

*This character study / commentary into Apostle Paul is based mostly on Charles Swindoll's "Great Lives in God's Word" series on Paul and FF Bruce's "Paul: Apostle of the Heart Set Free." Main source materials are based on contents in these books unless otherwise noted.

Sunday March 26, 2023

Lesson 3: The Making of God's Ministry Leader

Reference: Acts Chapter 9; Galatians 1:10-19

See Also: Lesson Supplemental – Pharisees

When we last left Paul, he just had an encounter with our living God in the person of Jesus Christ. He was blinded for three days, and after having his sight restored, he was baptized. Having not ate or drank anything for three days, Paul was weak, so he spent some time eating to regain his strength.

Events of Acts Chapter 9 – Paul after his baptism...

Luke tells us that Paul then spent several days with the disciples in Damascus, preaching in the synagogues. This would seem to imply that he was able to preach the message of Christ *immediately*, having just had that encounter with Christ merely three days ago. However, a closer examination by Paul's own testimony in *Galatians* would inform us that there are some missing details – a time gap – in the middle of Acts 9:19; and also again between Acts 9:25 and verse 26.

According to Galatians Chapter 1, Paul testified that after gaining his strength, he first went to the desert of Arabia for a period of time before returning to Damascus to meet up with some disciples (Gal 1:17). While in Damascus after some time in Arabia, Paul evidently preached about Christ in the synagogues (Acts 9:20). However, many questioned if he truly became a disciple of Christ, even as Paul was gaining influence (Acts 9:22). Paul then went back to Arabia, and spent three years in solitude before he returned to Jerusalem, where he met up with Peter and James for a short period of time (Gal 1:18-19).

Shortly after, as he tried to launch his ministry, his life was threatened; leading other believers to act on protecting him, sending him to Tarsus (Acts 9:30), where he remains for a few more years in obscurity.

Paul's Testimony about Himself Before / After His Baptism

Paul's own account of himself in his letter to the churches in Galatia inform and confirms his life journey after his encounter with Christ. By Paul's own account, we learned:

- Before his encounter with Christ, he sought the approval of men in pursuit of higher offices and positions (Gal 1:10)
- After his encounter with Christ,
 - He no longer practices people-pleasing (Gal 1:10)
 - Did not consult other people to learn about Jesus Christ (Gal 1:16)
 - His theology came from Christ, not from men (Gal 1:12; 16b)
 - He did not use his status to elevate himself with known Christ followers (Gal 1:17)
 - His calling is to preach to the Gentiles (Gal 1:16)
 - He retreated to the desert of Arabia for three years of solitude (Gal 1:18)
 - He only met apostles Peter and James *after* his three years of solitude (Gal 1:18-19)

Back to the book of Acts, his encounter with apostles Peter and James was not without drama. Luke informs us that after all this time in obscurity, his previous reputation as a feared persecutor of Christ followers still haunts him (Acts 9:26). But Barnabas intervened by calming the tension and bringing him to the apostles while testifying on his behalf (Acts 9:27). However, God's ministry to the Gentiles using Paul as His instrument is not yet ready for launch. We learned that shortly after meeting the apostles, he retreated back to his hometown of Tarsus (Act 9:30), and we will not hear from Paul again for another four to five years.

Swindoll's Principle for all ages

This chapter of Paul's life highlights the need for God's servants, especially those who are called upon to lead His ministry, to embrace the principles of solitude and of obscurity. In Swindoll's other work in this series focusing on David, Swindoll expounded on these principles as God's training efforts observed in the manner he raised David, one who would be "...a man after His own heart."

In his other work in this same character study series – focusing on David, Swindoll noted three key qualities that God expects from His leaders:

- Spirituality – God seeks out "...a man after His own heart...", which is how God characterized David (1 Samuel 13:14). To be a man after God's own heart would mean that whatever grieves God should also grieve this individual; and whatever pleases God will also please this individual. Spirituality means to be deeply authentic in your walk with God; not faking it for people to see.
- Humility – God seeks out "... a servant's heart..", which is how God refers to David (Psalm 89:20). Having a humble heart means to do as you're told; respect those in charge, serve faithfully and quietly. A servant doesn't care who gets the glory. A servant has one goal, and that is to make the person he serves look better, or more successful.
- Integrity – God seeks out a leader who will do what is right, rather than what is popular. He told Samuel that He does not look at the things man looks at; that man looks at the outward appearance, while God looks at the heart (1 Sam 16:7). Man's tendency is to act based on outward appearances; God rejects such leaders (i.e. Saul). Integrity is what you are when nobody is looking.

