

# Peter, Paul and Who?

(Series: Reimagining Church; Message Twenty-One)  
Acts 9:19b-43

Review (Slide)

February 14, 2021

*August – focused on prayer and waiting...*

*September – focused on the presence and power of the Holy Spirit...*

*October – focused on the early church's Rule of Life: teaching, fellowship, breaking bread and prayer*

*November – focused on the Church's mission*

*January – focusing on Spirit-empowered leadership*

*This month - February – focusing on the marks of a believer*

## Scripture:

*Saul spent several days with the disciples in Damascus. <sup>20</sup>At once he began to preach in the synagogues that Jesus is the Son of God. <sup>21</sup>All those who heard him were astonished and asked, "Isn't he the man who raised 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?" <sup>22</sup>Yet Saul grew more and more powerful and baffled the Jews living in Damascus by proving that Jesus is the Messiah.*

*<sup>23</sup>After many days had gone by, there was a conspiracy among the Jews to kill him, <sup>24</sup>but Saul learned of their plan. Day and night they kept close watch on the city gates in order to kill him. <sup>25</sup>But his followers took him by night and lowered him in a basket through an opening in the wall.*

*<sup>26</sup>When he came to Jerusalem, he tried to join the disciples, but they were all afraid of him, not believing that he really was a disciple. <sup>27</sup>But Barnabas took him and brought him to the apostles. He told them how Saul on his journey had seen the Lord and that the Lord had spoken to him, and how in Damascus he had preached fearlessly in the name of Jesus. <sup>28</sup>So Saul stayed with them and moved about freely in Jerusalem, speaking boldly in the name of the Lord. <sup>29</sup>He talked and debated with the Hellenistic Jews, but they tried to kill him. <sup>30</sup>When the believers learned of this, they took him down to Caesarea and sent him off to Tarsus.*

*<sup>31</sup>Then the church throughout Judea, Galilee and Samaria enjoyed a time of peace and was strengthened. Living in the fear of the Lord and encouraged by the Holy Spirit, it increased in numbers.*

*<sup>32</sup>As Peter traveled about the country, he went to visit the Lord's people who lived in Lydda. <sup>33</sup> here he found a man named Aeneas, who was paralyzed and had been bedridden for eight years. <sup>34</sup>"Aeneas," Peter said to him, "Jesus Christ heals you. Get up and roll up your mat." Immediately Aeneas got up. <sup>35</sup>All those who lived in Lydda and Sharon saw him and turned to the Lord.*

*<sup>36</sup>In Joppa there was a disciple named Tabitha (in Greek her name is Dorcas); she was always doing good and helping the poor. <sup>37</sup>About that time she became sick and died, and her body was washed and placed in an upstairs room. <sup>38</sup>Lydda was near Joppa; so when the disciples heard that Peter was in Lydda, they sent two men to him and urged him, "Please come at once!"*

*<sup>39</sup>Peter went with them, and when he arrived, he was taken upstairs to the room. All the widows stood around him, crying and showing him the robes and other clothing that Dorcas had made while she was still with them.*

*<sup>40</sup>Peter sent them all out of the room; then he got down on his knees and prayed. Turning toward the dead woman, he said, "Tabitha, get up." She opened her eyes, and seeing Peter she sat up. <sup>41</sup>He took her by the hand and helped her to her feet. Then he called for the believers, especially the widows, and presented her to them alive. <sup>42</sup>This became known all over Joppa, and many people believed in the Lord. <sup>43</sup>Peter stayed in Joppa for some time with a tanner named Simon.*

## Message

God has never been pleased with an **independent** spirit. That may come as a surprise to those of us living and working in America where our independence and independent spirit is something we take very seriously and are often very proud of. We cherish it; we celebrate it; and in fact, people are willing to die to preserve it.

I'm not talking about our nation's independence; I'm talking about the spirit of independence that pervades our culture - "I'll do it my way" - even in the church.

*"I've pulled myself up by my own bootstraps; I take care of myself and my own family; I'll do what I believe is right; No one is going to tell me what to do; I don't depend on anyone else - and . . . I expect you and everyone else to do the same"*

While many people are raised to value that independent spirit; you won't find it in Scripture, and from what I read there, it doesn't please God.

