

## **God Prepared Saul for Ministry—Acts 9:23-31—2/15/26**

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Open your Bibles to Acts 9 where we return to our study in this history of the church & the unstoppable Gospel of Jesus Christ.

The Gospel marched on in Acts 9 with the transformation of the fierce persecutor Saul into a fervent preacher for Jesus.

Jesus appeared to convict & convert Saul & to change his plans.

But Jesus had more preparation for Saul before elevating him to the role of Apostle to the Gentiles that we know as Paul.

Before we study that, let's read the context in Acts 9:1-31. [READ]

As we pick up in verse 23, we're going to walk through 4 ways God prepared Saul for the Apostolic ministry ahead of him.

Those 4 outline points highlight what God uniquely did in Saul's life.

As we've said before, we are not living in the time of transition when the NT was being written as the church began & grew.

We are also not preparing for Apostleship to the Gentiles as Paul was.

But we are following the same Jesus as Lord & Savior & we are serving the same God who works for & through His people.

And that God does not waste the pains & fears & struggles we face.

*We know, as Romans 8:28 says, that God causes all things to work together for good to those who love God, to those who are called according to His purpose.*

So when you look back on the uncertainties that have scared you & the trials that have burdened you & the changes that have unsettled you, you can know God had good purposes for each one of them.

We can look back & affirm that truth from Romans 8:28 & we can look ahead to apply that truth to the issues we face.

And seeing God's goodness in the stories of His people helps highlight how He has worked & how He can still do so similarly today.

So I have been praying that God's work with Saul will come to life with timely instructions & applications for us today.

We need to start with some background that's only implied in Acts 9, but that gives us a 1<sup>st</sup> way God prepared Saul for ministry.

The 1<sup>st</sup> way God prepared Saul for ministry—point #1 today—by providing him divine revelation.

#1, God prepared Saul for ministry by providing him divine revelation.

Part of preparation for ministry for anyone is spending time with the Lord Jesus, learning from Him through His Word.

That happened for Saul in the special ways Jesus appeared to him.

It seems likely that Jesus gave further revelation to Saul after the initial encounter at Saul's conversion.

The 1<sup>st</sup> 5 words of verse 23 hint at that; so read verses 18-23. [READ]

In verse 19, the author Luke told what happened for several days after Saul was converted, after Jesus had saved him.

That transformation in verses 20-22 was astounding to all who heard.

But we need to be careful not to miss the first 5 words of verse 23 that insert an indefinite longer time into this narrative.

It's tempting to read this & think Saul was persecuted soon after he started preaching as if this was all in a month or so.

But you need to know there's a longer time named in verse 23.

Those 1<sup>st</sup> 5 words—*And when many days had elapsed*—indicate a sense of sufficient fulfillment.

*Elapsed* translates the verb for fulfill or fill up or complete.

And the word for *many* is a word for enough or adequate or sufficient, for a large amount or extent or degree.

The point is that this was a long time sufficient to complete or fulfill God's preparation of Saul for what was next.

Likely during this time, Saul was preaching around Damascus, but we don't know much more than what he wrote in Galatians 1.

So turn to Galatians 1 where Saul—or then the Apostle Paul—was writing to defend his apostleship.

He had warned against any other gospel because the Gospel he preached to them was directly from his Master, Jesus Christ.

Then follow along in verse 10-18 of Galatians 1. [READ]

As a slave of Christ, Paul was trying to please God, not men, with the Gospel he received by revelation from Jesus Christ.

See where I get that 1<sup>st</sup> point for today in this cross reference—God prepared Saul for ministry by providing divine revelation.

God had called Saul to salvation & revealed this Gospel to preach that was from Jesus & not from any man consulted in flesh & blood.

That makes sense of what we read in Acts 9 of Jesus appearing.

And notice verses 17-18 of Galatians 1 that define how many days had elapsed in Acts 9:23 when Jesus may have given more revelation.

In Galatians 1:17, Paul said he did not go up to Jerusalem at first, but went away to Arabia & then returned to Damascus.

