

A NEW PREACHER

Acts 9:21-31

Paul had preached his initial sermon for Christ in the synagogue in Damascus. Two words were used to express the reaction of his hearers--"amazed" and "confounded." "But all that heard him were amazed, and said; Is not this he that destroyed them which called on this name in Jerusalem, and came hither for that intent, that he might bring them bound unto the chief priests? But Saul increased the more in strength, and confounded the Jews which dwelt at Damascus, proving that this is very Christ." Acts 9:21-22. He bewildered the Jews with his proofs that Jesus is the Christ.

Paul, too, was "amazed" at the reception of his first endeavor for his Lord. Instead of receiving him as he thought they should, they regarded him with suspicion, and held him at arms length. They were afraid of him. They looked upon him as a potential murderer. They doubted his sincerity. They believed that he had taken a stand for Christ for the purpose of deception and trickery.

In spite of the fact that "He bewildered" them with his brilliance and cleverness, he left them cold and unresponsive. At the conclusion of the effort, Paul, himself, was dissatisfied with the whole affair. He saw very plainly that he was not ready to launch immediately into the arduous work of the Saviour. His conversion was so astounding an experience that he needed time to get the new perspective of his life and work. He needed to get away for awhile and get prepared for the Lord's service. His hands had just been dripping with the blood of Christians and his heart was filled with venom and hatred toward the followers of Christ. He came to a definite decision, namely, he would drop out of sight completely by going into the desert, where he might be alone with God, and there get his bearings. "And after that many days were fulfilled" refers to the three years he spent at Arabia.

Why did Paul go into Arabia? He went there to stay long enough for all the poison and venom to leave his life, and to be filled with the sweetness of God's presence and power. Such a transformation always takes time, and especially for a man who had been as bitter as he. He went into the desert to enrol in Christ's College, and to sit at His feet and learn of Him. He entered Arabia as a volunteer, and not as a conscript.

Those engaged in full-time Christian service need to go into their "Arabia" for suitable preparation for a larger service for their blessed Master. In this matter He set the example for us. Out of approximately thirty-three years, He spent thirty of them in preparation. Think of it, thirty years of preparation to accomplish a three-year performance! He spent ten times as much time in preparation as He did in actual service for a lost world. And He, of all persons, knew the value of time.

Moses, the common Law-giver and Emancipator of the Jewish race, spent forty years in preparation for his great work for God. Like Paul, at the time he entered the desert, Moses had human blood dripping from his hands. Moses spent those forty years under the very shadow of Mount Sinai in preparation. Elijah was also trained in the desert. All of these men lived in the desert before they labored in the cities. God knows what He is doing when He calls His servants to leave all and to follow Him.

I. Proper Preparation.

1. A time of meditation and prayer.

There are no alarm clocks in the desert, and no human appointments to be met. The only appointment is with God, and that can take place anytime. The best possible time for meditation and prayer is when the body and mind are at rest before Him. In the workaday world, there is too much hurry and worry, with little time and disposition for the things of the Spirit.

Our whole purpose in going into our Arabia is to see God anew in His Word as we pore over its sacred pages. This provides a proper foundation for our intercession. Meditation on the Word not only teaches us what to pray for, but also how to pray.

Most of God's people today are suffering from mental and physical fatigue. The desert is a place of rest and repose. In the desert, there are no telephones to disturb us, no friends to call on us, no news commentators to alarm us, no bills to embarrass us, no obligations to remind us, no worldly amusements to tempt us, and no deadlines to disquiet us. There, we are alone with God. In all of our preparation for His service, we must remember that to be Spirit-taught is more important than being man-taught. The purpose in going to Arabia was to get some first-hand instruction from the heavenly Headquarters.

2. A time of fellowship with the Lord.

In the desert, there is little to distract. The landscape is much the same from day to day. During those years spent in Arabia, Paul found instruction, inspiration and satisfaction.

3. A time of discipline.

The very loneliness of the desert has a tendency to chill one's spirit as the cold winds succeed in chilling the body. During the day, the sun blisters one; the coming of night brings low temperatures. There is no human friend to go to in time of need, every human prop having been left behind. In the desert, we are shut up to God. In the midst of trials and troubles, we have no one to go to but Him. When we are lonely, we have Him to turn to for sweet companionship. When we are poor, we look to Him for our sufficiency. Whether we are glad or sad, we find our complete satisfaction in Him for He never faileth.

4. A time of vision.

There, we see things from the heavenly viewpoint. For example, before Paul went to Arabia, he thought that Jerusalem was the greatest city imaginable. But after getting God's view on the matter, he came to regard her as being in abject bondage, anything but free and unfettered. This is but an example of what dwelling in the desert alone with God will do for us.

II. Productive Performance.

1. Wisdom. V. 23-24a.

Both pleasure and pain enter into the texture of life; but it is never all pain, as it is never all pleasure. Men may kill the preacher, but they cannot kill the gospel. Just how the fact that they intended to kill Paul became known to him, we are not told. God may have warned him in a dream, or possibly by a vision. It may have been conveyed to Paul by the Holy Spirit. To be desert sweetened carries with it the thought of special wisdom being vouchsafed to us from on high.

2. Humility. V. 24b-25.

Paul's conversion had so enraged the Jews that they carefully made plans to kill him without him ever getting out of the city lest he should escape them. But his Christian friends lowered him over the city wall in a basket and thus enabled him to escape by night. Think of the man who is yet to be the greatest Christian of all time and the greatest apostle of Christ suffering the humility of being lowered down the wall of Damascus in a basket. He had become an humble man indeed.