**That independent spirit, taken to an extreme, raised up Timothy McVeigh.** He refused to place himself under any authority; and in doing what he pleased, he did the unthinkable - he took the lives of 168 people - including many children. He bombed the Federal building in Oklahoma City and was sentenced to death. He died defiant and proud, without a shred of remorse.

When asked why, he said he controlled his own fate and then he quoted a poem by William Ernest Henley, called *Invictus*:

*Out of the night that covers me,  
Black as the pit from pole to pole.  
I thank whatever gods may be, for my unconquerable soul”  
It matters not how strait the gate,  
How charged with punishments the scroll,  
I am the master of my fate;  
I am the captain of my soul.”*

Chilling, but not surprising words in a culture where people want to control their own destiny, pursue their own agenda, and use whatever means are necessary to get there and maintain it.

**The primary problem with wanting to control our own destiny is we ignore that each beat of our heart is a gift from God** (and ultimately, we have little control over those beats). **We belong to God in body and soul.**

Whether we're willing to admit it or not, we cannot exist independently; we need God and we need each other – desperately. We were created for **dependency**; we were created for **community**; we were designed to need our Creator and to need each other.

Scripture never says, “God helps those who help themselves” (even though people periodically quote that to me); it does say God helps those who acknowledge they can't help themselves.

While, thankfully, few people are like Tim McVeigh, many are like Saul and Peter - in need of a lesson, a reminder, some humility and dependence, some growth and maturation.

While our culture promotes independence now (and forever); it ignores developing time-forged **character**; we want it; and when we want it, we want it now! And we demand it from others instantly as well.

God, on the other hand (thankfully), is in no hurry; he takes his time; in planning to use us, he prepares us - and that usually requires some suffering, shaping, and schooling. God prefers to work with the humble, the **broken**, and the **bruised**; those who know they need his help, like Peter and Saul, Aeneas and Dorcas.

**Last week we noted that one of the marks of a believer is Grace – God's grace offered; God's grace received; his grace extended to others. This morning we're focused on community – on Group - and on Growth (a second and third Mark of a believer). Acts 9:19f underscores these Biblical principles.**

## PAUL (SAUL)

**With his eyesight restored, his baptism performed, his strength regained, Saul begins preaching in the Synagogues of Damascus.** And God goes to work to **break** Saul's stubborn will and **replace** it with His.

But unlike his conversion on the road to Damascus, this transformation will take time - it often takes a lifetime; but at some point, the process has to begin. With Saul, it began with his conversion.

Saul will learn to depend on God (growth) and to work with others (group) through a series of circumstances where he will learn to lean (**9:19-43**).

**In Damascus, people are amazed at Saul's preaching.** A recent Rabbinical graduate and Messianic convert, we could say Saul knows enough to be dangerous. He is **gifted** and **intelligent**; but he is woefully **unprepared** for the challenges ahead.

Forming (transforming/preparing) him for the ministry/service that awaits him will take **time, training**, and experiences of suffering and hardship. He had come to Damascus with pomp, pride, passion and a plan.

On the way, he was blindsided and blinded. He fasted. He prayed. His sight was returned through Ananias - a man on his list to be arrested - and he was brought before those whose lives he sought. He went to Arabia (cf. **Galatians 1:17**) and eventually returned to Damascus.

Peter would write - *"The God of all grace, who called you to his eternal glory in Christ, after you have suffered a little while, will restore you and make you strong, firm and steadfast"* (**1 Peter 5:10**)

This is a fundamental Biblical **principle** and a **process**; God routinely use suffering in maturing our lives. This passage has been inserted in our "profession of faith" form - it applies to everyone who would follow Jesus Christ. Membership in the body of Christ requires growth /maturing; being a disciple means being part of a community that supports and encourages one another through the struggles.

It isn't very long before people began to realize what Saul is really saying. His words were a welcome **balm**/comfort to those who had been abused by the whip of legalism and the oppression of occupying forces...but some also noticed Saul was putting a twist on their traditional theology and understanding.

