

Sermon Notes of Rev.Dr.I.J.W.Oakley (30-7-1995 Guisborough Evangelical Church)

A Chosen Vessel

Acts 9:16-20

Additional Bible Reading: Galatians 1:11-19

Introduction

Saul was taken blind into Damascus, and the Lord sent His servant Ananias to visit him. Saul was staying on Straight Street, a great street running East to West in Damascus, and still one of the main thoroughfares of the city. At first Ananias objected: **Lord, I have heard many reports about this man and all the harm he has done to your saints in Jerusalem. And he has come here with authority from the chief priests to arrest all who call on your name** (Acts 9:13,14). But the reply came: **Go! This man is my chosen instrument to carry my name before the Gentiles and their kings and before the people of Israel. I will show him how much he must suffer for my name** (Acts 9:15,16).

So Ananias went to the house, laid his hands on Saul and tells him he has been sent by God. Saul was filled with the Holy Spirit, his sight was restored, and immediately he was baptised, had something to eat, and linked up with the rest of the Christians. Then he began to preach Christ as the Son of God in the synagogue. The Lord had chosen him to use him; he was a “chosen vessel”, (c.f. Jeremiah 18:1-6). He was not self-made, but made and kept by the “potter”. He needed to be empty, clean and ready to be filled with contents more valuable than he himself.

We have this treasure in jars of clay to show that this all-surpassing power is from God and not from us (2 Corinthians 4:7). **You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you to go and bear fruit—fruit that will last** (John 15:16). This is the way we must view our Christian service.

Preparation of the chosen vessel for service

God has a purpose for every life He has chosen. We are chosen to bear fruit; saved to serve. Christ is our Lord as well as Saviour, so service is not an optional extra. Our life was planned before hand. Even before conversion, our circumstances, background and experiences were shaped and ordered in preparation. If we trace the way God prepared his servant Paul, we see a parallel in our own lives.

Preparation starts before birth. “If I had to write a story of my life, I should begin before I was born” (John Wesley). This is exactly where Paul began. **God, who set me apart from birth** (Galatians 1:15). Before the Damascus road, before childhood, before he was born – God had already marked him out, decided on his future service, and his experiences and gifts were given in preparation. **Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, before you were born I set you apart; I appointed you as a prophet to the nations** (Jeremiah 1:5).

Then there is preparation in training and background. Even before we know the Lord, the hand of God is guiding and preparing. Paul was brought up in a Jewish home, taught the Scriptures, much of it by heart. He was schooled by the rabbi, and as a

teenager trained in Jerusalem to be a rabbi. **Under Gamaliel I was thoroughly trained in the law of our fathers and was just as zealous for God as any of you are today** (Acts 22:3). Gamaliel was the greatest teacher of his day, a disciple of Hillel. Saul's knowledge of the Old Testament would have been detailed, and his training would have opened the door to preach in synagogues. More than that, he was a Pharisee (Philippians 3:5), a very strict Jew, who felt meticulous obedience to the Law was needed for salvation. This training was not a waste of time in the providence of God. He learned by bitter experience that we cannot earn salvation by merit, and so realized God's grace through the Cross is the only way. This truth was so wonderful to him, and he was so grateful.

Luther had a similar background. He did plenty of good works, 3-day fasts, sleepless nights of prayer, whipping himself, freezing to death in cold cells wearing thin clothing. Still he had no peace of conscience. "If ever a monk could have gone to heaven by his monkery, it was I." Then his eyes were opened to the perfect atonement on the Cross, to the one mediator, to justification by faith. He became a great preacher of the Cross.

Being a man of Tarsus was also part of Paul's preparation. Tarsus was a big harbour port, and many races lived there. It was a place where East and West met, and this gave him a world-wide look, perfect preparation for being the future Apostle of the Gentiles. Tarsus was one of the three great seats of learning in the ancient world, equivalent of a university city, with its teaching of philosophy, rhetoric and law. Hence Paul understood the outlook of the different kinds of men to whom he would end up ministering. There is evidence of Greek culture and education in his writings. His father was a Roman, hence his appeal to Caesar. And he mastered Latin, Greek and Hebrew, plus local dialects. Like every Jewish boy he was taught a trade so he could support himself. **Because he was a tentmaker as they were, he stayed and worked with them** (Acts 18:3). **We worked night and day in order not to be a burden to anyone while we preached the gospel of God to you** (1 Thessalonians 2:9).

So before conversion, Paul was well qualified to bear the Lord's name before Gentiles, Kings and the children of Israel. But obviously his conversion was central and crucial in his preparation. **God was pleased to reveal his Son in me so that I might preach him among the Gentiles** (Galatians 1:16). No man can preach of Christ unless he knows Christ, or speak of forgiveness, justification, the power of the Holy Spirit, sanctification or guidance unless he has known them. In Christian history there have been those with fine education and wonderful gifts seeking to serve the Lord – but all to no purpose because they did not actually know the Lord themselves. "I went to convert the Red Indians, but who shall convert me?" admitted John Wesley. God must have **made his light shine in our hearts to give us the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ** (2 Corinthians 4:6).

Paul also was anointed with the Holy Spirit. **Brother Saul, the Lord has sent me so that you may see again and be filled with the Holy Spirit** (Acts 9:17). **You will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth** (Acts 1:8). **Our gospel came to you not simply with words, but also with power, with the Holy Spirit and with deep conviction** (1 Thessalonians 1:5). The preacher's

material can be good, well arranged, interesting, the oratory and delivery can be excellent, but that is not enough. The Word needs to be preached with power, with the Holy Spirit, and with deep conviction.

