, misunderstanding, even violence will sometimes be our lot. Scripture says that Christians will suffer for His sake" (Phil. 1:2). 'for righteousness' sake" (I Pet. 2:9), "for the sake of the gospel" (I Tim. 1:9), "for resisting Satan" (I Pet. 2:19), etc. But the good news is that we triumph through all of this. Here is what Paul says in his second letter to the Corinthians,

. . . we are afflicted in every way, but not crushed, perplexed but not despairing; persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed; al- always carrying about in the body the dying of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus also may be manifested in our body. (2 Cor. 4:8-10)

Jesus said to his disciples on the night he was betrayed.

"Remember what I said to you: 'A slave is not greater than his master.' If they persecuted me, they will persecute you." (John 15:20)

Saul was no exception. He too would suffer much for the sake of the gospel. He who had made many of the early Christians to suffer would find himself on the receiving end of suffering in order that many would find salvation in Christ. Thus did God set apart Saul as a chosen vessel so that the door of salvation might be opened up to the Gentiles.

So Saul is awaiting the visit of a man named Ananias. who will lay hands on him. so that he might regain his sight." When that happens, Saul will be,

II. Received as a Brother in Christ

Acts 9:17-19

And Ananias departed and entered the house, and after laying his hands on him said, "Brother Saul, the Lord Jesus, who appeared to you on the road by which you were coming. has sent me so that you may regain your sight, and be filled with the Holy Spirit." And immediately there fell from his eyes something like scales, and he regained his sight, and he arose and was baptized; and he took food and was strengthened. Now for several days he was with the disciples who were at Damascus.

Paul's account of this incident, given before the Jewish people some years later, presents a clearer picture of what occurred when he was visited by Ananias. I will read both accounts so that we may benefit by this fuller picture.

And Ananias departed and entered the house, and after laying his hands on him said, "Brother Paul . . . regain your sight, and be filled with the Holy Spirit." And immediately there fell

from his eyes something like scales, and he regained his sight. Now, reading Paul's own account of this incident, from Acts 22]: "And at that time I looked up at him. And he said, 'The God of our fathers has appointed you to know His will, and to see the Righteous One, and to hear an utterance from His mouth. For you will be a witness for Him to all men of what you have seen and heard. And now why do you delay? Arise, and be baptized, and wash away your sins, calling on His name.'"

When Ananias laid his hands on Saul, he was being used by Christ to commission Saul as his God's ambassador. At that moment the power of Christ restored sight to Saul's eyes. Notice that Ananias referred to him as "Brother Saul," thus confirming his salvation. Saul had entered the new society, the Body of Christ, made up of brothers and sisters, with the Lord Jesus as common Head.

Secondly, as a new believer in Christ, Saul was filled with the Holy Spirit. In the age of the Spirit, the Holy Spirit has five activities in the life of the passive believer; and the passive believer, in turn, has one active responsibility. First, the Holy Spirit, as a member of the Godhead, convicts the world of sin, righteousness and judgment in and through believers. Secondly, the Holy Spirit regenerates the new believer, who receives eternal life, a new nature, and becomes a new creature in Christ. Thirdly, the Holy Spirit places (baptizes) the new believer into the Body of Christ a once-for-all experience-and makes all believers one in Christ. Fourthly, the Holy Spirit indwells the new believer, taking up permanent residence in his heart. And fifthly, the Holy Spirit becomes the seal of the believer's new security. This seal is the certainty of being possessed by God and preserved until the day of redemption. The Holy Spirit is, therefore, in a sense, Christ's engagement ring to his bride, the church.

Having received the Holy Spirit, then, the new believer's responsibility is to be "filled" with the Spirit, i.e., to obey his commands and promptings from within to live according to his new nature. Let the Holy Spirit so work in you that men and women may see Christ in you. That is a conscious choice. The very first words I said when I woke up this morning were, "Lord, use me today to your honor and glory. Fill me with your Spirit. Let people see Christ in me." That is what God has called us to do.

Next, Saul was baptized. Baptism by water is an outward, visible sign of an inward, spiritual cleansing which has already occurred. In Romans 6, Paul writes that when we are saved we are united spiritually with Christ in his death, burial and resurrection. When he died on the cross, we died with him. Our old nature was crucified with him so that our body of sin might be done away with. Thus, we are no longer slaves to sin, for, as Paul wrote, "he who died is freed from the power of sin."

Because I died with Christ so long ago, I have been set free from the power and the bondage of sin. Every time I choose to sin, therefore, I know in my heart I do not have to. I have the power, by the Holy Spirit, to say no to sin. I do not have to give in to the whims of the old nature. When Jesus rose from the grave we arose with him so that we too might walk in newness of life. We walk with him in peace, righteousness and joy. We are rich and blessed, and we daily experience a taste of what eternity will be like. I am thrilled to know that there is coming a day when I will be living with all of my brothers and sisters in eternity and I will never be tempted to judge anyone ever again. I will be able to love everyone just like Christ loves them. Last week when I stumbled and judged someone, my wife reminded me that we had committed ourselves to treat everyone who entered our home as we would treat the Lord himself. I agreed with her, but added, "I still don't like that woman!" She said, as a prophet would, "Then get over it!" Don't you just love it when your wife rebukes you like that? As believers we must daily remind ourselves that we have been crucified with Christ "so that our body of sin might be done away with."

Fourthly, Saul was accepted into the fellowship of believers in Damascus and remained with them several days. Now he was known as "Brother Saul." The arrester of the brethren had himself been arrested, and was invited to participate in the fellowship of other believers. The Lord moved him into a fellowship of believers where he probably was taught some basic truth about his new-found faith. This is a good principle to keep in mind when we are ministering to new Christians.

At our discipleship meeting which I mentioned earlier we talked about another incident that happened during

the Colombian prison ministry. While there, we held a seminar for about seventy ex-convicts who had become Christians in prison. When I asked one of them which prison he had been in, however, he told me he had never been a prisoner, but rather had been a prison warden. He had come to the conference by mistake, he said. He thought he was going to a conference designed to make him a better prison warden, but instead arrived at this seminar where he met many men who had been in his prison. He had come so far he decided to stay for the week and attend the seminar. Later in the week, after he had attended all the teaching and sharing sessions, he stood up during one of the mealtimes and shared about how he came to the wrong conference. Then he said, " Today I spent time with one of your team from PBC and I want you to know that I have given my life to Christ." All of the ex-convicts jumped up and ran to this man to hug him and shake his hand and welcome him into the kingdom of God. On a later ministry we visited his prison in the High Andes and discovered that he had led his wife and children to Christ. He had not attended the wrong conference, but had arrived exactly where God wanted him to be!

Looking back on his life years later. Paul would write to the Galatians,

... when He who had set me apart, even from my mother's womb, and called me through His grace, was pleased to reveal His Son in me, that I might preach Him among the Gentiles .

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Saul was a chosen instrument of God for his particular ministry. You and I have also been chosen by God, redeemed by the Son, and sealed by the Spirit. In this study we are looking at Saul's story, which has been recorded for us in the New Testament. What will be recorded of us in our generation?

Our Heavenly Father, place us wherever you want us to be. chosen vessels and instruments of your love and your grace.

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