

"SET ASIDE FOR GOOD WORKS"

(Acts 11:19-30)

(Chuck Swindoll)

No one likes to feel set aside. After Saul's dramatic conversion on the road to Damascus and then his "furlough" in Tarsus ministry, he undoubtedly felt bewildered and disillusioned during those "silent" years back in his hometown. Thankfully, he submitted to a humbling decade of soul-shaping preparation in the shadows of the church. His patience allowed him to emerge later as the most influential man in the history of the New Testament age.

As I observe the Lord's preparation of Saul, two principles emerge.

First, **only the Lord can prepare a person for ministry.** After the Lord confronted Saul personally (9:4-6) and then revealed his future role in ministry (26:15-18), Saul got to work right away, confronting his kindred Jews in the synagogues. When that failed, he wisely retreated to Arabia for nearly three years. Perhaps thinking his experience had sufficiently prepared him and feeling ready to engage in ministry again, he returned to Damascus—to disastrous results there and again in Jerusalem. Clearly, he wasn't ready. Ten years passed with the great Saul of Tarsus pushed to the sidelines in a pagan university city, far from the action in Jerusalem, a town he once owned. Then, when the time for Saul was right, and when Saul was right for the times, the Lord allowed this humbled Pharisee to step into the spotlight. He reentered, a wiser man with a clearer understanding of the work of the Spirit in his life and his ministry.

Almost every seasoned minister can relate. After I received my call to ministry, I knew immediately I needed to prepare. But when I enrolled in the four-year program at Dallas Theological Seminary, I had no idea that a large percentage of my preparation would occur outside the classroom! Certainly, the professors gave me crucial knowledge and insight, but it was the Lord who prepared me. During that time, He whittled and filed and chipped away at my character to shape me into a suitable vessel.

Then, after my formal schooling, I spent another two years assisting an older pastor and another two years struggling in a ministry not suited to my personal style and bent. As I look back, I realize that nothing could have prepared me for my future role in ministry like the Lord's personal touch during those difficult years out of the limelight. At the time, it was unclear what the Lord was doing. Looking back, it all makes sense.

Second, **the Lord must prepare the ministry for the person.** During his face-to-face encounter with the Lord and his three-day fast, Saul learned that he would minister to the Gentiles. The Lord told him,



"For this purpose I have appeared to you, to appoint you a minister and a witness not only to the things which you have seen, but also to the things in which I will appear to you; rescuing you from the Jewish people and from the Gentiles, to whom I am sending you, to open their eyes so that they may turn from darkness to light and from the dominion of Satan to God, that they may receive forgiveness of sins and an inheritance among those who have been sanctified by faith in Me." (26:16-18)

At the time, however, Peter had not yet visited Cornelius. The Gentiles were only beginning to consider this strange Jewish teaching from Jerusalem, and the church leaders had not even considered evangelism outside the Jewish community. Simply put, the world was not yet ready for Saul's ministry with such a marked emphasis on grace.

While the Lord prepared Saul for evangelism and church planting among the Gentiles, He also prepared the Gentiles and the church for him. In ministry—like a lot of things—timing is everything.