Damascus was considered the northern end of Nabatean Arabia, a kingdom extending down through modern Jordan into the Sinai region.

So Paul said he was in that region of Arabia & returned to Damascus again before heading to Jerusalem.

Galatians 1:18 says he went to Jerusalem 3 years after his conversion & those 3 years tell us *how many days had elapsed* in Acts 9:23.

I say that to clarify that Acts 9:23 did not happen overnight or in a month as we now turn back there & read it again. [READ]

Now you know when those many days elapsed—when the portions of those 3 years as they counted them were completed.

And you know that Saul later wrote of that as a time of divine revelation so that he was not preaching his own gospel.

His Gospel was from his Lord Jesus Christ & that was unique for Saul as an Apostle & as an inspired author of NT writings.

And that's important for us to grasp as we appreciate the trustworthiness of the NT letters that Paul wrote.

As we've said before—you can trust your Bible, your NT, as given by inspiration from God—breathed out by God, as 2<sup>nd</sup> Timothy 3:16 says.

So you can be prepared for ministry like Saul was by studying the divine revelation that God has provided in the Scriptures.

You can trust God's preparation of Saul for ministry & you can learn from that same source of divine revelation in Scripture.

So be freshly motivated to know that you have God's Word.

You have specific, sufficient instructions from our Creator to know how to live this life & prepare for life eternal!

That 1<sup>st</sup> application is from the opening of verse 23 because of how Paul described that time in Galatians 1.

That's a great foundation to start with to prepare us all for thoughts of being useful to God in every season of our lives.

If you wonder what God has been doing in your life & what He wants to do in the future, you can find categories to frame answers to those questions by spending time in His Word.

With that background clarified, read Acts 9:23 again. [READ]

When that time was fulfilled, the Jews *plotted* together—they contemplated about their wishes & conspired to act.

And their plot was to do away with Saul—or as the ESV & New King James or LSB translate it—it was to kill him or put him to death.

Even though Saul had formerly been one of them, his preaching in that region over a few years had not wavered.

Since Saul's trust in Jesus as the Jewish Messiah had solidified & his testimony & teaching were irrefutable, he was a target to eliminate.

But God was preparing Saul for how much he must suffer for Jesus' name as Jesus had told Ananias earlier in Acts 9:16.

And read verse 24 to see the intensity of this. [READ]

They, meaning the Jews in Damascus who did not trust Jesus, were continually watching as if standing guard by the gates.

The gates were large entrances to the city surrounded by walls.

We don't have walls around our cities, but we have venues with admission prices have similar kinds of walls or fences so that you can only get in or out through certain gates or doors.

Verse 24 says that day & night those city gates were being guarded.

And the goal in verse 24 is the same as in verse 23—so that they might put Saul to death, kill him.

This was dangerous—Saul was a fugitive, needing to stay hidden & move secretly to keep from being caught & killed.

Yet verse 24 says, *their plot became known to Saul*.

Luke did not tell how it became known, but his point was that GOD was the One who made sure it became known.

God is the unstated Actor behind that protection of Saul's life.

This was 1 of many dangers he would face as Apostle to the Gentiles.

So we can note this as another preparation of Saul—#2, God prepared Saul for ministry by protecting him through dangers.

God prepared Saul for ministry, #1, by providing him divine revelation, & now #2, by protecting him through dangers.

#2, God prepared Saul for ministry by protecting him through dangers like plots by people watching to catch & kill him.

Read verse 25 to see how God protected Saul here. [READ]

Saul had students or learners, disciples of Jesus who were following him as he followed Jesus.

And those disciples, after taking Saul at night, let him down through the city wall out a window in a house built along the city wall.

They lowered him in a big basket like those used to gather loaves leftover after Jesus fed the 4000 in Matthew 15:37.

Apparently, the Jews had conspired with the Nabatean governor to guard the city to catch Saul as he mentioned in 2 Corinthians 11:32-33.

