Acts 2024 Juan Seo (June 16, 2024)

**SAUL BOLDLY PREACHED, “JESUS IS THE SON OF GOD”**

Acts 9:19b-43

Key Verse 9:20

***20 At once he began to preach in the synagogues that Jesus is the Son of God.***

Last Friday, we had a prayer meeting to prepare for the Summer Bible Conference. Although it rained before the meeting, we thank God that many coworkers attended. The Praise & Worship team's music was beautiful and powerful. The deep Bible reflections by M. Hannah Seo and M. Rebecca Han moved our hearts. M. James S. Kim provided an overview of his message. We prayed for the Conference messengers, baptism candidates, and programs. Most importantly, we prayed for our church to become a Spirit-Filled Community. It is truly beautiful when beloved brothers and sisters gather together to praise and pray to God. Jesus created the church community so that we would not live out our faith alone. Within the church community, we can love one another and grow as Jesus' disciples. Today's passage shows that the great servant, Apostle Paul, was protected and grew as a disciple of Jesus and a spiritual leader within the Christian community.

Last week, we learned about Saul’s conversion. To understand the early life of faith of the Apostle Paul, it is necessary to read today's passage together with Galatians 1:17-20. Shall we read it together? ***"17 I did not go up to Jerusalem to see those who were apostles before I was, but I went into Arabia. Later I returned to Damascus. 18 Then after three years, I went up to Jerusalem to get acquainted with Cephas and stayed with him fifteen days. 19 I saw none of the other apostles-only James, the Lord's brother. 20 I assure you before God that what I am writing you is no lie."*** If we read Acts chapters 9 only, it's easy to think that he was in Damascus for some time after his conversion and then went straight to Jerusalem. But in Galatians chapter 1, the Apostle Paul tells us that after receiving God's call to preach the gospel to the Gentiles, his immediate response was not to consult any human being. He did not go up to Jerusalem to meet the apostles, but instead went to Arabia. He then returned to Damascus and after three years he went up to Jerusalem. The three years here is the period between his conversion and going to Jerusalem. We don't know exactly at what point the apostle Paul went to Arabia. Perhaps after meeting Jesus and being converted, as verses 19b-20 indicate, he spent several days with the disciples in Damascus. And immediately he began to preach in the synagogues that Jesus is the Son of God. Verse 23 says, ***"After many days had gone by,"*** which probably means that he traveled to Arabia for around three years. After this, he returned to Damascus and preached the gospel for a time. Afterward, he went up to Jerusalem to escape the Jews who were trying to kill him. This is a brief timeline of Paul's life after his conversion.

I would like to share two important lessons from today's passage with you.

***First, the importance of Christian community.*** Verse 19b says, ***“Saul spent several days with the disciples in Damascus.”*** What do you think Saul, who had been newly converted, and the disciples in Damascus were doing during those several days? I think that they probably had a beautiful time of reconciliation. Ananias, who had witnessed Saul's conversion and had prayed for him in obedience to Jesus' command, would have been a great mediator in this process. When he brought Saul the persecutor into the community of Jesus' disciples in Damascus, the disciples would have been horrified. Some of them would have tried to run out the door as soon as they saw him. Some of them would have been frozen in place. Even as Ananias calmed them down and told the story of Saul's conversion that he had witnessed, some of the disciples would have looked at Saul with disbelief, and some would have resented Ananias for bringing the persecutor into the group of disciples. When Ananias's introduction to Saul was over and Saul himself began his story, how do you think Saul felt? Saul had come to Damascus to arrest them, to drag them back to Jerusalem and put them in prison. He was a persecutor and a murderer who had already imprisoned and killed many of Jesus' disciples. Now, he had met Jesus as his Savior and stood before them as their brother, not as their enemy. His first words would have been, "I'm sorry," and "Please, forgive me." Saul would have sincerely confessed his sins before his Christian brothers, repented, and asked for forgiveness. He would not have made excuses, saying he didn't know; he would not have tried to justify his sin; and he would have given a detailed testimony of how he had come to know Jesus as his Savior. The disciples would have heard with their ears, seen with their eyes, and felt with their hearts Saul's genuine repentance and conversion through Jesus Christ. And with the love of Jesus Christ, they would have welcomed Saul as a brother in Christ. They would have patted him on the shoulder as he sobbed over his sins. They would have embraced him with their arms and kissed him on the cheek. They had been enemies to each other, but now they became brothers in the love of Christ. Saul became one with them in the community of Christ. And so a beautiful work of reconciliation took place in Christ.