Some are ready to call Paul a coward for running away from danger. But bravery does not mean that a man will deliberately go into unnecessary danger. It means that he will be cautious in all dangerous matters. A good general may retreat

in order that he may gain an advantage. His retreat does not mean cowardice; it means wise strategy.

Some are ready to accuse Paul of losing faith in God because he sneaked away by night from the threatening storm. But let us remember that faith is not folly, nor is it presumption. It makes men act sensibly. It calls out the best there is in a man. It embraces whatever means, ways and methods that are available to accomplish its ends. Faith does not mean that we expect God to employ miracles to answer our prayers. Prayer may be answered in the simplest ways and by the most ordinary methods.

Some are ready to charge God with unfaithfulness to His servant in not protecting him, but such a charge is without foundation. When Christ was dying, the mob howled, "Let Him alone; let us see if His Lord will save Him." Let us remember that God has given us minds and reasoning power, and has channels by which we may escape, and He expects us to use our common sense and good judgment. Some fickle religionists deliberately go into danger to prove their faith. They let snakes bite them to prove their faith. Such acts are not only foolish, but they are sinful. Faith in God should make men sensible.

The escape of Paul was the normal thing to expect. Christ did a similar thing on one occasion. The mob was about to kill Him and He "escaped out of their hands." Noah did a similar thing when he built the Ark to save his life when the flood was coming. It is not irreligious to be sensible.

In his letter to the Galatians Paul tells us that he went to Arabia and stayed in solitude for nearly three years. These were perhaps the most pivotal years of his life. They were years of meditation and preparation for his life's work. In this period of silence Paul also played for time. If he would drop out of the picture, the storm would pass, but if he kept in the limelight, the storm would grow worse. Time is a good healer of any trouble. How much church members need to learn this important lesson! Many church troubles will adjust themselves if we give them time. Some impatient people are unwilling to wait.

After leaving Arabia, Paul went back to Damascus for a brief time and was vigorous in his preaching that Jesus was the Son of God. He found the storm had passed, the hate had cooled, and the people were more receptive.

3. Companionship and cooperation with the saints. V. 26-28.

Paul returned to Jerusalem. What emotion must have surged in his heart at the thought of Jerusalem! Could he stem the tide of the old influence? Could he break away from the old leaders who would gladly welcome him back to their fold? But he was going back a new man; going back to preach the very things he had denied before.

The first thing Paul did upon arriving in Jerusalem was to look up the brethren. He wanted their company. That is always a good sign. But it was now three whole years since they had heard of his conversion, and even the apostles knew absolutely nothing about his whereabouts during that entire time. He went to the little band of persecuted Christians, but they were afraid of him. They held him under suspicion and closed their doors in his face. What a stab to a new convert! He picked up the work of Stephen whose death he had sanctioned. Stephen was disputing with the Hellenistic Jews when they killed him and with this group Paul began his work. He still seemed to be under the accusing finger of a dying man, but, nevertheless, he tried to carry on the work. Barnabas introduced him to them, and assured them all that he was genuinely saved. Finally, they agreed to accept him as a disciple of the Lord Jesus. Paul proved here that he was no lone wolf or free lance. He craved the companionship and cooperation

of others in the faith. "And he was with them coming in and going out at Jerusalem."

4. Boldness. V. 29.

This boldness came from a disciplined life. This will always be a direct result from having spent the time in the desert alone with God. In the desert, we shall have power with God; in the streets, power with man.

5. Submission. V. 30.

When the Jews sought to kill him in Damascus, he acquiesced in the wishes of the brethren and submitted to be lowered over the walls in a basket. Later, when the Jews in Jerusalem were about to slay him, the brethren recommended that he depart with them at once to Caesarea and from there they sent him back to his home in Tarsus. Instead of protesting against their proposal, he quietly submitted to it without question or delay. He was willing to go away for the good of the cause. Only a truly big man would have done this.

6. Vindication. V. 31.

Not only were the leaders of the church in Jerusalem vindicated in their recommendation that Paul retire from the scene, but Paul was openly vindicated and exonerated before God and man by having gone when he did, and in the Christlike spirit in which he went.

Christianity has always gone in cycles. Its interests rise and fall; they come and go; they are encouraging and then discouraging. The early church had come through a long storm, but it came at last to a haven of calm and peace. How sweet and well-earned this rest must have been! They were no longer persecuted, but were permitted to worship undisturbed. Their joy was boundless. Their rest was due to the fact that Saul, the chief persecutor, had been converted. The results of this rest were favorable. Usually a state of ease means a state of idleness, of laziness, of indifference, and usually worldliness, and sometimes quarrelsomeness; but the early church used this period of peace and rest to learn more about Christ, and His Word, and His will, and their own responsibilities, and their opportunities to enlist others in His cause. What a fine use to make of one's peace and rest!

In addition to having rest, they were increased. They were edified. This deals with their personal lives. They now had time to strengthen their hope, their faith, and knowledge, and fellowship and their moral character. Very few of us make such use of their years of ease. We make better Christians when we are hardpressed. Our faith is strengthened by hardships rather than by ease, and rest and quietness. Years of material prosperity do not contribute to the religious and moral improvement of the country. Years of prosperity are usually years of godless living. Years of ease are years of revelry and wickedness.

They were multiplied. They now had time and opportunity to do what their hearts had longed to do but were hindered from doing because of their unpopularity of their cause. Their zeal was not lessened when the pressure was taken away. They were deeply in love with Christ and did not fail to tell the whole community about Him. Such conduct will not go unrewarded. If the churches of today were filled with members who walked in the fear of the Lord, we would be built up in our moral lives and our work would reach out toward the ends of the earth. We are hindered and limited by this lack. Our troubles are not without, but are within. Our foes are not on the outside, but are on the inside.