This is how God had raised David and made David the person God wanted when he was anointed the next king of Israel before his father and his brothers (who all appeared "more qualified"). These qualities, however, are not the qualities that would describe Paul at this moment in his life. God needs to take Paul into His training ground, and remake Paul in the same manner He had done to David and scores of other biblical servants.

In this regard, Swindoll observed the following methods God used to train David:

- First in solitude – David was all alone with God while tending to his father's sheep. If you have unresolved conflicts in your inner life, solitude has a way of helping us address those issues.
- Then with Obscurity – not even David's father paid much attention to David when God was raising Him. Servant-leaders in training are first unknown, unseen, and often unappreciated. In the relentless demands of obscurity, character is built. Those who first accept the silence of obscurity are best qualified to handle the applause of popularity.
- Trained through Monotony – David was doing the same thing over and over for many years; being trained by God means to be faithful in the menial, insignificant routine, regular, unexciting, uneventful, daily tasks of life.
- Trained in the arena of Reality – David was being trained in real life situations (fighting off bears and wolves). God trains us to handle real problems in real life; not make belief or theoretical.

Swindoll referenced two of these principles in this Chapter as it relates to Paul. The lesson and implication is clear: before Paul would begin that journey through which he will endure much suffering for the sake of His Name (Acts 9:16), God had to first train and reform / strengthen Paul's inner being, as well as to repair his outer image. Both of which takes time, and neither of which can happen if Paul is (1) around people and be a topic of discussion, and (2) staying busy trying to convince others of his conversion (Acts 9:21-26). God, effectively, had to decommission Paul, hide him away for some time while He work the hearts both of the public (to change perception of Paul) and of Paul.

As it relates to us, Swindoll offered three principles for those of us who may have found ourselves too busy in life to where we may be “squeezing” God out of our daily interaction:

- *Instead of Speeding Up, Slow Down and Rethink* – In Saul’s case, after his Damascus experience, he was in no hurry to tell others about his conversion. He was already a person with high status, and he could have used his status to “hang out” with the stars of the followers of Christ (the apostles), making a powerful force. But he didn’t do that either. Instead, he retreated, and he meditated, and he retraced his steps (i.e.. Returning to Damascus / Arabia). He slowed down, and he spent time with Jesus. When our life is too busy, find ways to slow down and rethink.
- *Instead of Talking More, Be Quiet and Reflect* – Paul was full of Scriptural knowledge, full of head knowledge. Problem was, they were learned with the wrong narrative. As such, he needed to spend some quiet time to reflect on what he knows. At issue is, when we’re talking, we’re not listening, and we’re not reflecting. The more we talk, the more we rationalize our old behavior into acceptable behavior. We would have our answers before the question is even presented, and we talk our way to make the question fit the answer. This is what happens when we talk too much – we stop listening, and we stop reflecting on what got us into this busy life.
- *Instead of Seeking a Place of Power, Be Still and Release* – Paul wanted to be “somebody.” He had ambitions to sit as one of the elders of the Sanhedrin. This pursuit led him to be a people-pleaser, aiming to earn the respect of the powerful. In his post-Christ encounter life, Paul abandoned the “popularity-seeking” person in him and embraced the humble servant for Christ label. Christians who serves God in pursuit of being a “somebody” is probably serving God for the wrong reasons.

Reflecting Upon the Word

Read 1Samuel 17:16-37. This is the infamous battle between young David and a giant named Goliath.

1. Study David’s behavior and responses in his various encounters to (1) the Israelite army, (2) the Philistine giant, (3) his brother, (4) his father, (5) king Saul. Identify traits displayed by David that are the fruits of solitude, obscurity, monotony, and reality (Swindoll’s insights on God’s training).
2. Read forward into 1Samuel 17:38-40. Why would David reject the protective armor and weapons of warfare offered by king Saul?

Reflecting Upon our World

God’s training method for His servants and His leaders may, at times, seemed counter-intuitive to the worldly methods. Consider a candidate like Paul in his immediate post-Christ encounter state.

1. How would the world (worldly methods) reform him to become the Christian leader that he became? Consider: his image, his belief, his methods, his relational skills.
2. What characteristics of Paul do you think God had to removed / reformed? Are these characteristics equally undesirable by worldly standards?
3. Using your responses above, take a moment to reflect on how our world would define Christianity, versus how God defines Christianity. Also, worldly leaders vs Godly leaders.

Reflecting Upon Your Spiritual Journey

Reflect on your personal journey both in your own time of conversion (or in the life of someone you know).

1. Evaluate your spiritual journey as it relates to the three qualities Swindoll identified that God expects from his leaders and followers. How do you measure up? Are there areas that needs attention?
2. Reflect on your own spiritual journey against the four-part methodology God used to train His leaders. Try to identify when God took you down that journey, and what was the outcome / lesson learned. Frame your reflection into a personal testimony.