

**Acts 9: 20-31; “Christ Displaying His Strength”, Sermon # 41 in the series –
“Laying the Foundations”, Delivered by Pastor Paul Rendall
on February 19th, 2017, in the Morning Worship Service.**

It says here in verse 22 – “But Saul kept increasing in strength.” What does this phrase mean? Looking carefully at the context of the verses, I believe that it means that he kept increasing in spiritual strength; and so, he was able in those days, to do many significant things for the advancement of the kingdom of Christ. O, it is true that in verse 19, it says that “he took food and was strengthened”. Surely he needed this physical strengthening after his 3-day fast. But what is even more important for us to see, was that there was a spiritual strengthening that was taking place in Saul’s heart which showed forth the greatness of the grace of Christ at work in him. It was Christ Himself, by the power of His Holy Spirit who was increasing Saul’s strength. And so, in this hour, I would like to take a closer look at how this spiritual strength was displayed in Saul in these days following his conversion. And so, as we look at this, I want to attempt to set forth this vital truth to you – It is Christ who gives you the strength to accomplish all of God’s purposes for your life. This truth will apply to those who have not yet found Christ, as well, because it will be important for you to see, that you must believe in Jesus Christ for yourself to obtain spiritual strength. It will be very important that you see the great need that you have for Christ’s righteousness to be imputed to you, and for Christ’s great strength by grace to be imparted to you, so that you will be saved, and learn to walk in His way. Each of us needs to see that the strength to make progress in your relationship of faith in the Lord Jesus, and obedience to the will of God, comes not from yourself as its source, but from God. 1st of all – The Display of Christ’s strength demonstrated, brought amazement. (verses 20 and 21) 2nd – The Display of Christ’s strength demonstrated, confounded the unbelieving. (verses 22-25) 3rd – The Display of Christ’s strength demonstrated, brought fear and disbelief to many in the church. (verse 26) And 4th – The Display of Christ’s strength demonstrated, brought Barnabas and others to help Saul at just the right time.

1st of all – The Display of Christ’s strength demonstrated, brought amazement.
(verses 20 and 21)

Saul, after his conversion, spent some days with the disciples in Damascus, it says in verse 19. And while there, he got right to the work that the Lord had called him to do; the work of preaching Christ; not himself, but Christ. And we see here that He preached Christ, not just being a mere man, but Christ Jesus as the Son of God. Verse 20 says: “Immediately he preached the Christ in the synagogues that He is the Son of God.” “Then all who heard were amazed, and said, ‘Is this not he who destroyed those who called on this name in Jerusalem, and has come here for that purpose, so that he might bring them bound to the chief priests?’” You can see that Saul’s errand was well known to the general Jewish populace, even the unconverted among them. You notice the phrase “who called upon this name”, it says in verse 21? It indicates that there were, no doubt, many at Damascus who, although they may have heard about Jesus, they did not know that He was the Son of God. It caused them great amazement that Saul had so changed that he was not persecuting people who belonged to the Way, any longer, he was instead preaching to them and telling them that they needed to believe in Him! What could have brought about this great change? They needed to know, and you need to know, that it was the risen, living Christ’s strength which was being demonstrated in Saul.

We need very much to understand that unless the preacher preaches Jesus as the Son of God, people will not know that there is any difference between Jesus and any other man. And if they do not know that difference, then how can they be saved? But Saul now did know the difference because he had seen the Lord on the road, as it says in verse 27 of our text; he had

beheld His great overpowering glory, and he had heard Him speak words to him which changed the whole direction of his life. He had been fighting against Jesus before, and one of the main reasons that he fought against Him so hard was that he thought that Jesus was just a man. But now he knew His inherent glory as the Son of God. Let us understand that there are people all around us who do not know that the Lord Jesus Christ is a unique being among all of mankind. He is not only fully and really man, but He is also fully and really God. He is God made manifest in the flesh. There are in Jesus, two natures in one blessed Person. And this why He must be preached as the Son of God. But Saul had come to know and to realize that Christ had to be God to be our Savior. This was the truth that he so clearly saw when he was first converted. This was what so amazed great numbers of people in the synagogues of Damascus, concerning Saul. They knew that Saul had been a persecutor, they knew that he had obtained letters from the chief priests, and they knew that he had come there for the very purpose of doing there, what he had been doing at Jerusalem; haling and binding men and women, and taking them off to prison because they were saying that Jesus was the Christ, the Son of God.

