

Followers of the Way

Get up and go into the city - our mission mandate

Philip Quenby 16-07-23

Acts 9:1-31

This is another in our sermon series on lessons from the book of Acts. The theme for today is: Get up and go into the city – our mission mandate. Let me start with a story, which happens to be true.

Some years ago, my mother lay gravely ill in a hospital on the outskirts of Nottingham, seemingly close to death. Each day I went to visit, returning at night to her flat outside the city. One evening, as I sat digesting a meal, into my mind came, “Get up and go into the city.” I straight away recognised the words of Acts 9:6, and knew it had to be God. It was late, and I asked Him if I could go the next morning. The answer was yes, so early the following day I took a bus into the city centre. In that curious way we have of knowing without understanding why we know, I realised this was all somehow connected with a dream I had years beforehand, but had forgotten till that moment. In the dream I had been in a high place in Nottingham that I did not recognise. It was bounded on three sides by buildings, with an old-style chapel off to the left, and on the open side the land fell away sharply, giving a clear view over the valley of the river Trent.

Well, I had no idea where this place was, but obviously I had to head for high ground. So, when I got off the bus in the city centre I did precisely that, telling God He would have to lead me. And led I was, to exactly the place I had seen in the dream – except that what looked like a chapel was in fact an old schoolhouse. There, overlooking the river, was a tiny park, and standing there, God told me to prophecy to the breath. For forty minutes or so I prayed for the city and for the nation. I cannot tell you what I prayed, as I was only half-conscious of it myself, but somehow in the purposes of God this must have been significant. Because just down the hill is a plaque commemorating that near this spot Charles I raised his standard on 22nd August 1642, calling men to join the royalist army, and effectively firing the starting-gun for civil war. This is a spiritual stronghold that still has power today, and the people of God are called to take back such places from the enemy.

So, the Bible passage we heard read just now has a special resonance for me. It is a warfare Scripture: in the same way there was an almighty battle when Joshua led Israel across the Jordan to start taking possession of the Promised Land, there was a heightened intensity to the clash between the kingdom of God and the kingdom of this world as believers in the Lord Jesus began taking the message of the Gospel into the nations. Saul had been “breathing out murderous threats against the Lord’s disciples” (Acts 9:1), and was heading to Damascus with the express purpose of arresting any “who belonged to the Way ... [to] take them as prisoners to Jerusalem.” (Acts 9:2). Though this Torah-observant Jew was motivated by being “extremely zealous for the traditions of [his] fathers” (Galatians 1:14), what he was doing was nothing less than the work of Satan. Christ Himself made this clear when “a light from

heaven flashed around [the future apostle]" (Acts 9:3) and Jesus spoke, explaining it was He "whom [Saul was] persecuting." (Acts 9:4).

Parallels with Israel's taking of the Promised Land are explicit. Following his conversion, Saul learned of a plan to kill him (Acts 9:23-24) "but his followers took him by night and lowered him in a basket through an opening in the [city] wall" (Acts 9:25) – almost an action replay of how Rahab let the spies sent to Jericho by Joshua "down by a rope through the window, for the house she lived in was part of the city wall." (Joshua 2:15). After many struggles and difficulties, eventually "the church throughout Judea, Galilee and Samaria enjoyed a time of peace" (Acts 9:31), just as when Joshua ceased fighting, "the land had rest from war" (Joshua 11:23, 14:15), "the LORD gave [the Israelites] rest on every side" (Joshua 21:44) and "the LORD [gave] Israel rest from all their enemies around them" (Joshua 23:1). To position ourselves correctly at this point in redemption history, we need to take to heart that "what has been will be again, what has been done will be done again. There is nothing new under the sun." (Ecclesiastes 1:9). The past tells us about the future, as the physical tells us about the spiritual.

This Bible passage speaks about spiritual blindness and spiritual sight; spiritual deafness and spiritual hearing; about the radical inclusiveness of God's kingdom, and being His chosen instruments. It warns of suffering for the name of Christ, and illustrates God's work of preparation in our lives. These are days in which we will see more than ever before a clear distinction between people who see and hear heavenly things, and those who do not. It should be no surprise if those who lack a godly perspective fail to see God at work and have nothing worthwhile to say about the spiritual: "The men travelling with Saul stood there speechless; they heard the sound but did not see anyone." (Acts 9:7). Christians, by contrast, are to be people who see and hear clearly, and having done so, then obey promptly and act as we are led by God. What, then, can we learn from this Scripture that will help us do this?

There are three lessons to highlight from this Bible passage, with five bullet points under each of these headings. Those bullet points draw on the example of Saul the unregenerate man; Ananias the faithful disciple; and Saul the born-again believer.