In 2<sup>nd</sup> Corinthians 11:32-33, he said: *In Damascus the ethnarch under Aretas the king was guarding the city of the Damascenes in order to seize me, and I was let down in a basket through a window in the wall, and so escaped his hands.*

So there was a coordinated effort to kill Saul, a cooperation between the Jews who opposed Jesus & the civil authorities in that area.

So this protection was against real dangers, against formidable foes that had the civil power & resources to do away with him.

And this was God's wisdom to prepare Saul for what he would encounter as he preached Jesus across the Roman empire.

In 2<sup>nd</sup> Corinthians 11, he later recounted dangers that he had endured as part of his ministry as Apostle to the Gentiles.

You recall that list in 2<sup>nd</sup> Corinthians 11:23-27 where he said he was *“in far more labors, in far more imprisonments, beaten times without number, often in danger of death. Five times I received from the Jews thirty-nine lashes. Three times I was beaten with rods, once I was stoned, three times I was shipwrecked, a night and a day I have spent in the deep. I have been on frequent journeys, in dangers from rivers, dangers from robbers, dangers from my countrymen, dangers from the Gentiles, dangers in the city, dangers in the wilderness, dangers on the sea, dangers among false brethren; I have been in labor and hardship, through many sleepless nights, in hunger and thirst, often without food, in cold and exposure.”*

Think of all that & imagine the temptations to stop trying or give in to despair or question God's care.

But God did not let Saul see that list ahead of time.

Rather, God gradually prepared him step by step with increasing faith for each new trial.

And we can see the rescue from the plot to kill him in Damascus as one of those early steps of preparation.

We can see God's wisdom to build faith for trials to come as part of Him keeping promises like 1<sup>st</sup> Corinthians 10:13.

1<sup>st</sup> Corinthians 10:13 says, *No temptation has overtaken you but such as is common to man; and God is faithful, who will not allow you to be tempted beyond what you are able, but with the temptation will provide the way of escape also, so that you will be able to endure it.*

The example of God preparing Saul by protecting him through dangers illustrates how He may be doing the same kind of preparation of us in the trials we have faced or are facing.

That means we can stop whining & insisting on knowing the answer to every why question about God's providence in our lives.

We can take courage from stories of God's faithfulness & trust God's wise plans in our own lives.

I'm not saying we minimize our health scares & relational stresses & political concerns & other burdens & potential dangers.

But we can be helped by recalling how God carried us through what we faced & how He is readying us for what's ahead.

God prepared Saul by using his disciples in the church to demonstrate His sovereignty over all things & His power to do as He has planned.

This was an early lesson about what Saul might suffer & how God could provide for his escape.

But that was not all God was doing to prepare Saul for future ministry as he faced a different kind of trial next in Jerusalem.

Read Acts 9:26 to see the distrust he dealt with. [READ]

Recall that after his conversion, Paul said in Galatians 1:18 that: *three years later I went up to Jerusalem to become acquainted with Cephas.*

That trip to Jerusalem was after he had escaped Damascus.

Even though many had heard his conversion story, they still did not trust him & that was a cause for disunity in their fellowship.

He was making ongoing efforts to join the disciples, seeking to unite in fellowship with the local church as he should have.

But sadly, the disciples in Jerusalem all feared him based on his past persecution of Christians that started in Jerusalem.

Even after Saul had been a believer for some part of 3 years, the disciples were not believing that Saul was a disciple.

They did not trust that he was the real thing & were not accepting him.

Saul had already faced this in Damascus & God had prepared Ananias to accept him & affirm his faith in Jesus.

Now God had Barnabas vouch for him as we read in verse 27. [READ]

Luke had already introduced Barnabas, which means son of encouragement, in Acts 4 as an exemplary generous giver.

Now that same gracious heart was displayed in taking hold of the likely lonely Saul to lead him to the Apostles.

Galatians 1:18-19 indicate that this may have only included the Apostles Cephas or Peter & the Lord's brother James.

Barnabas spoke about how Saul had seen the Lord Jesus on the road to Damascus & that the Lord had talked to Saul.