In Acts 22: 4, Paul says – “I persecuted this Way to the death, binding and delivering into prisons, both men and women, as also the high priest bears me witness, and all the council of the elders, from whom I also received letters to the brethren, and went to Damascus to bring in chains even those who were there to Jerusalem to be punished.” And in Acts 26: 9, he says: “Indeed, I myself thought I must do many things contrary to the name of Jesus of Nazareth.” Why did he think that way? It was because he was controlled and led on to do these things by his sinful fleshly mind. It was because he did not know that Jesus was the Lord of glory, the Son of God. Let me ask you whether you understand that when you want to know God, that you must call upon the name of the Lord if you would be saved; that name which so faithfully represents all of Christ’s Divine Person, as being fully God and fully man? There is no other name under heaven, which is given among men, by which you must be saved, than the name of Jesus. Joseph, Jesus’ earthly foster-father was told by the angel – “You shall call His name Jesus, for He shall save His people from their sins.” And further, it was said to him, “Behold, the virgin shall be with child, and bear a Son, and they shall call His name Immanuel, which is translated, God with us.” He is the only Mediator between God and men; the man Christ Jesus. He is Mediator as it regards both His natures in His one blessed Person.

Where this has relevance for our study this morning is this. If Paul preached the Christ, that He is the Son of God, then you and I need to see Him this way ourselves, and preach Him as the Son of God; begotten of the Father, as His only-begotten Son from all eternity. He is far and away greater than any man who has ever lived! He who existed from all eternity came in His incarnation, being born of the virgin, and thus as a Man was sinless. And thus both His righteousness and His sufferings have infinite value. After all – How can Jesus save you from your sins if He were only a man? If He were man alone, He would be a sinner descended from Adam, and even the best of the sons of Adam need to be saved themselves. Listen to what Elihu said to Job, who was a blameless man, fearing God and turning away from evil. He said: “If you are righteous, what do you give Him? (That is God) “Or what does He receive from your hand?” “Your wickedness affects a man such as you, and your righteousness a son of man.” In other words, his righteousness as a mere man could not be transferred to another.

A son of Adam could not redeem you to God, for even his life’s perfect obedience, if there were such a thing would not be meritorious enough to transfer it to any other person. His righteousness would be only for Himself. And how could the purchase of redemption be made by a mere man? For it says in Psalm 49, verse 7 – “No man can by any means redeem his brother, or give to God a ransom for him – For the redemption of his soul is costly, and he should cease trying forever – that he should live on eternally, that he should not undergo decay.” But this was Christ’s strength that was being seen in Saul now, that He would preach Jesus as

being the Christ, the Son of God! This was the strength of God, that Saul's heart had been changed and his persecutions ceased. He was an altogether different man! Now he was manifesting the greatness of the power of Christ in his life. Let us each one ask themselves – Is the life of Christ being manifested in the things that I say and do? Am I sharing the truth with people around me that Jesus is the Son of God?

2nd – The Display of Christ's strength demonstrated, confounded the unbelieving.
(verses 22-25)

Verse 22 says: “But Saul increased all the more in strength, and confounded the Jews who dwelt in Damascus, proving that this Jesus is the Christ.” “Now after many days were past, the Jews plotted to kill him.” “But their plot became known to Saul.” “And they watched to gates day and night to kill him.” “Then the disciples took him by night and let him down through the wall in a large basket.” Now there are two ways mentioned here which show us how Christ's strength was put forth, or demonstrated, which confounded the unbelieving. The first was that by his preaching, Paul so reasoned with those whom he preached to, that he proved that Jesus was the Christ. The second was that Christ foiled their attempts to take Paul and kill him. In both of these things Christ strength was demonstrated. Matthew Poole, the commentator says on this phrase: “He increased the more in strength” – “True grace thrives by exercise and opposition: the word here used (increased) many take to be a metaphor from builders, who, in erecting their fabrics (buildings), fit one piece or part to another, and then bring them and join them together; thus St. Paul did, in bringing forth or quoting the promises in the Old Testament, and showing their exactly being fulfilled in the New Testament, or in the gospel of our Saviour Jesus Christ; and he spake with such an evidence and demonstration of the Spirit, that he did, as it were, constrain men to be of his opinion.” (end of quote)