Reconciliation in Christ can be achieved through genuine repentance and forgiveness. But how difficult it is to genuinely repent and wholehearted forgive! It takes great courage to ask for forgiveness and admit that I was wrong first. Sometimes, we think that asking for forgiveness first is a sign of losing. However, asking for forgiveness first is the path to victory in the love of Christ. It also takes courage to forgive. Some people may say, “I will forgive you, but I will never forget your faults.” However, genuine forgiveness means completely forgetting the other person’s faults. Why should we accept and forgive one another? It is because we are Jesus' disciples. What was Jesus' commandment to his disciples before he died on the cross? ***"Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another"*** (Jn 13:34). Jesus' heart must have been very heavy as he had to leave his disciples behind and die. He commanded his disciples to love one another, knowing that the only way they would survive in this sinful world was if they loved one another. When we love one another as disciples of Jesus and are united in community, we can be empowered to be victorious in this world. And when people who don't know Jesus see us loving one another, they will come to know the love of Christ and accept Jesus as their Savior. I pray that among us, there will be a work of reconciliation and unity through true repentance and forgiveness so that we can be a Spirit-Filled Community of love.

In today's passage, we see that Saul twice escaped death with the help of his brothers in Christ. When Saul boldly proclaimed the gospel in Damascus, ***"Jesus is the Son of God,"*** some Jews conspired to kill him. Day and night they kept close watch on the city gates in order to kill Saul. How did his brothers in Christ help him then? They took him by night and lowered him in a basket through an opening in the wall. The brothers actively helped to save Saul. The owner of the house with the window in the wall was probably a disciple of Jesus. In this way, Saul was spared by the help of his brothers in Christ.

Something similar to this happened in Jerusalem. Saul arrived in Jerusalem and tried to join the disciples. He wanted to meet them and worship Christ together. But they were all afraid of him because they couldn't believe that Saul really was a disciple. Saul, who had been a persecutor before, couldn't enter the community of disciples in Jerusalem. Who helped Saul then? It was Barnabas. Barnabas took Saul and brought him to the apostles. The Apostle Peter was probably very surprised when he met Saul, but Barnabas explained well 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. With the help of Barnabas, Saul was able to meet the Apostle Peter, the top leader of the church, and to enter the community of disciples. And Saul spoke boldly in the name of the Lord in Jerusalem. Then the Hellenistic Jews in Jerusalem wanted to kill him. Saul was once again on the verge of death. How did his brothers in Christ help him? They took him down to Caesarea and sent him off to Tarsus. They accompanied Saul all the way to Caesarea. They helped him get to his hometown of Tarsus, a relatively safe place to stay. Saul was once again saved by the help of the Christian community.

Here we need to take a moment to think about Barnabas, the man who helped Saul enter the community of Christ in Jerusalem. What kind of person was Barnabas? We first see Barnabas' name in Acts 4:36. He was a Levite from Cyprus who sold a field he owned and brought the money and put it at the apostles' feet. His name was Joseph, but the apostles called him Barnabas, which means "son of encouragement." Barnabas was a man of encouragement who helped his brothers in Christ wholeheartedly. In fact, without Barnabas, there would be no Apostle Paul as we know him. How did Barnabas meet Saul? The Bible doesn't say about this; there's no record of them knowing each other before. Perhaps they first met when Saul tried to enter the community of disciples. Barnabas may have wondered why Saul, a persecutor, would want to join the community of Christ's disciples. He might have thought that perhaps he really had encountered Jesus. While the other disciples were afraid of him and avoided him, Barnabas may have met Saul privately and heard his story. Barnabas, being a person with spiritual discernment, knew there was no falsehood in Saul's words. Barnabas was convinced that Jesus had called Saul, and he was determined to help Saul. Not only did Barnabas help Saul enter the Christian community, but he later helped Saul to be used well in God's work. When Saul had left Jerusalem and was living in Tarsus for about ten years, Barnabas visited him and invited him to work with him in Antioch. And Paul emerged as a major player in God's work as he ministered the gospel in Antioch.

A community of love in Christ is one that knows each other's difficulties, prays for one another, and helps each other. It is especially a community with many men and women of encouragement like Barnabas. There are some coworkers among us who need prayer support due to health issues. We earnestly pray for God's healing grace to be upon each of them. About ten days ago, Joseph Han Jr. and Rebecca Han moved into a house in Bayside with God's help. They are praying that their home will be used to help many young people. Thank God for their holy desire to serve the Lord. On the day they moved, several brothers–Sam Choi, Joshua Bae, Jimmy Kim, and Joel Kim–helped them move until late at night. I thanked God for the community of love I experienced through them. We have coworkers like Barnabas among us, and because of them, many people are helped in our community and experience the love of Jesus. I pray that we will become a loving community that shows deep concern for our coworkers, prays for each other, and helps one another.