We're not told how Barnabas knew Saul's conversion story, but he knew it & knew of Saul's ministry.

The rest of verse 27 says he told of how at Damascus Saul had openly & fearlessly spoken in the name of Jesus.

That testimony of Saul's conversion & courageous preaching in Jesus' name must have been convincing enough.

Read of his acceptance among them in verse 28. [READ]

At first when he tried to be with them, they feared him.

But now he was with them, literally going into & going out with them in Jerusalem, which was an idiom for moving about freely.

And in his acceptance with the church, he was also speaking out boldly in Jesus' name just as he had done in Damascus.

So realize how Saul had to walk through being distrusted & ostracized & isolated & avoided by those with whom he was trying to associate.

He experienced the pain of separation from those who trusted Jesus & should have shared fellowship with him.

We can phrase this as a 3<sup>rd</sup> way God prepared Saul for ministry—point #3, God prepared Saul for ministry by proving him through disunity.

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God used Barnabas's testimony about Saul to prove his genuineness & to pave the way for his acceptance among those who did not trust him.

Saul's arrival in Jerusalem brought disunity in the church there as people avoided him & separated from him.

We are not told if anyone other than Barnabas would fellowship with him when he first arrived & that must have been strange & painful.

But God worked through Barnabas to clarify the truth & lead toward reconciliation in relationships & partnership in Christ.

So think of that—consider how that was vital preparation for the Apostle Paul who would later take the Gospel to the Gentiles.

When Paul wrote about Jewish & Gentile believers unified despite past strife, he could speak from real experience.

He could speak to Gentiles in Ephesians 2-3 about the joy of no longer being aliens & strangers, but being fellow heirs with the saints.

He could write that knowing both the pain of hostility as an outsider & the love of true unity in the Gospel.

He knew the power of God to unite former enemies so he could confront Peter undermining that unity as Galatians 2 describes.

Such mysteries were yet to be revealed in the NT, but God was preparing him to experience them & to write about them.

God prepared Saul for such ministry by proving him through disunity.

Do you see the wisdom of God in His preparation of Saul?

Be amazed at the details God orchestrated in unfolding the beauty of His design for the multinational, unified church of Jesus Christ.

And let God's wisdom in Saul's life encourage you to trust God in what He's doing in your life also.

We can learn from God preparing Saul for ministry (1) by providing him divine revelation, (2) by protecting him through dangers, & (3) by proving him through disunity.

Then 4<sup>th</sup>ly & lastly today, we can learn from God preparing Saul for ministry by persevering him through difficulties.

God prepared Saul for ministry by persevering him through death plots like we find in verse 29 & direction changes like we find in verse 30 & the overall development that those trials & silent years brought him.

But let's #4 simply say, #4, that God prepared Saul by persevering him through difficulties.

Read verses 29-30 for the death plot & direction change. [READ]

As in Damascus, some were trying to put Saul to death, seeking to kill him.

This time the murderous schemers were Hellenistic Jews, as the lead instigators against Stephen were.

Hellenistic Jews spoke Greek as their primary language & they were culturally Greek & yet retained their Jewish religion.

That's who Saul was speaking & debating with, likely on a continual basis though Saul's time there was short.

Galatians 1:18 indicated that he was only there 15 days.

His reasoning must have raised this rage quickly, but having learned of it, the disciples responded decisively.

They brought Saul down to Caesarea by the Mediterranean Sea to send him off & out by ship.

Then they sent him back to his home city Tarsus, which was in the regions of Syria & Cilicia where Galatians 1:21 also says he went.

Paul's words in Acts 22:17-21 reveal how they learned of it.

In Acts 22:17-21, Paul said: *It happened when I returned to Jerusalem & was praying in the temple, that I fell into a trance, & I saw Him saying to me, 'Make haste, & get out of Jerusalem quickly, because they will not accept your testimony about Me.'* “And I said, ‘Lord, they themselves understand that in one synagogue after another I used to imprison & beat those who believed in You. & when the blood of Your witness Stephen was being shed, I also was standing by approving, and watching out for the coats of those who were slaying him.’ “And He said to me, ‘Go! For I will send you far away to the Gentiles.’