The power to convince people by the word of truth, the Bible, does not simply come from your having a strong mind with an ability to reason well with people; although this is a very helpful gift and ability. It comes from the working of the Holy Spirit in the use of those means. Paul's being able to confound them, by proving to them that Jesus was the Christ, does not necessarily mean that Paul convinced all of them of this truth. He did convince some, and they were saved. But being able to confound them meant that he so spoke by the power of the Holy Spirit that he was able to convince them from the Scriptures so that they could not give him any answer to the contrary. They could not say that Jesus was not the Christ; they now knew, having had it proved to them from the Scriptures that He was the Christ. What did this confounding of them consist of? We have a good example of this in Paul's preaching in Acts chapter 13, from verse 14 on.

In verse 14 it says that Paul and his traveling companions had come to Antioch in Pisidia, and they went into the synagogue, and after the reading of the Law and the Prophets, the rulers of the synagogue sent to them, saying, “Men and brethren, if you have any word of exhortation for the people, say on.” And Paul proceeded to give them a short history of Israel from the time of Moses to the time of David. And then told them in verse 23 – “From this man's seed, according to the promise, God raised up for Israel a Savior – Jesus – after John had first preached before His coming, the baptism of repentance to all the people of Israel.” “And as John was finishing his course, he said, ‘Who do you think I am?’ “I am not He.” “But behold, there comes One after me, the sandals of whose feet I am not worthy to loose.” “Men and brethren, sons of the family of Abraham, and those among you who fear God, to you the word of this salvation has been sent.” “For those who dwell in Jerusalem, and their rulers, because they did not know Him, nor even the voices of the Prophets which are read every Sabbath, have fulfilled them in condemning Him.” “And though they found no cause for death in Him, they asked Pilate that He should be put to death.”

“Now when they had fulfilled all that was written concerning Him, they took Him down from the tree and laid Him in a tomb.” “But God raised Him from the dead.” “He was seen for many days by those who came up with Him from Galilee to Jerusalem, who are His witnesses to the people.” “And we declare to you glad tidings – that promise which was made to the fathers.” “God has fulfilled this for us their children, in that He has raised up Jesus.” “As it is also written in the second Psalm: ‘You are My Son, Today I have begotten You.’” “And that He raise Him from the dead, no more to return to corruption.” “He has spoken thus: ‘I will give you the sure mercies of David.’” “Therefore He also says in another Psalm: ‘You will not allow Your Holy One to see corruption.’”

Now, we need to see Saul’s faithfulness here, to the gospel, and what the gospel does to people when it is preached. It confounds the reasoning of those who are only wise with fleshly wisdom and it shows them the wisdom of God; His plan, and His purposes. Saul gave them a history of the facts. He told them that Jesus was descended from David, which the Messiah had to be according to the Bible. He told them that the Christ would have a forerunner, and that that forerunner was John the Baptist. He knew that many thought John a great prophet and so he related to them John’s attitude of humility in thinking that Jesus was a far greater personage than he was. Saul then related the facts of how the rulers and many of the people of Jerusalem treated Jesus. He said that they did not really know Him, nor even the voices of the Prophets which were read every Sabbath, and that they had wrongfully condemned Him to death. And even though there was no cause for death in Him; they asked Pilate to put Him to death. And then think about what he said next: “Now when they had fulfilled all that was written concerning Him, (that is, in the Old Testament Scriptures), they laid Him in a tomb. But God raised Him from the dead. And this, once again was a fulfillment of the Old Testament Scriptures in Psalm 2 and Isaiah 55 and Psalm 16. This was proving to them, that Jesus was the Christ. He gave them facts and evidence that Jesus was the Christ.