Paul did not go to Jerusalem straight away, but retired to Arabia (not our modern Arabia, but an area south and east of Palestine, whose north-west tip is close to Damascus) for a time, to be alone with God. He needed this time to understand the will of God, rethink his whole belief. To be useful to God, he needed to take time to be alone with God, for Him to make Himself known to Paul, to disclose His plans and resources.

God's preparation of Paul is a wonderful revelation of the wisdom and power of God. Life is but an outworking of the divine plan made before our lives began. This throws new light on our lives. God has guided and overruled ever step, even the disappointments and upsets. Life is a thrilling adventure, discovering the track God has already laid out for us. He bids us to trust and obey. One day we will look back over our course and have cause to say He has done all things well.

*“His decree who formed the earth
Fixed my first and second birth,
Parents, native place and time,
All appointed were by him.”*

Nature of service by the chosen vessel

This man is my chosen instrument to carry my name before the Gentiles and their kings and before the people of Israel (Acts 9:15). God was pleased to reveal his Son in me so that I might preach him among the Gentiles (Galatians 1:16). I resolved to know nothing while I was with you except Jesus Christ and him crucified (1 Corinthians 2:2). This grace was given me: to preach to the Gentiles the unsearchable riches of Christ (Ephesians 3:8).

How quickly and faithfully Paul preached Christ, so soon after his conversion. **At once he began to preach in the synagogues that Jesus is the Son of God. Saul grew more and more powerful and baffled the Jews living in Damascus by proving that Jesus is the Christ (Acts 9:20,22).** This is what we are in business for. This is what the church is called to preach and what we are to witness to in our lives. We are not here to comment on the international situation, advise the government on the next step, or discuss politics and social issues, pacifism. We have a very clear and definite message, which concerns the Lord Jesus Christ, the Son of God, who died on the Cross and rose again to deal with man's greatest problem. **The Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all (Isaiah 53:6).** God put our sins on His Saviour, and punished them. He took our place, died our death. As a result we can be reconciled to God, have our sins forgiven, the sentence of banishment lifted, and our future destiny changed from hell to heaven. In the present, we know God, we are new creatures in Christ, and all things are made new.

This is the message God has told us to preach, and this is the only message which has power to awaken the dullest conscience and move the hardest heart. This message creates a radical change, from darkness to light, from condemnation to forgiveness

and peace. This message sustains us in the trials and temptations of life, meets men's deepest needs, holds men in the last dread hour of death and secures fullness of life beyond the grave. It brings immeasurable joy to those who receive it, and irreparable loss to those who reject it. "Lord, let not anyone occupy this pulpit who does not preach Christ and Him crucified" (Andrew Bonar).

Note that Paul started his ministry in the synagogues of Damascus, the very place where he begun his work of persecution. This was an act of great moral courage. He wanted those who knew him best to hear his message first. People who are not willing to witness at home will never be missionaries. Boarding a plane will not miraculously turn a man into a missionary. **Go home to your family and tell them how much the Lord has done for you, and how he has had mercy on you** (Mark 5:19).

Costliness of service for the chosen vessel

It is remarkable that in the same breath the Lord speaks of Paul's service, he speaks also of suffering (Acts 9:15,16). The Lord is always faithful – when He calls us, He warns us. **If anyone comes to me and does not hate his father and mother, his wife and children, his brothers and sisters—yes, even his own life—he cannot be my disciple. And anyone who does not carry his cross and follow me cannot be my disciple** (Luke 14:26,27).

Trouble soon came Paul's way. Jews in Damascus plotted to kill him, and watched the gates of the city to catch him. The disciples had to let him out over the wall in a basket, and thus he escaped. This says much for the effectiveness of his preaching. "The biggest compliment you can pay an author is to burn his books" (G.B.Shaw). "A wolf does not attack a painted sheep." Counterfeit Christianity is always safe, but real Christianity is always in peril. To suffer persecution is the greatest of all compliments.

D.L.Moody once challenged a young man who had just returned from preaching the Gospel: "Was anyone converted? Was anyone angry? Then you did not preach the Gospel."

Yet with great trial comes great grace. **Blessed are you when people insult you, persecute you and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of me. Rejoice and be glad, because great is your reward in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you** (Matthew 5:11,12). **The apostles left the Sanhedrin, rejoicing because they had been counted worthy of suffering disgrace for the Name** (Acts 5:41). **That is why I am suffering as I am. Yet I am not ashamed, because I know whom I have believed, and am convinced that he is able to guard what I have entrusted to him for that day** (2 Timothy 2:12).

During the Pentland Rising of Covenanters in 1666, Alexander Robertson, a probationer for ministry, said: "I bless him that gave me a life to lose and a body to lay down for him. I reckon the price low, and all I have or can do little or too little for him who gave himself for me and to me."

Paul's triumphant words at the end: **I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith** (2 Timothy 4:7).

Conclusion

To Christians – remember you were saved to serve. You were called over many years, and in a variety of ways, prepared for service. Service means bearing His name before men. It costs. But we are not left alone in our trials and it is all so worthwhile. Commit yourselves again to the Lord – your heart, life and talents. You will have no real peace, full satisfaction or true service without consecration.

*“What is my being but for thee,
Its sure support, its noblest end.
Thy ever smiling face to see
And serve the cause of such a friend.”*

To the unsaved – you are not serving the Lord, but serving self. You need to lay down the arms of rebellion and plea for mercy, and then yield your life to his glad service.