The **first lesson** relates to **preparation and response**. In the same way God prepared Saul (Paul) to be "my chosen instrument to carry my name before the Gentiles and their kings and before the people of Israel" (Acts 9:15), so He will prepare us. This does not mean we will necessarily see "a light from heaven ... and [hear] a voice" (Acts 9:3-4), or have a "vision" (Acts 9:10 and 12), since the manner of preparation will differ from person to person. In general, we can expect that, the more we are asked to do and the greater the change needed in our lives, the more dramatic divine intervention will be. What we can all expect, though, is to meet Jesus. It is our response to this encounter that holds the key to what happens next. Saul's experience on the Damascus Road holds good for us, too:

Praise and worship. In the presence of the Almighty, the only proper response is to fall on our knees in praise and worship, alert to what He wants to say: Saul "fell to the ground and heard a voice say to him, 'Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?'" (Acts 9:4).

Recognition and obedience. We should recognise our Saviour for who he is, and obey his commands, acknowledging that often we may have to wait before we are shown the next step: "'Who are you, Lord?' Saul asked. 'I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting,' he replied. 'Now get up and go into the city, and you will be told what you must do.'" (Acts 9:5).

Humility and being teachable. There is no shame in accepting help when we need it, provided it takes us in the right direction: “Saul got up from the ground, but when he opened his eyes he could see nothing. So they led him by the hand into Damascus.” (Acts 9:8).

Waiting and persevering. There will be times of trial, points at which we may not hear from God, and seasons when we need to fast. These are part and parcel of life, and we should not allow them to undermine our faith or deflect us from our course: “For three days [Saul] was blind, and did not eat or drink anything.” (Acts 9:9).

Watching and praying. Prayer is key to gaining wisdom, insight, revelation, and power: because Saul prayed, “In a vision he [saw] a man named Ananias come and place his hands on him to restore his sight.” (Acts 9:12).

The **second lesson** concerns **expectation and availability**. God commonly involves other people in our preparation and transformation: “The Lord told [Ananias], ‘Go to the house of Judas on Straight Street and ask for a man from Tarsus named Saul, for he is praying. In a vision he has seen a man named Ananias come and place his hands on him to restore his sight.’” (Acts 9:11). It may be only one in a million who is called to exercise the kind of ministry Saul was destined for, but every Christian is called to exercise the ministry of Ananias. He demonstrated:

Responsiveness: He knew God’s voice, and when “The Lord called to him in a vision, ‘Ananias!’ ‘Yes, Lord,’ he answered.” (Acts 9:10).

Submission: His dialogue with God was respectful, and he submitted to God’s will. He put forward the facts as he knew them, but did not attempt to substitute his own judgment for God’s: “I have heard many reports about this man ...” (Acts 9:13).

Promptness: He did what God told him, even though it made little sense from a human point of view, and he acted promptly: “But the Lord said to Ananias, ‘Go!’ ... Then Ananias went to the house and entered it.” (Acts 9:15 and 17).

Christlikeness: He showed love and acceptance to the unlovable: “Placing his hands on Saul, he said, ‘Brother Saul ...’” (Acts 9:17). Ananias went on to corroborate what Saul had heard and experienced in a way that authenticated his own mission and gave encouragement to the future apostle: “the Lord – Jesus, who appeared to you on the road as you were coming here – has sent me” (Acts 9:17). Only God could have revealed this to him, and only God would offer acceptance to someone like Saul.

Being filled with the Holy Spirit: He was a channel for healing and the work of the Holy Spirit: “Placing his hands on Saul, he said, ‘... Jesus ... has sent me so that you may see again and be filled with the Holy Spirit.’” (Acts 9:17).

If we want to have people like Saul of Tarsus at work in our nation and to see people changed so those who were previously “persecuting the church” (Philippians 3:6) become the Gospel’s most powerful advocates, we must start becoming more like Ananias – being available to God, and not letting our expectations get in the way of His plans and purposes.

The **third lesson** is an issue of **what we do and how we do it**. God’s activity in our lives requires us to become “doers of the word, not hearers only, deceiving our own selves.” (James 1:22, KJV). If we are

to manifest the kingdom of God in the way we should, we need to know both the Word of God and the ways of God. In the aftermath of his encounter on the road to Damascus, Saul gained new insight into God's ways. Being able to see spiritually had its effect and counterpart in the physical realm when Ananias laid hands on him: "Immediately, something like scales fell from Saul's eyes, and he could see again. He got up and was baptised, and after taking some food, he regained his strength." (Acts 9:18-19). Straight away, Saul began to move in his new Holy Spirit-filled life through:

Being in community: Fellowship with other believers is vital for our wellbeing and growth. "Saul spent several days with the disciples in Damascus" (Acts 9:19) and "When he came to Jerusalem, he tried to join the disciples, but they were afraid of him, not believing that he really was a disciple. But Barnabas took him and brought him to the apostles." (Acts 9:27-28). Community enables the giving of mutual support and encouragement, and the proper functioning and exercise of all the gifts and callings that make up the Body of Christ (Romans 12:6-8, Ephesians 4:11-12).

