

A useful tool in God's Hands. Acts 9:1-31

Portions adapted from "We Can Make A Big Difference For God!" by Rick Crandall at SermonCentral.Com

Our God likes to use little things to make a big difference in His world. Max Lucado pointed this out, when he wrote:

"That guy who gave Jesus the donkey on Palm Sunday is just one of the long line of folks who gave little things to a big God. Scripture has quite a gallery of donkey-givers. In fact, heaven may have a shrine to honor God's uncommon use of the common. It's a place you won't want to miss. Stroll through and see Rahab's rope, David's sling, and Samson's jawbone. Wrap your hand around the staff which split the sea and smote the rock."

(Max Lucado, "And the Angels Were Silent" - "The Guy with the Donkey," pp. 55-56)

I also think of the widow's mite, and the little boy's lunch that Jesus miraculously multiplied to feed over 5,000 men, plus women and children. God surely uses little things to make a big difference in His world; the same goes for people. All of Christ's followers, whether little or great, can be useful in the hands of God; you never know when some little thing faithfully done can make a big difference in God's scheme of things. We see this truth today displayed in the life of Ananias.

Most every Christian knows the incredible ways that God used the Apostle Paul. But God in the same way that God used Ananias, He can also use us.

We can also be a useful tool in God's hands

1. By recognizing God's **sovereignty** (vs. 1-16).
2. By accepting God's **grace** (vs. 1-5).
3. By following God's **guidance** (vs. 6-12)
4. By going in God's **strength** (vs. 13-18).

1. So, how can we, just a small player in God's great plan, be a useful tool in His hands? **First: by remembering that everything in our life has been guided by God's sovereignty.**



Throughout this story of Saul meeting with Ananias, we see God's sovereignty over all areas of their life. Let's start with Saul.

In his angry zeal, to bring the harm against all the disciples of Jesus, Saul had set out to arrest any followers of "The Way" that he finds in Damascus. But on his journey to do more damage to the young church, he was suddenly knocked off his horse and pinned to the ground by a blinding light. Laying helplessly there he heard a voice saying to him, "*Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting Me?*" He replied, "***Who are You, Lord?***" And the voice said, "***I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting.***"

How sovereign is our God? – sovereign enough to keep watch over all His flock, even as they were being persecuted by men like Saul, and sovereign enough to also keep His eye on the evil people who were trying to hurt the Lord's church. Sovereign enough to shine a light brighter than the sun knocking Saul to the ground and then striking him blind until such time that God decided to restore his sight (Acts 26:14).

But why did God do all this? Because according to God's sovereign plan for his life, Saul would be a powerful tool for spreading the Gospel. But Saul was a driven man. Saul was a zealot for the wrong faith. So God had to do something drastic to get his attention and help him to understand the truth. God physically blinded Saul to teach him how spiritually blind he had become. He was very zealous for God, but had somehow not seen Jesus, the Messiah, in the Scriptures. And in not seeing Jesus, Saul couldn't see what God wanted to do in his life."

And God did get Saul's undivided attention. between the paralyzing light, the voice of Jesus, the three days of blindness followed by the healing touch of Ananias. This sovereignly choreographed event literally changed his life. In less than one week Saul went from being a persecutor of the Church, to Paul, disciple of Christ. This Damascus event became so seminal in the life of Paul that he repeats the story twice more in the Book of Acts and often referred to it in his own letters.

We never hear anything more of Ananias of Damascus, but this faithful follower of Jesus, always a useful tool, on this day, became a vital tool in the hands of God to bring Saul to his senses and into the service of God.

How God's sovereign will for our lives meshes with our own will, our own choices, is truly a mystery; but you can see it actively working here in both the lives of Ananias and Saul.

Blinded Saul is now led against his will into Damascus to fast and pray, and await Jesus' next move in his life. After three days, Jesus speaks to Ananias about going to Saul, and he replies "*here I am lord.*" Like Philip's getting up and going at God's call, that was a wise response from Ananias, because as we have already learned throughout many Biblical stories, when God intends to use you as a tool to advance His plans, you will go willingly or grudgingly, but you will go!

But look at how intimately God's sovereignty is intertwined in both these men's lives! In a vision, Ananias is given specific directions to go to a specific house on a specific street to heal a specific person, who is just now receiving a vision that a specific man named Ananias would now come to heal him; and that is exactly what happened. Jesus told Ananias to go and he did go; but we knew he would go, because Saul had already received the vision that he was coming.

How can we sort out this dance between divine sovereignty and our human choices? We can't! But we do need to recognize that our choices, whether good or bad, are still surrounded and guided by God's will for our lives. So we who know God can live with confidence under His care. And if we want to be a useful tool, perhaps one day even a vital tool, whenever we hear God's specific call, we should follow Ananias' lead and always say, *here I am Lord*.