***Second, Saul's passion and suffering for the preaching of the gospel.*** What did Saul do immediately after meeting Jesus and having reconciliation with the disciples in Damascus? Verse 20 says, ***"At once he began to preach in the synagogues that Jesus is the Son of God."*** If we think that Saul went to Arabia afterward, then Saul began preaching the gospel immediately after meeting Jesus. His message was very simple and clear: ***"Jesus is the Son of God."*** That's the core message of the Christian gospel. We don't need any special theological knowledge to share this message. We don't need to go to seminary and get a master's degree and be ordained to be able to share the gospel. We may need to go to workshops on evangelism to learn how to do it more effectively, but that's not the essence of preaching the gospel. ***"Jesus is the Son of God"*** is a message that comes from a personal experience with Jesus. If we have met Jesus as Savior and Son of God, we can share this simple message from our experiences.

What was the reaction of those who heard Saul's preaching? They were astonished. The people gathered in the synagogue might have been expecting a message from the high priest when Paul, who had come to Damascus from Jerusalem with a letter from the high priest, spoke, or they might have been expecting a message to seek out and capture Jesus' disciples. But Saul's message was an unexpected one: ***“Jesus is the Son of God.”*** They were so surprised that they asked each other, ***"Isn't this the man who has come to capture Jesus' disciples?"*** Verse 22 says that Saul grew more and more powerful and baffled the Jews living in Damascus by proving that Jesus is the Messiah.

When Saul went to Jerusalem, he spoke boldly in the name of the Lord. Also he talked and debated with the Hellenistic Jews. Do you remember who debated with the Hellenistic Jews before? It was Stephen. Unable to win the debate with Stephen, they accused him before the Sanhedrin and had him stoned to death. Saul was there, and he approved of their killing of Stephen. But then Saul believed in Jesus, went to Jerusalem, and took over the ministry that Stephen had been doing. Saul was a man filled with a passion to share the gospel.

How could Saul be so passionate about sharing the gospel? Of course, he was a very passionate person. Moreover, the grace he received from Jesus was so great that he preached the gospel with passion. When we experience the love and grace of Jesus deeply, we become passionate about sharing the gospel. When I was in Venezuela, a missionary in Latin America told me, "The leaders of Venezuela UBF seem to be passionate about the gospel, but the leaders of my church don't have that kind of passion. Venezuelan people seem to be more passionate in character than people in my country." His words might be true. But I believe the source of that passion lies in how deeply we experienced the love and grace of Jesus. The more deeply we experience the love of Jesus, the more we want to share that love with others. The Apostle Paul experienced so much love and grace from Jesus that he considered everything a loss and dedicated his life to spreading the gospel. Some people say that since they haven't committed great sins, the grace they have received from Jesus is not that great. However, this is a big misunderstanding. We have all sinned enough. The problem is that we don't yet realize how much we have sinned. The deeper we learn about who God is and who Jesus is, the more we realize how much of a sinner we are, and the more we can experience the great grace of forgiveness of sins from Jesus. I pray that each of us will be able to discover our sins deeply and enjoy the great grace of Jesus' forgiveness, and that we will be able to serve the gospel work with joy and passion.

Do you remember what Jesus said to Ananias when he called Saul? ***"Go! This man is my chosen instrument to proclaim my name to the Gentiles and their kings and to the people of Israel. I will show him how much he must suffer for my name."*** (9:15-16) Jesus said that Saul, who had persecuted him and his disciples, would suffer greatly for the name of Jesus, and he fulfilled his word of promise. Saul had already been close to death twice since the beginning of his life of faith. Saul had to escape from Damascus by being lowered in a basket. Paul referred to this event by saying, ***“I will boast of the things that show my weakness”*** (2 Cor 11:30). He also had to flee Jerusalem, and faced many hardships afterward. Paul confessed, ***"We must go through many hardships to enter the kingdom of God"*** (Acts 14:22). God gives suffering to those He loves. Through these sufferings, Paul became more dependent on God and came to know Jesus more deeply. He became stronger in weakness and a mature shepherd who helped God’s flock with the love of Jesus.

I pray that God will make our church a Spirit-filled community of love. May we be clothed in the love and grace of Jesus like Paul and boldly proclaim the gospel. May we be willing to suffer for the sake of the Lord and grow as disciples of Jesus. Amen.