

'WOE TO ME IF I PREACH NOT THE GOSPEL'

SERIES: PAUL, AN INSTRUMENT OF THE RISEN CHRIST

by Ron Ritchie

I have just returned from three days of meetings at Westmont College in Santa Barbara. For several years I have been invited to participate in the college chapel program, to meet with the faculty and students, and to interact with all the goings-on in that Christian campus of some twelve hundred kids, one of whom is my son Rodd. It was a very exciting time. How wonderful to hear all those young people worship the Lord together at chapel! The zeal and the energy they displayed really ministered to my spirit. Several young men told me one evening that they wanted to serve the Lord no matter where he placed them. I began to ask them a few practical questions about money for fares, passports, what and where they would like to teach, etc. They were a little vague on these matters; they hadn't really thought through the details involved. But there was no doubt about their zealousness and drive. One of them said, "I really want to preach.- He was bubbling over with enthusiasm and love for God. Asked what his message would be, he said he hadn't worked on that yet but he was sure he wanted to be a preacher.

Saul of Tarsus was similarly ambitious following his conversion on the Damascus Road in the first century. Try as he might, however, he found that his zeal and energy for the things of Christ did not translate into converts to Christianity at first. This is the subject of our study this morning. I am happy to see so many students here. This message from the book of Acts, based upon the apostle Paul's cry, "Woe is me if I preach not the gospel," should encourage your hearts.

In these messages from the book of Acts we are looking at the life of the apostle. We have already studied Saul's conversion experience; Ananias' subsequent laying-on of his hands on him so as to restore his sight; his acceptance into the fellowship of believers in Damascus; and our Lord's commissioning of him to bear his name before Gentiles, kings, and the people of Israel. It is hard to imagine the apostle Paul ever being a new babe in Christ Jesus, but that is what he was at one time. Here, then, we find Saul, following his dramatic conversion and commissioning, having fellowship with his brothers and sisters in Damascus.

There is an important and encouraging message for young believers in this passage. Later, the mature Paul would become a model for Christians throughout the centuries. He gave himself wholeheartedly to the service of his Lord and Savior, so much so that he wrote to the Corinthians years afterwards, ". . . I am under compulsion: for woe is me if I do not preach the gospel" (I Cor. 9:16). He was "eager to preach the gospel," he wrote to the Romans (Rom. 1:15). Here was the reason for his eagerness:

For I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek. For in it the righteousness of God is revealed from faith to faith, as it is written, "But the righteous man shall live by faith."

By that time, the apostle was eager and fully prepared to share the gospel with all men. He had a clear and effective message of salvation to offer. But we tend to forget that he was once a new, struggling believer. We will be encouraged to know that he too had to learn to trust Jesus, not his own fleshly efforts, day in and day out. And it was a learning process for Saul. He had many qualifications in the flesh, but he had to forsake and discard them in order to become an effective minister of the gospel. Just like you and me, Saul had to put together the building blocks of his faith, one at a time. "Woe is me if I preach not the gospel,- said Paul. Likewise, I am sure he often thought, "Woe is me if I preach the gospel in the flesh" especially the religious flesh.

I know how he felt, being a former street preacher myself. When I was a student in Philadelphia many years ago, I preached every Friday night in front of Gimbel's department store. At least I think that is what I was

doing preaching. Every Friday night when school was in session, no matter how bad the weather, my friend George Klock and I preached to the passing crowds. And a lot of them passed by in a hurry! Maybe our microphone was too loud. One Christmas I noticed that even Santa Claus, who used to stand near us, moved down the block! At another time I preached in the missions, mainly to drunks who had to listen to my message before they were fed. A lot of them woke up later, as Ray Stedman would say, "greatly refreshed." Preaching in the flesh tends to have that effect.

Let us look, then, at the message of this new Christian, Saul, from Acts 9:19-26. We discover that, following his commissioning, he immediately began to proclaim,

I. Jesus is the Son of God

Acts 9:19-26

Now for several days he was with the disciples who were at Damascus, and immediately he began to proclaim Jesus in the synagogues, saying, "Jesus is the Son of God." And all those hearing him continued to be amazed, and were saying, "Is this not he who in Jerusalem destroyed those who called on this name, and who had come here for the purpose of bringing them bound before the chief priests?" But Saul kept increasing in strength and confounding the Jews who lived at Damascus by proving that this Jesus is the Christ. And when many days had elapsed, the Jews plotted together to do away with him, but their plot became known to Saul. And they were also watching the gates day and night so that they might put him to death; but his disciples took him by night, and let him down through an opening in the wall, lowering him in a basket.