But that's not the most amazing display of God's sovereignty that we see in this story. Did you notice what Jesus Christ said about Saul's future in verse 16?

I myself will show him how much he must suffer for the sake of my name.' Acts 9:16

Think about the implications of this declaration for a moment.

We don't expect God to show us our future, but we can faithfully live knowing that indeed God has mapped out our life from birth to death. In Psalm 139, King David sings, *I will praise you for I am fearfully and wonderfully made In your book were written all the days that were formed for me, when none of them as yet existed.*

But why would Jesus apparently give Saul a detailed vision of his own future - especially the hardship parts.

- We know that **prophecy** tells us of a future event as proof of God's sovereignty over our future.
- And we know for their personal instruction or encouragement, that Joseph, Nebuchadnezzar, and Peter were given symbolic, metaphorical, summaries of their future in the bowing sheaves, the tree stump, and Peter's bound hands.

But to hear Jesus say that he would personally show Saul (a detailed?) accounting of how much he was personally going to suffer in his future ministries for Christ, perhaps is the most powerful Biblical illustration we have of God's sovereignty over any one life.

But it also leads me to ask some mind blowing questions...

- How much of his actual future did Jesus reveal to Saul: all the beatings, the shipwreck, the snakebite, imprisonments, even his final death?
- And how did this detailed revelation of his future then affect the future ministry of Saul. Was his life thereafter just one big "déjà vu" event? *"Ouch! There's the snake bite, but I know it's not going to kill me, so I am glad that is over with."*
- Was Saul somehow encouraged, strengthened, emboldened, for his future mission, by seeing that every event of future suffering Jesus showed him was all a part of God working out His sovereign purpose in Saul's life?

In a strange way, I guess I can see how such a purpose driven, strong willed, person as Saul would actually be better prepared to face his future ministry by knowing in advance that all his future suffering – such as he had previously inflicted on the saints in Jerusalem – would happen under the sovereign complete control of God over his life. So, that no amount of future hardship could defeat Paul's ministry, because he had already seen it coming. Knowing when his own end would be, could give Paul the courage to press forward even in the face of whatever current, seemingly overwhelming resistance he was meeting.

But I don't think that I would want to know that much of my future. Thankfully, God does different things with different people.

An interesting side note is that while his Hebrew name would always be Saul, meaning "prayed for," sometime after the Damascus road Saul started referring to himself by the Greek nickname of "**Paul**" which literally means "**small, humble**," that he used thereafter in all his writings (acts 13:9). While seeing very little that could be considered small or humble in Paul's personality or future ministries, I can't help thinking that the Damascus road and Jesus' personal revelation of God's plans for his future, gave Saul a proper perspective of his own importance within the plans of his sovereign Lord; which his nickname "Mr. Small, Mr. Humble" thereafter signaled to his listeners.

In one sense, knowing or not knowing, we are all useful tools for working out God's purposes in our world; but those of us who do know this and who willingly give ourselves to God's labors, are certainly the happier and more secure because of our knowing.

2. So we, who might be tempted to think of ourselves as just a small player in God's world, should realize that there are no "small players" in God's sovereign plans. We like Ananias can be always be a useful tool, and someday perhaps even vital tool for God as long as we remember both His **SOVEREIGNTY** but also His **GRACE IN ALL OUR LIVES.**

The Bible tells us that all God's sovereign plans have been guided by His love for and desire to save us; to bring us back into His family. Remember, "*for God so loved the world that He gave...*" Paul would later write, as was clearly demonstrated in his own life, that

God proves his love for us
in that while we still were sinners
Christ died for us.
Romans 5:8

Here in Acts, we see a most amazing display of that love. God loved Saul enough to reveal Himself to Saul on the Damascus Road that day. But this miraculous encounter is much more surprising when we remember what Saul was like at the time. Stephen's sermon and subsequent death at the hands of the Jewish Council launched a wave of persecution intended to wipe out all followers of "The Way" in Jerusalem. Inspired by the stoning of Stephen, Saul became a major player in that event; going on a murderous rampage dragging men and women from their homes to imprisonment or death (Acts 8:3, 22:4-6). Then, apparently having found all he could in Jerusalem yet still unsatisfied, Saul was headed to Damascus to do the same thing when **Jesus stopped him.**

Living by a strict intolerant code, Saul had become a religious terrorist. In his eyes, if you followed Jesus, you were a heretic needing to be removed, beaten, placed in jail, or killed. Saul's mission of persecuting Christians consumed him; hunting Christians became his life's goal. The text describes Saul's hatred like that of a wild animal. *Breathing out threats and murder*, Paul "*ravaged*" the Jerusalem Church; tearing believers from their homes like an animal tears apart its prey.