So this was not what Saul had expected.

He expected that his testimony would be undeniable & compelling.

But God knew that He had other plans for him.

So this further dangerous difficulty he faced in Jerusalem & then a directional change sent him to minister in obscurity for over a decade.

Scholars call what follows this verse as the silent years about Paul because nothing is known of his ministry then.

Galatians 2:1 mentions 14 years until his visit to Jerusalem in Acts 15 when verses 23 & 41 mention Gentile Christians in Syria & Cilicia that may have come to Christ in Paul’s time there.

But from all we know, it was 9-10 years from this time until Barnabas asked Saul to come to Antioch as Acts 11 reports.

We need to understand these time gaps in Saul’s life as God worked to prepare him gradually for his Apostleship to the Gentiles.

God was developing Saul’s character & ministry skills in this time when we basically know nothing about him for 10 years.

That’s good for young people to hear in our day of microwave results & short-term gratification & social media fame & selfie promotions.

God was persevering Saul through difficulties, direction changes, & development even when no one heard about him.

He was not yet known as the Apostle to the Gentiles & his seasons of fruitful ministry were yet years ahead of him.

But God was preparing him to serve with humility & faith.

We know that later in ministry, Paul wrote in 2<sup>nd</sup> Corinthians 12 about God sending a thorn in his flesh to keep him from exalting himself.

But early in his ministry, God was also keeping him from exalting himself by using dangers & disunity & difficulties.

Do you see the wisdom & goodness of God in His preparation of Saul for his later life & ministry as Paul the Apostle to the Gentiles?

Consider what lessons God might have for you as we see how God knew when & what He was doing with Saul.

How can you trust God & His Word more fully in your own journey?

As we think through the details & timeframes in this narrative, I pray that God will use it for each of our development.

And beyond preparing Saul’s own heart, this was preparing him to lead & shepherd others who face dangers alongside him.

As he later wrote in 2<sup>nd</sup> Corinthians 1:3-4: *Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies and God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our affliction so that we will be able to comfort those who are in any affliction with the comfort with which we ourselves are comforted by God.*

That’s a key for how to interpret God’s providence in your life.

You may not get specific answers to your why questions, but you can know general answers about God’s good purposes.

Know that God will use for good whatever He has you walking through or has already walked you through or will walk you through.

God will use His comfort & strengthening of you to comfort & strengthen others in His plan to continue spreading His care.

He is working in you to use you in the lives of others.

So if you are asking “why” questions about your trials, you may be looking for answers in yourself for your own benefit.

But the bigger answers may be outside of you for the benefit of others.

Like Saul, God may be preparing you for dangers & disunity & difficulties ahead for yourself or He may be preparing you to lead others through similar things they face.

God’s work with Saul early in his Christian life shows ways that God has worked in the past that He may work similarly in our time.

So God’s preparation of Saul for ministry teaches us to trust what He’s doing in our lives as well.

And read in verse 31 what God was doing in the church in that time as he moved Saul & yet continued to build the church. [READ]

This is one of Luke’s summary statements that appear periodically throughout the book.

It closes this section that began with Stephen’s ministry with Saul preaching to Hellenists like Stephen did.

That again shows that the name of Jesus cannot be stopped.

The church had taken the next steps to spread from Jerusalem throughout all Judea & Galilee & Samaria as Jesus said in Acts 1:8.

The church was having peace as political leaders changed in that time & some external pressures were lifted.

As the church was being strengthened & living in the fear of Jesus as Lord & the Holy Spirit’s encouragement, it was continuing to grow.

Saul would become greatly instrumental as the church spread, but at this stage, note that God was still preparing him for that.

So I pray God will use these ways He prepared Saul to renew & remind us of His good purposes in the seasons of life we encounter.

Pray with me as we close.