

BELPRES CHURCH

Sermon Title: Paul's Guide to Redirection

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Scripture: Acts 9:1-31

¹ Meanwhile, Saul was still breathing out murderous threats against the Lord's disciples. He went to the high priest ² and asked him for letters to the synagogues in Damascus, so that if he found any there who belonged to the Way, whether men or women, he might take them as prisoners to Jerusalem. ³ As he neared Damascus on his journey, suddenly a light from heaven flashed around him. ⁴ He fell to the ground and heard a voice say to him, "Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?"

⁵ "Who are you, Lord?" Saul asked.

"I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting," he replied. ⁶ "Now get up and go into the city, and you will be told what you must do."

⁷ The men traveling with Saul stood there speechless; they heard the sound but did not see anyone. ⁸ Saul got up from the ground, but when he opened his eyes he could see nothing. So they led him by the hand into Damascus. ⁹ For three days he was blind, and did not eat or drink anything.

¹⁰ In Damascus there was a disciple named Ananias. The Lord called to him in a vision, "Ananias!"

"Yes, Lord," he answered.

¹¹ The Lord told him, "Go to the house of Judas on Straight Street and ask for a man from Tarsus named Saul, for he is praying. ¹² In a vision he has seen a man named Ananias come and place his hands on him to restore his sight."

¹³ "Lord," Ananias answered, "I have heard many reports about this man and all the harm he has done to your holy people in Jerusalem. ¹⁴ And he has come here with authority from the chief priests to arrest all who call on your name."

¹⁵ But the Lord said to Ananias, "Go! This man is my chosen instrument to proclaim my name to the Gentiles and their kings and to the people of Israel. ¹⁶ I will show him how much he must suffer for my name."

¹⁷ Then Ananias went to the house and entered it. Placing his hands on Saul, he said, "Brother Saul, the Lord—Jesus, who appeared to you on the road as you were coming here—has sent me so that you may see again and be filled with the Holy Spirit." ¹⁸ Immediately, something like scales fell from Saul's eyes, and he could see again. He got up and was baptized, ¹⁹ and after taking some food, he regained his strength.

Saul in Damascus and Jerusalem

Saul spent several days with the disciples in Damascus. ²⁰ At once he began to preach in the synagogues that Jesus is the Son of God. ²¹ All those who heard him were astonished and asked, "Isn't he the man who raised havoc in Jerusalem among those who call on this name? And hasn't he come here to take them as prisoners to the chief priests?" ²² Yet Saul grew more and more powerful and baffled the Jews living in Damascus by proving that Jesus is the Messiah.

²³ After many days had gone by, there was a conspiracy among the Jews to kill him, ²⁴ but Saul learned of their plan. Day and night they kept close watch on the city gates in order to kill him. ²⁵ But his followers took him by night and lowered him in a basket through an opening in the wall.

²⁶ When he came to Jerusalem, he tried to join the disciples, but they were all afraid of him, not believing that he really was a disciple. ²⁷ But Barnabas took him and brought him to the apostles. He told them 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. ²⁸ So Saul stayed with them and moved about freely in Jerusalem, speaking boldly in the name of the Lord. ²⁹ He talked and debated with the Hellenistic Jews, ³⁰ but they tried to kill him.

believers learned of this, they took him down to Caesarea and sent him off to Tarsus.

³¹ Then the church throughout Judea, Galilee and Samaria enjoyed a time of peace and was strengthened. Living in the fear of the Lord and encouraged by the Holy Spirit, it increased in numbers.

Transcript:

As Paul neared Damascus on his journey, suddenly a light from heaven flashed around him. He fell to the ground and heard a voice say to him, "Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?" "Who are you, Lord?" Saul asked. "I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting." He replied. "Now get up and go into the city and you will be told what you must do." Saul got up from the ground. But when he opened his eyes, he could

see nothing. So they led him away by the hand into Damascus. For three days, he was blind and did not eat or drink anything. But the Lord said to Ananias, "Go. This man is my chosen instrument to proclaim my name to the Gentiles and their kings and to the people of Israel."

Then Ananias went to the house and entered it. Placing his hands on Saul, he said, "Brother Saul, the Lord, Jesus, who appeared to you on the road as you were coming here, he has sent me so that you may see again and be filled with the Holy Spirit." Immediately something like scales fell from Saul's eyes and he could see again. He got up and was baptized. And after taking some food, he regained his strength. Saul spent several days with the disciples in Damascus. At once, he began to preach in the synagogues that Jesus is the son of God.

And later in Paul's life, he wrote, "We were under great pressure, far beyond our ability to endure so that we despaired of life itself. I have been in danger from my fellow Jews, in danger from Gentiles, and in danger from false believers. Besides everything else I face daily, the pressure of my concern for all the churches who is weak. And I do not feel weak. Praise be to the God and father of our Lord, Jesus Christ, the father of compassion and the God of all comfort who comforts us in all our troubles so that we can comfort those in any trouble. I have learned the secret of being content in any and every situation, whether well fed or hungry, whether living in plenty or in want. I can do all this through Him who gives me strength."

Let's pray. Jesus, please speak to each one of us, whatever we need to hear from you today. Amen. Well, good morning. I'm Scott Mann, one of the pastors here at BelPres. And it is so good to be here with you. This summer, we're looking at how real people in the Bible coped with major disruptions in their lives like we're living through right now. I've never experienced anything like it, but I'm grateful that we can learn from people who have. The apostle Paul is a great guide since we know more about Paul than virtually anybody in the whole Bible. Paul's life was dramatically redirected when Jesus literally knocked him off his feet and made him the apostle to the Gentiles. In less than 30 years, Paul established the church in Asia and in Europe and wrote half of the books in the New Testament.