Saul's message was two-fold: Jesus is the Son of God, and Jesus is the Christ, the Messiah. And he delivered his message in the synagogues, where the services consisted of the singing of the Psalms and the reading of the law and the prophets. Following the reading, an invitation was extended to those present to comment on the passages. That is when Saul took the opportunity to proclaim his message, "Jesus is the Son of God."

How that must have electrified the Jews! Saul had begun to proclaim what the Angel Gabriel, then Mary, the mother of Jesus, followed by John the Baptist, and finally what the disciples of Jesus himself believed, as the Scriptures record, that Jesus was indeed the Son of God. At Jesus' birth, the angel said to Mary, "Behold, you will conceive in your womb, and bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus. He will be great and will be called "The Son of the Most High . . ." "The Holy Spirit will come upon you and the power of the Most High will overshadow you, and for that reason the holy offspring shall be called the Son of God" (Luke 1:32-35). At Jesus' baptism, a voice from heaven proclaimed, "Thou art My beloved Son. In Thee I am well pleased" (Luke 3:22). As the disciples observed the miracles of Jesus, they said, "Now that we have seen you and what you can do, surely you are the Son of God" (Matt. 14:33). At Jesus' trial, responding to the high priest's question, "Are you the Son of God? . . . Jesus answered, "Yes, I am" (Luke 22:70).

The Jews who sat listening to Saul in those synagogues in Damascus fully understood the nature of his claim to mean that Jesus was divine, that he was the true Representative of the Israel of God, the true Vine, the Servant of Jehovah, God's anointed King. They understood Saul to be saying that Jesus the Nazarene, the man who was accused of blasphemy by the high priest, the one who was taken outside the city walls and crucified by the Romans, was the very Son of God. Saul was making what was, to the Jews, an incredible claim: that the Jesus who was crucified was co-equal with God himself, that he believed the claim of Jesus, "Before Abraham was, I Am." Mary believed because an angel revealed that to her. The disciples believed because of the miracles of Jesus. John the Baptist believed because the voice from heaven revealed it to him. And now Saul, for his part, believed because of his personal experience with the resurrected Lord on the Damascus Road. Of this Jesus, Paul would write later these marvelous words in the book of Romans,

. . . concerning his Son, who was born of the seed of David according to the flesh, who was declared with power to be the Son of God by the resurrection from the dead, according to the Spirit of holiness, Jesus Christ our Lord.

What did the Jews think of Saul's preaching? They were 'amazed,' Acts records. I'm sure they were confused also, as is evident by what they said, "Is this not he who in Jerusalem destroyed those who called on this name, and who had come here for the purpose of bringing them bound before the high priest?" Saul's message left the Jews amazed and confused. If we were keeping "box scores" on the results of his preaching ministry, we would have to record that Paul scored a miserable

Converts, 0; Amazed, 100 percent.

Many scholars feel that, following this event, Saul departed to the Arabian desert to be instructed in many things by the risen Christ. Galatians 1:15-17 gives some clues for this scenario:

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, I did not immediately consult with flesh and blood, nor did I go up to Jerusalem to those who were apostles before me; but I went away to Arabia, and returned once more to Damascus. Then three years later I went up to Jerusalem . . .

I don't know about Saul, but I would have struggled in my spirit with spending all that time in the desert as a young believer, learning about the faith, when I had such a zeal to preach the gospel and win converts. This is where many young believers struggle. They have so much they want to share, but they must first undergo discipline and training under the Holy Spirit. I am speaking from experience. As I have already noted, while I was preaching during my student days in Philadelphia, I may have made better use of my time away in the desert somewhere, learning of the things of Christ. I'm glad there are no videotapes of those street-corner preaching sessions!

We do not know how long within that three-year period of living in Damascus that Saul spent in the desert. We do know, however, that when he returned his message had changed from "Jesus is the Son of God" to "Jesus is the Messiah." He had learned what the disciples before him needed to learn about Jesus following his death and resurrection. Remember what the Lord said when he appeared to the two disciples on the Emmaus road:

"O foolish men and slow of heart to believe in all that the prophets had spoken. Was it not necessary for the Christ to suffer these things and enter into His glory?" And beginning with Moses and all the prophets, He explained to them the things concerning Himself in all the Scriptures . . .