Let us always remember that when a person or a group of people are confounded in their understanding of things, when they have had the truth of their need to believe in Jesus Christ proven to them from the Scriptures, that there is a responsibility that they have to go forward in their mind and heart to believe it, because this is how God speaks to our hearts. He speaks to our hearts through the preaching of the Holy Scriptures, and gives us the truth of what we need to be saved, and then He expects every person to believe it. You say to me – But what about election? If God has not purposed that a person is to be saved, they will not be saved. Of course, this is true. But it is none of your business, it is God’s business. And He will be holy in it. God will be righteous in every case, with every person, in relation to their being saved or their not being saved. If a person is not saved, it will not be God’s fault that they were not saved; it will be their own fault because they rejected the gospel and the word of God being preached to them. God’s election of any person is according to His mercy and His holy purposes. The doctrine of election does not at all hinder your coming to Christ now; indeed it is your responsibility. God would have all men everywhere repent and believe in Christ. This means that when the gospel is being preached to you, that God has fairly laid the matter before you. You are a sinner who needs Christ. And God, in this golden opportunity, is offering you salvation to you now, by having the truth preached to you that you need to be saved. All those who will hear it will be held responsible for what they do with it. If you believe it, you will be saved. If you do not believe it, you will be condemned.

Listen to how Paul puts it in verse 38 and following of Acts 13. “Therefore let it be known to you, brethren, that through this Man is preached to you the forgiveness of sins; and by Him everyone who believes is justified from all things from which you could not be justified by the law of Moses.” “Beware therefore, lest what has been spoken in the prophets come upon you: ‘Behold, you despisers, marvel and perish!’” “For I work a work in your days, a work which you

will by no means believe, though one were to declare it to you.” You see, this was the confounding power of Christ being manifested through Saul’s preaching. Here is what resulted from Christ’s great display of strength, in and through Paul’s preaching. Verse 42 says – “So when the Jews went out of the synagogue, the Gentiles begged that these words might be preached to them the next Sabbath.” “Now when the congregation had broken up, many of the Jews and devout proselytes followed Paul and Barnabas, who, speaking to them, persuaded them to continue in the grace of God.” “On the next Sabbath almost the whole city came together to hear the word of God.” “But when the Jews saw the multitudes, they were filled with envy; and contradicting and blaspheming, they opposed the things spoken by Paul.” “Then Paul and Barnabas grew bold and said, ‘It was necessary that the word of God should be spoken to you first; but since you reject it, and judge yourselves unworthy of everlasting life, behold, we turn to the Gentiles.’” And verse 48 then says: Now when the Gentiles heard this, they were glad and glorified the word of the Lord.” “And as many as had been appointed to eternal life believed.” That is good example for us here, of Christ displaying His strength through Paul’s preaching, to save some, and to confound the unbelieving so that they would actually begin to persecute Paul.

This was what happened in our text in Acts 9 as well. Verse 23 says: Now after many days were past, the Jews plotted to kill him.” “But their plot became known to Saul.” “And they watched the gates night and day to kill him.” But, it says, “the disciples took him by night and let him down through the wall in a large basket.” I want to see, and take heart when you see it, that Christ was watching over Saul so that He would be able to continue on to preach the gospel for Him in many other places. The plot of these men became known to Saul, and through the means of other disciples helping him, he was lowered down in a basket from a window in the city wall, and thus escaped their hands. The Lord was very concerned to show forth his strength in keeping Saul safe, for it was not his time to die, and he had much work left to do. Let us remember that this is how it is with us as well. If we are serving Christ, God will be watching over that service, and displaying His great strength and power to keep his servants from being killed until it is His time to bring them home to glory. Saul increased in strength in that he was coming to understand Christ’s great working in his life.

