

Meditations of the Heart - Reflections on the Scriptures

Psalm 19:14 Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable in your sight, O LORD, my rock and my redeemer.

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Sermon Series: *The Mission of God* Sermon: *Whose Mission is it?*

Acts 9: 1-19

Acts 9:1-19 1 But Saul, still breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord, went to the high priest 2 and asked him for letters to the synagogues at Damascus, so that if he found any belonging to the Way, men or women, he might bring them bound to Jerusalem. 3 Now as he went on his way, he approached Damascus, and suddenly a light from heaven flashed around him. 4 And falling to the ground he heard a voice saying to him, "Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?" 5 And he said, "Who are you, Lord?" And he said, "I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting. 6 But rise and enter the city, and you will be told what you are to do." 7 The men who were traveling with him stood speechless, hearing the voice but seeing no one. 8 Saul rose from the ground, and although his eyes were opened, he saw nothing. So they led him by the hand and brought him into Damascus. 9 And for three days he was without sight, and neither ate nor drank. 10 Now there was a disciple at Damascus named Ananias. The Lord said to him in a vision, "Ananias." And he said, "Here I am, Lord." 11 And the Lord said to him, "Rise and go to the street called Straight, and at the house of Judas look for a man of Tarsus named Saul, for behold, he is praying, 12 and he has seen in a vision a man named Ananias come in and lay his hands on him so that he might regain his sight." 13 But Ananias answered, "Lord, I have heard from many about this man, how much evil he has done to your saints at Jerusalem. 14 And here he has authority from the chief priests to bind all who call on your name." 15 But the Lord said to him, "Go, for he is a chosen instrument of mine to carry my name before the Gentiles and kings and the children of Israel. 16 For I will show him how much he must suffer for the sake of my name." 17 So Ananias departed and entered the house. And laying his hands on him he said, "Brother Saul, the Lord Jesus who appeared to you on the road by which you came has sent me so that you may regain your sight and be filled with the Holy Spirit." 18 And immediately something like scales fell from his eyes, and he regained his sight. Then he rose and was baptized; 19 and taking food, he was strengthened.

The most startling aspect of this passage is not Saul's encounter with the risen Christ and Saul's subsequent conversion. (We can be sure of this because the early Christians came to accept the conversion of Saul (a.k.a. Paul the apostle) before they accepted his calling – to the Gentiles. Thus, the most controversial aspect of this passage is not whether these early Christians could trust this man who had previously tried violently to destroy their faith. What was harder for them to accept were the words of the Lord Jesus in verse 15: "Go, for he is a chosen instrument of mine to carry my name before the Gentiles and kings and the children of Israel. 16 For I will show him how much he must suffer for the sake of my name."

The Lord's words show just how much the early church (including even the apostles) misunderstood the mission of God. Up to this point, the early church was, by and large, entirely Jewish and these Jewish Christians had no framework for thinking that it should be any other way. But following Saul's conversion, the Apostle Peter received a vision from God while he was praying. God was instructing Peter to go to the home of a pagan Roman military commander named Cornelius. In Peter's mind, however, it was unlawful to associate with Gentiles and he was clearly uncomfortable with entering this man's house. In keeping with what he had learned in the vision, though, Peter said, "God has shown me that I should not call any person common or unclean. So when I was sent for, I came without objection." (Acts 10:28-29)

They asked Peter to tell them about the gospel of Christ and, as Peter did so, he is interrupted – by the Spirit of God who comes upon these Gentiles, in a way exactly like the Spirit of God had come upon the first Christians in Jerusalem on the day of Pentecost. This was way beyond what the early Jewish Christians ever expected to see God do. Peter begins to see that the circumstances are very much outside of his control and that God is on the move in a way Peter could not have imagined.

When word got around as to Peter's visit to Cornelius, Peter's old friends in Jerusalem were extremely critical. What Peter had done, in their minds, was a clear breach of the law. Peter responded by saying, "If ... God gave the same gift to them [to these Gentiles] as he gave to us when we [Jews] believed in the Lord Jesus Christ, who was I that I could stand in God's way?" (Acts 11:17) Peter had learned that, when it came to the mission of God, it was God's mission and God was in control. The ensuing chapters in the book of Acts go on to show how the early church (largely Jewish at the time) had to wrestle with all these Gentiles who were putting their faith and hope in Jesus as their Messiah, too.

When we consider the mission of God, we need to understand that his expansion of the kingdom of God - the proclamation of the Gospel - is first and foremost God's mission..., and God is easily able to accomplish that mission even when his own church (the people He has already redeemed) not only do not understand God's purposes, but are even diametrically opposed to God's mission!

So, how do we participate in the mission of God ourselves? We'll talk more about it in the next few weeks. The main thing that I as your pastor want you to be concerned with is to simply *walk with God*: worship Him, trust Him, depend upon Him. That's what we're made to do, and that's what Christ has redeemed us for – that we might be reconciled to God, glorify God and enjoy Him. And, if you remember from last week, that is the very definition of eternal life – that we know God.

Amazing things happen when people simply walk with God. As you grow to trust in God and walk with Him, He will guide you and show you how you can best serve Him. To return to the parable of the Good Samaritan that we looked at two weeks ago, as we seek to follow Jesus (and learn His word), He will show us how to love our neighbor as ourselves.

As a church, we support various missionaries in cross-cultural settings and will continue to do so. But our primary mission as a church, your mission as a part of this community of believers, is not way far away somewhere, it's right here – nearby in our city, nearby in your neighborhood, nearby in your workplace – where you have the opportunity everyday to love your neighbor as yourself. As we walk with God and seek to love Him with all our heart, He will guide us as to how we can love our neighbor as ourselves. As Augustine has said, "Preach the gospel at all times; if necessary, use words." Ultimately, the mission is God's and we can rest in Him to accomplish that mission and work through us in surprising ways.