Proclaiming the Gospel: some have the specific mantle of the evangelist (Ephesians 4:11), but all are called to proclaim the Gospel: "At once he began to preach in the synagogues that Jesus is the Son of God." (Acts 9:21).

Walking with God: The more closely we walk with God and do our utmost to obey him, the greater our spiritual strength will be: "Yet Saul grew more and more powerful and baffled the Jews living in Damascus by proving that Jesus is the Christ." (Acts 9:22).

Confronting opposition: Saul "baffled the Jews living in Damascus by proving that Jesus is the Christ" (Acts 9:22), though apparently this did not lead to their all becoming Christians. Some were resistant to truth, then as now. Others' failure to accept what is staring them in the face should neither alarm nor discomfort us, but neither should it prevent us from confronting opposition when needed.

Embracing suffering and death: God told Ananias, "I will show [Saul] how much he must suffer for my name." (Acts 9:16). In Damascus, "the Jews conspired to kill [Saul]" (Acts 9:23) and in Jerusalem "the Grecian Jews ... tried to kill him" (Acts 9:29), yet nevertheless he "preached fearlessly in the name of Jesus" (Acts 9:27) and "[spoke] boldly in the name of the Lord. (Acts 9:28).

On the road to Damascus Saul came to a point of realisation – realisation in the sense of perceiving as true what was previously hidden, of apprehending clearly what was formerly obscured. He saw that what he had been doing up to then in the belief he was serving God was wrong. He came to see exactly who Jesus Christ is. And, most importantly, to know that this Jesus was not dead, but alive. But there was also realisation in the sense of bringing into existence and making actual the fullness of his destiny. From this moment, he was no longer Saul (meaning *responded, prayed for*), known everywhere for his "persecuting of the church" (Philippians 3:6), but began the process of transformation by which he became Paul (meaning *small, humble*), the great apostle to the Gentiles.

The man who up to then was "breathing out murderous threats against the Lord's disciples" (Acts 9:1), wanted to "take [any he found] as prisoners to Jerusalem" (Acts 9:2), and was known for "all the harm he has done to [the] saints" (Acts 9:13) – a man who "[came to Damascus] with authority from the chief priests to arrest all who call on [the] name [of Jesus]" (Acts 9:14) – was utterly transformed. Ultimately, this was because he met Jesus, but it was also because "a disciple named Ananias" (Acts 9:10) did as he was told.

God delights in using people who have been great sinners to do some of his mightiest work. Moses, David, and Saul were all murderers, either killing with their own hands or having others kill on their behalf and with their approval (see Exodus 2:12, 2 Samuel 11:15, Acts 8:1). God also tends to choose those we might regard as unprepossessing, unsuitable, or worse. Reflecting on this should build us up. No matter what we have been, what we have done or what we lack, Jesus can use us. If we allow the moment of realisation to come upon us, and open ourselves to encountering the risen Jesus, we will be changed. The greater our past sin, the more obvious our limitations, the worse our infirmities, the more powerful will be our witness: "All those who heard him were astonished and asked, 'Isn't he the man who caused havoc in Jerusalem among those who call on this name? And hasn't he come here to take them as prisoners to the chief priests?'" (Acts 9:21).

Men like Saul and Ananias did not come about by chance any more than the world was formed by chance. They were prepared by God and placed by the Almighty where they could best be used, as each of us will be if we allow our Creator to mould, shape and guide us. God's signs and wonders are visible in this land today, just as they have been in years gone by. The reason they are not better known is that too many "heard the sound but did not see anyone" (Acts 9:7): events take place without our recognising who is behind them. We need to look for our heavenly Father at work and pray that the scales will fall from our eyes and those of our fellow countrymen. Then realisation will come upon us, and we will live in a land where: "Everyone was amazed and gave praise to God. They were filled with awe and said, 'We have seen remarkable things today.'" (Luke 5:26).

And now, back to the story we started with. There are spiritual strongholds in this nation that must be broken if people are to be set free to choose – either for God, or not. Some strongholds are big national ones, but they exist in every locality. They can only be broken by the power of God, but this power is often channelled through ordinary believers like you and me. God will not do what He has given His people power and authority to do. Which means that, if we do not take these strongholds, they will remain in place and people will continue to suffer under them. It is time to get up and go into the city, time like never before to war in the Spirit for our nation. A recruiting poster for the First World War had a picture of a child sitting on his father's lap and asking, "What did you do in the Great War, daddy?" It is time to ask ourselves the same question, to seek the face of God today and ask what He wants us to do in the Great War of our day. Whatever it is, may it all be for His praise and glory.

Amen