Later, the Lord appeared again to his disciples in Jerusalem and said to them,

"These are My words which I spoke to you while I was still with you, that all things which are written about Me in the Law of Moses and the Prophets and the Psalms must be fulfilled. Then He opened their minds to understand the Scriptures . . .

They had finally come to see that Jesus was indeed the Messiah.

Saul, therefore, changed his message a little, from "Jesus is the Son of God" to "Jesus is the Messiah." Verse 22: ". . . Saul kept increasing in strength and confounding the Jews who lived at Damascus by proving that this Jesus is the Christ." He would have shown them that Jesus is the Passover Lamb of Exodus; the Atoning Sacrifice of Leviticus; the Prophet to come of Deuteronomy; the Sheep led to slaughter of Isaiah; the Savior of Obadiah; the Branch of Righteousness of Jeremiah; the Resurrection and Life of Jonah; the Son of Righteousness of Malachi. And what was the result of all this? Let's look at the "box scores" of this preaching session by Saul:

Converts, 0; Confounded, 100 percent.

Why was this? It was because the Jews could not accept Saul's teaching at that time. God instead had called him to be a channel of his love to the Gentiles. The Jews rejected him and forced him to flee Damascus. Things got so bad that the disciples lowered him over the wall of the city in a basket. Later he would tell the Corinthians that in that moment of weakness and failure he learned that the Lord did not intend his background, his intellect and his ability to confound his Jewish audiences. We can imagine his frustration. He was excited about his new faith. He had the pedigree and the schooling. He understood his own people. He probably had a five-year plan to preach in every synagogue in the circuit. But instead he became a "basket case!" He learned that God did not need all of his natural abilities and strengths. God wanted Saul plus nothing. He would make him "an instrument to bear His Name before the Gentiles."

That must have confounded Saul. Why didn't God want to use him among his own kind of people? "Doesn't God realize that here is my mission field?" Saul must have reasoned. God had quite a different plan for him, however.

I am sure there are times when many could say, with Saul, "If the world only knew who I really am and what my abilities are . . ." While driving to church this morning I was thinking along those very lines myself. I was talking to God and I must admit I smiled a little. I prayed, "Lord, you gave me a lot of artistic ability, but you have never used my art in my Christian life. You gave me ability as an actor, but you have never used that either. I used to write poetry by the hour. I was privileged to have my poems printed regularly in the United States Armed Forces newspaper in Europe, "Stars and Stripes." But you never used that ability. In the early '50 s, I was in on the ground floor of radio and television as a disc jockey and TV announcer I often felt that the 700 Club would have nothing on me but you didn't use that either. I really had to laugh to myself, because never in my wildest dreams did I think that God would put me in a place like PBC. I find it unnatural. It doesn't fit with who I think I am. I come here each Sunday in fear and trembling, praying all the time lest I teach you something that is false, or that I would preach in my flesh. The thought that I would reap honor or glory from preaching scares me to death. Yes, I smile to myself all the time when I consider how unused in my ministry are my natural abilities. If I was granted my choice. I would never be here again. This is not where I belong. Through all of this struggle, however, I have been learning one thing: God does not want my talents. God wants me, and you, period. That is the lesson that Saul had to learn in Damascus.

Now we will look at Saul's message, "Jesus is Lord," which he preached in Jerusalem, following his escape from Damascus.

II. Jesus is Lord

Acts 9:26-31

And when he had come to Jerusalem, he was trying to associate with the disciples; and they were all afraid of him, not believing that he was a disciple. But Barnabas took hold of him and brought him to the apostles and described to them how he had seen the Lord on the road, and that He had talked to Him, and how at Damascus he had spoken out boldly in the name of Jesus. And he was with them moving about freely in Jerusalem, speaking out boldly in the name of the Lord. And he was talking and arguing with the Hellenistic Jews; but they were attempting to put him to death. But when the brethren learned of it, they brought him down to Caesarea and sent him away to Tarsus. So the church throughout all Judea and Galilee and Samaria enjoyed peace, being built up; and, going on in the fear of the Lord and in the comfort of the Holy Spirit, it continued to increase.