3rd – The Display of Christ’s strength demonstrated, brought fear and disbelief to many in the church. (verse 26)

“And when Saul had come to Jerusalem, he tried to join the disciples; but they were all afraid of him, and did not believe that he was a disciple.” You know, sometimes when Christ is demonstrating His strength in a person’s life, even believer may be brought to fear and disbelief concerning the reality of whether this is truly the Lord doing these things, or not. That is what happened in this particular situation, because we find Saul trying to doing a most reasonable thing; when he came to Jerusalem he was trying to join the church. This, by the way, is the next reasonable and desirable step of obedience to Christ following your conversion and following upon your being baptized. It is to join a church of the Lord’s people. This, even the one who was to become known as the great apostle Paul, would desire to do. And yet we find here that it says that “they were all afraid of him”. They did not believe that he was a disciple. Probably many of them thought that Saul’s conversion was a ruse. It was a tactic that he was using. They suspected that it could be possible that he was a wolf in sheep’s clothing, and that he was trying to win their confidence, so that he could later throw off the mask and become a persecutor again. How much more would he ravage the church then!

This leads me to say, that we should understand that when Christ stretches forth His hand to wonders, it may indeed create fear for a time in His sheep, for they do not understand the greatness of His strength, or the purposes for which He is using it! Let us pray to understand, and search to know, and attempt to see what the Lord is doing. Saul was to become a very great

gift to the Church of Jesus Christ; not only to the local church in Jerusalem, but also to the whole then known world, and to all generations through his letters. Sometimes a person may come into our midst, and we hear that he or she has been saved. And as we may have heard some things about them, we are suspicious as to whether they have truly been saved or not; whether they have truly been born again, or not. Surely, these are not unreasonable fears. And we can surely say that anyone who desires to become a member of the church needs to be examined. Do they have a testimony? Can they related to us how they were saved? Do they appear to be a repentant person; a person who is ashamed of their former unbelief, and opposition to the truth of the gospel and God's word? Have they been humbled to confess that they needed to be saved; that they were once proud of the strength of their own fleshly mind, but now they would live by the truth of God's word and the strength of Christ's grace? Has the course of their life changed so that they are not fighting against God's will which is found in the Bible? Are they aware that their former course of life caused others sometimes to fear them, or fear for them, that they did not know God? These are the questions which should be asked of one wanting to join the church. But this leads me to my last point.

4th – The Display of Christ's strength demonstrated, brought Barnabas and others to help Saul at just the right time. (verses 27-30)

“But Barnabas took him and brought him to the apostles.” “And he declared to them how he had seen the Lord on the road, and that He had spoken to him, and how he had preached boldly at Damascus in the name of Jesus.” “So he was with them at Jerusalem, coming in and going out.” “And he spoke boldly in the name of the Lord Jesus and disputed against the Hellenists, but they attempted to kill him.” “When the brethren found out, they brought him down to Caesarea and sent him out to Tarsus.” How good it is to see Christ's strength to help and keep, to lead and to guide, demonstrated here in the actions taken by the apostles and the brethren. They listened to Barnabas vouch for his new friend and brother Saul. Barnabas was not called the “son of encouragement” for nothing. He was sensitive to this man who had so radically changed. He knew that some might not believe it. He looked into the matter for himself, and he was able to see Christ's working and His strength. He took Saul to the apostles. And he declared to them how the Lord had dealt with Saul on the road that day; how Saul had seen the Lord on the road, and how he preached boldly at Damascus in the name of Jesus. And this was the beginning of Saul's being recognized as an apostle of the Lord.

You and I in this church need to look at one another in this holy way as well. We need to ask questions of people who come into our midst. We need to find out how the Lord has been dealing with them; whether they believe that they are a true Christian yet, or not. If they have already confessed Christ, we need to try to get to know them better and try to understand what the Lord is doing in their life; what their needs are, what their gift is, what their desires are in terms of serving the Lord. For the Lord is working in the life of each and every Christian, displaying His strength. And the question that we should ask ourselves is: How can I help them so that they will know that I care about what they will become, and what they will do for Christ. How is it that Christ will show forth His strength to them, and to a watching world, which needs Him?