He was soon viewed as a **threat** to the Jewish leaders; so they devised a plan to get rid of him (The hunter had now become the **hunted**; the proud was **humbled**). Saul's former "friends" now enemies posted guards at every gate in Damascus to prevent him from escaping).

**His fellow "Christ-followers" (notice, no names, but the community/church) come to the rescue.** They came at night to *"lower him in a basket through an opening in the wall"* (**9:25**).

Notice: The man destined to be a proud Sanhedrin leader now places his life in the **hands** of the very group he once sought to **destroy**; the pursuer is now running for his life (Note the irony; and how quickly things can change).

(Let me ask you a question: Have you ever had to depend on other people like that? Do you remember those who walked with you? Truth is, you never forget them).

I remember those who came when our son Kevin died; when I left Calvary; it wasn't the people I'd have expected; but people came and stayed and cared... Nothing like a basket rescue in a time of trouble to teach us a bit of humility.

Learning to **trust** others is just the first step. Then comes the **waiting**. Slowing down and waiting for God's timing is often the hardest part.

R.C.H. Lenski: "*Paul's career began like that of Moses, with a flight and then with a long period of waiting, waiting, nothing but waiting*"

Saul's story makes for great reading, but it makes for hard living; waiting is hard and humbling (Have you ever had to wait and wait for something; Marilyn and I had to wait to have children - through years and years of infertility It was hard and humbling.) God seldom works "fast."

### **Damascus. Arabia. Then back to Damascus. Then on to Jerusalem...**

Jerusalem was "Saul Town" - he owned it. He had been a "rising star." He went to graduate school there; he knew the logistics, the movers and the shakers. "*But [the disciples in Jerusalem] were all afraid of him, not believing that he really was a disciple*" (9:26). (Could be a wolf in disguise, an undercover spy in their midst...)

Then comes the **rejection** - being shunned because of one's past and the baggage one carries; the pain of rejection when longing for acceptance can be unbearable; a suffering deeper than physical pain. But here - and elsewhere - God is using this to break Saul's independent spirit.

The suffering becomes an essential part of his story and ultimately, a testimony to God's grace; God did it in Saul's life; he does in our as well (Can't tell you how many rejections "slips" I've received, applications that were denied or ignored, or doors or opportunities I've sought that I've found closed...)

But God brings a relatively unknown, a "**who**" we've met only once before (4:36), to assist: "*But **Barnabas**...*" (isn't that a great opening) *out of nowhere...the son of encouragement*" steps up to advocate for Saul.

Every time Barnabas appears, he's offering encouragement; he's providing assistance; he's going the extra mile; he's risking his reputation out of grace. Barnabas brings Saul to the Disciples: "*I've checked him out. He's the genuine article. He speaks for Jesus. He has seen the risen Christ! He is on our side.*"

Everyone needs a Barnabas's from time to time (Can you name the Barnabas' in your life? If you're a follower of Jesus, you have them – few people become followers of Jesus without them).

Likewise, we all need to be a *Barnabas* in other's lives – always seeing the best in someone, offering second chances, and providing large doses of encouragement and grace. Who have you been a Barnabas to in the last week/month...?

As successful as Saul was in Jerusalem, God was just beginning to prepare him. Saul confronted the Hellenists and realized they were plotting to kill him. So the *believers* (a group of more unnamed “who's”) in Jerusalem took him to Caesarea (a port city) and sent him to Tarsus (i.e., back home).

Even the city he once “owned” had turned against him; and instantly he **is gone!** And Saul (temporarily) disappears from the pages of Acts. Scholars believe Saul may have remained in Tarsus as long as ten years (A classic example of the slow, thorough work of a timeless God! Dallas Willard told John Ortberg, “*Hurry is the greatest enemy of spiritual life today!*”).

**Acts 9:31** - “*Then the church throughout Judea, Galilee and Samaria enjoyed a time of peace and was strengthened. Living in the fear of the Lord and encouraged by the Holy Spirit, it increased in numbers.*”

Without Saul - the world's soon to be greatest missionary - the church **flourished.**

Ouch! So much for being **indispensible**. No one is. But Saul needs to learn he needs God and others **more** than God and others **need** him; (That's dependence; that's humility; that's God's way; that's the mark of a believer; that's the community we call Church). When Saul learned that, then God could and did use him mightily.