This was Saul's first trip back to Jerusalem in three years. However, his reputation as the "hatchet-man" for the Jewish council had not been forgotten by the followers of the Way, who had drifted back to the city following their scattering at Stephen's death. They found it hard to believe that Saul had been converted. Perhaps he was a wolf in sheep's clothing, they thought. That is where Barnabas comes in. "But Barnabas

took hold of him and brought him to the apostles," says verse 27. Barnabas (his real name was Joseph) was a Levite who was born on the island of Cyprus. His name means "son of encouragement." He is first mentioned in Acts on the occasion when he sold a tract of land and brought the money and laid it at the apostles' feet (Acts 4:36-37). Later, he is described as a "good man, full of the Holy Spirit and faith." He was entrusted by the apostles to check out the growing church of Gentiles in Antioch. As a result of Barnabas' testimony concerning him, Saul was welcomed into the fellowship of believers in Jerusalem.

How many former blasphemers have had difficulty gaining acceptance among Christians following their conversion? Chuck Colson, in his book, *Born Again*, tells of his first meeting with Harold Hughes, the United States Democratic Senator, who was a Christian. When Doug Coe (the Barnabas figure in this story) tried to set up a meeting between Colson and Hughes, Hughes replied, "There isn't anyone I dislike more than Chuck Colson. I'm against everything he stands for." Later, however, Hughes agreed to meet with Colson, in company with some other Christians. Hughes began, "Chuck, they tell me you have had an encounter with Jesus Christ. Would you tell us about it?" Colson told of his spiritual pilgrimage, and ended by saying,

"I really was able to see who Jesus is and my need for Him . . . then I could give my life to him . . . As a new Christian I have everything to learn, I know that. I'm grateful for any help you can give me." For a moment there was silence.... Harold ... lifted both hands in the air and brought them down hard on his knees. "That's all I need to know, Chuck. You have accepted Jesus and He has forgiven you. I do the same. I love you now as a brother in Christ. I will stand with you, defend you anywhere, and trust you with anything I have." We prayed . . . Howard wrapped his arms around me and gave me a big bear hug. Now I knew what fellowship really meant.

Chuck Colson also had to face the suspicion and doubts of many when he became a Christian, just as had Saul of Tarsus upon his return to Jerusalem.

But now Saul had been welcomed into the fellowship of Christians. He moved freely throughout Jerusalem, speaking out boldly in the name of the Lord, mainly to the Hellenistic Jews, picking up where the martyred Stephen left off. What was the result of his preaching? Let's check the box scores on this preaching stint:

Hellenistic Converts, 0; Death Threats, many.

In Acts 22:17-21, an account of his witness before the Jewish people some 25 years later, Saul gives details as to why he left Jerusalem on this occasion:

"And it came about that when I returned to Jerusalem and was praying in the temple, that I fell into a trance, and I saw Him [Jesus] saying to me, 'Make haste, and get out of Jerusalem quickly, because they will not accept your testimony about me.' And I said, 'Lord, they themselves understand that in one synagogue after another I used to imprison and beat those who believed in Thee. And when the blood of Thy witness Stephen was being shed, I also was standing by approving, and watching out for the cloaks of those who were slaying him.' And He said to me, 'Go! For I will send you far away to the Gentiles.'"

"But Lord," Saul was saying, "I'm a natural. If you need someone to witness to the Jews, I'm your man." The Lord was not impressed by his argument, however. "Go!" was his word to Saul.

Notice how patient God was in preparing Saul to come to the place where he would no longer depend on himself but on God to use him as a channel to the Gentile world. "Woe is me if I preach not the gospel," said Paul. That was all very fine. but the gospel had to be preached with an attitude of total dependence upon the risen Lord.

So Saul leaves Jerusalem, having discovered that the ministry he longed for with his own Jewish people

would be denied him. What was the result of his leaving? Verse 31 puts it dramatically, "So the church throughout all Judea and Galilee and Samaria enjoyed peace . . . ~ Saul had the zeal, the energy and the gifts, but he still needed to learn to depend upon the Lord. He needed to learn that he was to follow the Lord, not have the Lord follow him. He needed to learn that he was called to preach to the Gentiles. His schooling was about to begin its second phase.

All of us who have received Jesus as our Lord must learn the same lessons. As Christians, we have been given spiritual gifts but we need to wait on the Lord to use his power, his direction, and his timing in our lives and ministries. God does not need our talents, our background, our flesh. He wants empty vessels who are ready and willing to be filled with his Spirit and to be used by him in his time.

For we have this treasure in empty vessels, that the surpassing greatness of the power may be of God, and not from ourselves.

We can well say, with Paul, "Woe is me if I preach not the gospel." But it must be our Lord's gospel, in his time, by his power, and to his glory.

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