Saul's heart was filled with hatred and his mind poisoned by prejudice, But Jesus Christ loved him anyway. Isn't this amazing? -- That Jesus could love someone who so passionately hated Him with all his heart? Isn't it amazing that Jesus would even love Saul enough to die on the cross for him? Yet the Lord did love Saul enough to die for Him. Just as Jesus also loves us enough to die on the cross for us.

There is no doubt that we can see God's grace in the way Paul was brought back to faith in Jesus as God's son. But don't under-estimate what the Lord has done in your own life. **Have you ever stopped to think about how amazing God's love for you is that He has been planning, preparing and working for not just hundreds -- but for thousands of years -- to ensure that you were here, that you had a chance to live and to breathe, to love Him and to love others, and to make a difference in this world?"**

Brothers and sisters in Christ, we really have no comprehension of all that God has done to get us to the point where we were able and willing to hear the good news of Jesus Christ. But we do know that it was because of God's love for us and His grace plan for our salvation. As we again come to Christ's table today, remember that Jesus said *this is my body broken for you, and this is my blood shed for you; as often as you do this, remember me.*

3. Remembering these truths that God's sovereignty over our life is guided by His love and grace extended to us, will help transform our lives, will help make us, like Ananias or like Paul, a useful tool in God's hands. Especially when God does give us guidance for our lives.

While Christ demonstrably had a sovereign plan for both their lives, Paul and Ananias still needed His guidance to live that life. The Spirit of God guided Saul into Damascus. Then God guided Ananias to Saul. And then the Spirit guided the Apostle Paul for the rest of his life thereafter. So we can be sure that God will also guide us!

God guided Ananias and Paul through personal visions. These days, we do not see such dramatic visions because God's guidance can now come through His written Word, and the quiet voice of God's Spirit turning His written word into His living word in our hearts. God can also guide us through the wisdom from other godly people, and when He guides, we need to follow, trusting in the Lord to lead us where He will.

4. With his guidance, we certainly can be a useful tool in God's hands. But having received such guidance, we need to be going in spite of our fears or hesitations.

It's an old cliché, but God really does want us to get out of our comfort zones, even when the difficulties are real. Told to go heal Saul of Tarsus, Ananias had some very legitimate fears about what he was being told to do:

'Lord, I have heard from many about this man, how much evil he has done to your saints in Jerusalem; and here he has authority from the chief priests to bind all who invoke your name.' (13-14)

Think of the threat that an un-blinded unconverted Saul could have been to Ananias. Also think about the hardships the Apostle Paul would face as he followed the Lord. Remember what the Lord said about Saul in vs. 15-16, *"he is an instrument whom I have chosen to bring my name before Gentiles and kings and before the people of Israel; I myself will show him how much he must suffer for the sake of my name*

The Lord didn't sugar-coat Paul's future at all! There may be a steep price to pay for following the Lord. He never promised us an easy life here, but he did promise us the strength to go where he leads and an eternal home awaiting us at the end of our journey. Life can be scary at times, but our faith can overcome all of our fears. And

that's what happened with Ananias. *So Ananias went and entered the house. He laid his hands on Saul and said, 'Brother Saul, the Lord Jesus, who appeared to you on your way here, has sent me so that you may regain your sight and be filled with the Holy Spirit. (vs. 17).*

Having been visited by faithful Ananias, great things then started to happen to Saul. He received his sight back, he was baptized into his newfound faith, *and immediately he began to proclaim Jesus in the synagogues, saying, 'He is the Son of God.'* (vs. 19).

Unable to refute his powerful arguments for Jesus as the messiah, Saul's opponents first tried to murder him in Damascus, and then again in Jerusalem. And that was all before he was even called to go on his first missionary journey. As we read on through the Acts of the Apostle which will now focus mostly on victories and challenges in the life of Paul the missionary. We don't know what would have happened if Ananias had given in to his fears. But we know for sure that God used this otherwise unknown Christian to make an incredible difference in the life of Saul of Tarsus, and thus also in our world.

We can be like Ananias! Our faith can overcome our fears.

1. recognize God's **sovereignty** (vs. 1-16).
2. accept God's **grace** (vs. 1-5).
3. And follow God's **guidance** (vs. 6-12)
4. going in God's **strength** (vs. 13-18).

There is no telling how much God can use people like you and me, as long as we are willing to be a useful tool in His hands.

So as we bow for prayer, let your faith overcome any fears.