

Called to Ministry Class 8

The Call of Saul of Tarsus

**Homework for next week: Central section of Acts chapters 13:1 to 21:6
Paul's...ministry among the Gentiles**

It would be difficult to overestimate the importance of the Call of Saul of Tarsus on the course of world history, the shape of the world today, and the existence and shape of our lives as we know them. Other than the coming of Jesus, the calling of Saul of Tarsus has been the instrument of God's transformation of the world more than any other. Paul's collection for the church in Jerusalem was not only a significant endeavor in his ministry but was seen by the Apostle as the very fulfillment of prophecy. Sunday is our Commitment Sunday, when we (mostly Gentiles) make our pledges to the ministry of the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. I have included in our notes tonight a brief background of how the Bible understands giving in relationship to worship. I have also asked our elder and my friend Lee Worsham to share his story of giving with you.

Acts 9:1-17 lays out Saul/Paul's call narrative but let's read Acts 9:1-22

See the four parts of this story

Heavens are opened vv.3-6

Empowerment by the Spirit v.17

Endowment with Self-consciousness v.15a

Explanation of Saul/Paul's mission v.15b-16

Paul receives a dual calling, to bring the Gospel to the Gentiles, us, and to suffer for Jesus' sake. This dual calling structures the two latter divisions of the Book of Acts, which will in turn guide our study for the coming weeks.

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Paul was one of, if not the most, distinguished rabbinical student of his time. Notice how his confrontation with Jesus transformed his understanding of the meaning of the Bible, that is, the OT. His eyes were opened in more ways than one. As the most promising rabbi of his era is confronted with the One who has been ordained by Yahweh as The Rabbi par excellence, Saul is changed in every way. He understands himself differently, he understands righteousness differently, he understands the mission of God differently.

Saul had been empowered by the Sanhedrin to arrest as blasphemers followers of Jesus wherever he found them. When the NT speaks of zeal it connoted a willingness to employ violence to affect righteousness. Saul was on a violent mission to remove the witness of Jesus from the earth in general and Judaism in particular. A judicial decision had already been made about Jesus, which now that Jesus had been exposed as a false rabbi, made His continuing followers purveyors of false teaching...and as such dangers to the future of Israel. They had to go, wherever they could be found.

Having rounded up those he could find in Judea he now set off to round them up in Damascus...but a funny thing happened to him on the road to Damascus...

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Rather than Saul arresting Christians, the Christ arrested and indicted him! He was confronted with a Theophany or God appearance...or more precisely a Christophany, an appearance of the Risen and Ascended and Reigning Lord Jesus Christ! You can almost hear the "Uh oh!" For Saul, this was a judicial reversal of earth-shaking proportions. He had gone forth in the name of the Lord to remove heresy only to discover that despite all of his training and knowledge that it was he and not the followers of Jesus who was the false teacher and purveyor of heresy...moreover, he had done it with violence, so as to make himself an enemy combatant against Jesus, who turns out to be not only the true messiah and King of Israel, but actually the Lord and God of Israel and of all the Earth!

As Paul reflects upon his life apart from Christ and his offenses against Him in 1 Tim 1:12-17 he sees himself as the 'foremost' of sinners...to whom God showed mercy...for a purpose. Having experienced and continuing to experience grace so impossible, so free, so limitless Paul's heart burst open with unimaginable possibilities. If God could forgive him what he had done...then anyone could be rescued, forgiven, and called to ministry.

One important element in Bible Study is to be curious about names...in this case the name of the man God sent to Saul to open his eyes and commission him to ministry was Ananias. This is a Greek name, adapted from a Hebrew name, Hananiah. The -iah is a reference to Yahweh...Hanan means gracious...Ananias' name means gracious is Yahweh ...his name conveys his mission, to bring Yahweh's grace, the unmerited favor of God to a person who not only did not deserve it but had actually merited God's just wrath, not his mercy. Names often unlock or at least shed light and insight into passages of Scripture. Great use of your smart phone!

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Paul's calling and empowering for ministry opened a door to a whole new category of unlikely disciple. Paul never quite got over, the grace Jesus extended to him as he then extended that same grace to the Gentiles. Further, Paul then carries out his ministry led by the Spirit, as Jesus did. He includes women as disciples, as Jesus did. He brings the Gospel to rulers and Kings, as Ananias told him he would.

The Apostle discovered that he was sent to people with whom he thought he had nothing in common. He was only marginally successful with people with whom he thought he had much in common but is known for reaching people with whom he would have chosen to have as little as possible to do. He also realized that his life before Christ was not purposeless...but was orchestrated by the One who called him. God had not wasted his previous experience and training but had designed his life for purposes he never imagined. He also saw his life as a part of a much larger story... I think he had this way of seeing, before knowing Christ. However, knowing Jesus as Lord completely changed his expectations and gave him new lenses through which to see his life and the world...in light of the new covenant, and the inauguration of the Kingdom and the rule and reign of the King and Judge.

Saul got a new name, a new family, a new calling, a new mission, a new heart, new desires and passions...his calling should bring us to reflect upon God's calling on our life now...we may have been clearer about our calling in an earlier chapter or perhaps we are clearer now...but we are just as called now as at any time in our life. We have been made and redeemed and sent for a purpose...that purpose is to display the glory of God and to enjoy him forever...so says the Westminster shorter catechism in its first question. Our greatest joy, and what is clear from Moses to Luke's Gospel is that joy is crucial to our fulfillment of our calling, will be found in the fulfillment of God's call upon our life. "Better to be anywhere God has called me...than anywhere he hasn't."