As his transformation and growth continues, **Saul** will change his name - from his namesake from his tribe of Benjamin, the first King of Israel, to **Paul**, from the Greek word *paulos*, meaning “**small, little**” - a sign of learned humility.

## **PETER (9:32-43)**

**Luke now shifts the focus to the Apostle Peter.** You know Peter - he was the **oldest** and **first** among the Disciples, one of the three in Jesus' inner circle (with James and John).

Peter is the disciple who said, “*You are the Christ/Messiah, the son of the Living God*” (**Matthew 16:16**) and then “**betrayed**” his Rabbi; not once, but three times! Peter is the one disciple Jesus singled out after his resurrection in **John 21** to ask: “*Do you **love** me*”; not once, but three times! How humiliating in front of his peers. Peter went through the **humiliation** protocol to prepare him to be used by God; God would use him mightily as well.

As Peter is making his way back from visiting the churches in Samaria, he passes through a little town called Lydda (currently Lod). Peter encounters a man who had been **paralyzed** for eight years. Paralysis is a devastating condition; it obviously paralyzes the body, but it soon paralyzes the spirit.

Peter heals him - not by saying, "I heal you" but by saying, "**Jesus Christ** heals you! Rise up and make your bed." Stand up, be strong; take your mat - you'll no longer need it!" Luke makes the source of Peter's healing power clear: **Jesus!**

**While Peter is at Lydda, an incident takes place in the nearby city of Joppa (cf. Map).**

There was a woman named Tabitha (Dorcas in the Greek; word means *gazelle* - a very graceful animal); Tabitha was known for her grace and love for others. Luke notes she is a disciple (i.e., she is a follower of Jesus). She falls **sick** and **dies!**

The disciples at Joppa send two men to Lydda to ask Peter to stop in their town. Were they inviting Peter to grieve with them? (It is hard to imagine they assumed Peter would come and raise her from the dead!). But there is a need; Peter comes.

They show Peter evidence of her fruitful life - the coats and tunics she made - and all those who are mourning her passing. Peter asks them to leave the room (like he saw his Master do), kneels and **prays**, and then tells her to rise! And she does! Through our humility comes God's power.

Word spread...and many believed! God **answers** prayers. The power comes from **Jesus** - and many believed in him. All too often we think about what we can do - and what is beyond our ability. The truth is - "*With man this is impossible, but not with God; all things are possible with God*" (**Mark 10:27**)

Peter and the first century church provide evidence of God's power - both the **slow** and the miraculous **transforming** work of God - as the Church in the 21st century must as well.

## AND WHO

Interestingly, in this passage the Christians are called "**saints**" (9:13,32,41). It is a word Saul/Paul uses to designate **disciples (followers) of Jesus**; Saul/Paul writes his letters to the "saints" (*hagios*) at such and such a place.

The word is sometimes translated as "*holy*"; but the root meaning is simply, "**different**." It describes something that is different from the ordinary. The word is used to describe God's people - first Israel and now the Church.

God's people are to be a **holy**, separated; **distinguishable** from the rest of the world because God chose them to be his people and do his work; we are saved to serve; we are called to **depend** on God and **serve** with others. And the source of our power to be holy and make a difference...comes from Jesus.

**The secret to building a great church is building it God's way.** God breaks all our man-made, prideful approaches - "Do it my way! My way is best!" "We need to do this right now - as quickly as possible!" "Use/listen to the celebrities, those with the resources, the movers and shakers."

Sorry, but it's not about **you/us**; it's certainly not about me; It's about **God**. All about God. Not only does God's way work best; God himself works best.

**Just to set the record straight; we are neither masters of our fate nor captains of our soul. The sooner we realize that Truth, the sooner we'll be open to a move of God's Spirit, and the better we'll be and the better we'll be together.**

All believers, even Saul and Peter, have to learn that (i.e., grow, mature) **before** God will use us. That process will **hurt**; it always does. It will take time; and we are an impatient people. But in **his time**, in his way, he'll make our **dependent** spirit beautiful and use us to **build** his Church together!

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