But in many ways, his life was a lot like ours. He had to figure out his relationship with God and with other people, how to prioritize his time each day, how to get everything done, how to deal with illness, and injury, and an occasional disaster. Like most of us, Paul's life was not a straight line, but he was so often redirected. We can't even count all the times. But we benefit because we can see how he responded. We can learn from Paul's example when our lives get redirected.

Now, today I'll use a few common road signs to help us remember how to apply what Paul teaches us about redirection. I hope as we come across them someday, when we're back out on the roads, we'll remember what we've learned here. Paul's biggest redirection was Jesus. Sometimes God disrupts our lives. Paul was a rising star with a perfect pedigree, commissioned to destroy the new Jesus movement. He thought their ideas were dangerous and wrong. But one day in the middle of the road, Jesus personally appeared to him, corrected his beliefs and redirected his whole life. It's like Jesus stopped him in the middle of the road with a giant red wrong way sign. So what exactly did Paul do when God stopped him? How can it help us know what to do when God redirects us? Paul stopped what he was doing wrong immediately. He spends three days fasting and praying. He repents feeling deep regret for persecuting Christians and fighting against God's purposes. Now, part of repentance is turning around and going in the right direction. He very quickly began telling people the truth that Jesus really is the Messiah and son of God.

Now, many people don't know what Paul did next. He retreated to take time to absorb his new reality. He had to reconcile his lifelong devotion to God revealed in scripture. With the fulfillment of Jesus coming as Messiah and son of God, his death, his sacrificial death, and his resurrection, all of it. Paul didn't get away for a weekend retreat. He did a three year retreat to learn all the stories of Jesus, all that he taught, and rethink all of the scriptures in light of Jesus. He had to figure out how to live into his new reality. So when our lives are redirected, how do we respond? Stop, don't go the wrong way. Repent, turn around, make a U-turn if you need to. Take time to pray and fast. If there's sin, repent. Learn what you need to learn and do your best to discern the new direction that God has for you. Sometimes the most important thing we can do is to actively wait until the way becomes more clear.

Now, sometimes God redirects us. Not because we're doing anything wrong, but because God has something better for us. The book of Acts tells us that the Holy Spirit would occasionally prompt Paul to change his plans by negatively preventing him from going in one direction. And other times sometimes positively compelling him to go in a new direction. And he learned to obey these promptings. Now, sometimes God speaks to us through a trusted person in our life, or maybe an idea, or a picture, or a thought that doesn't feel like our own. However, God speaks, "Listen. Test it against scripture and within your Christian community. And then obey." That's how we grow in sensitivity to the Holy Spirit and discern what God wants us to do next.

So sometimes God says stop and sometimes go. But most of the time, it's not God miraculously intervening and redirecting our lives. Our plans get hijacked by lots of other things. By a health crisis, by friends and family, maybe a natural disaster, or people opposing us. Of course, God is with us in these challenges and can use them for good, but often He isn't directly causing them. So if a red light means stop and a green light means go, what does yellow mean? No, it doesn't mean flow it. Some of you know that joke. No, yellow is caution. Prepare to stop, go slow or people's lives may be in danger. Well, Paul got a flashing yellow signal when he was redirected by health challenges. The Bible tells us that he went to Galatia to seek help for an illness. There was no place better. Of course, he planted the church along the way. And that's why we have the book of Galatians. We know Paul had significant eye problems, but several scriptures mention that he also had other health challenges.

So what did Paul do when he was hijacked by health problems? He prayed for healing. He sought the best treatment he could. In this case, it was in Galatia. And he kept doing what he knew he needed to do the best he could. He addressed his health while still following God's will as best he knew how. He took on a scribe to write and read for him to avoid straining his eyes. He didn't demand God heal him, or somehow believe that God didn't love him because he didn't heal his eyes. When other people were getting healed, he kept asking for healing. And at one point, God answered. That people saw God's strength more clearly through Paul's weakness. Paul paid attention to the yellow signs. He prayed and tried to steward his health wisely. Sometimes that meant he slowed down, or delegated to others, or asked for help.

He practiced a weekly Sabbath. He made reasonable accommodations for his disability and used his time recovering from injuries to refocus on God. He didn't let it stop him from doing God's will. Eventually he understood that God was using his limitations to advance the gospel. Now, we can do any of these things on this list. In 2020, we may have to do all of them. God wants us to be good stewards of our bodies, of our time. He built Sabbath into the universe. Wisdom knows the difference between a sprint and a marathon. It's okay for us to not be okay all the time. When our health redirects us, it's a flashing yellow sign and a reminder to use wisdom with what we've been entrusted, on behalf of ourselves and for others and for God's purposes.

So how does Paul's experience help us when our plans get changed by family and friends? From the moment we meet Paul and throughout his whole life, he never did things on his own. He was a very strong personality, but he always worked with a team of men and women. He had learned not to go it alone. But that can get messy when people have different ideas. And Paul knew that full well. Paul's little band had an early disagreement and Paul went one way and his good friend Barnabas went another. But they didn't let their disagreements stop them from the things that they did agree on, like sharing Jesus with people. Many of Paul's letters are written to redirect Christian brothers and sisters in their beliefs and in their relationships. Paul even had to confront the apostle Peter to correct his error. That can't be easy. I know it's never easy when I have to correct Pastor Dudley, and vice versa.

When I need to be redirected or need to redirect a loved one, that's a yellow signal. Slow down, watch out for others, be wise, pray first. Paul teaches us to be humble and courageous. Check your motives. Do it for sure out of love and with their best interest in mind. We don't see ourselves as superior to others. Paul could come on strong, especially in his letters, but he constantly urged Christians to yield to one another, to put others' concerns before our own, to be humble and not conceited. That doesn't mean we lay down and let people walk all over us. Paul was courageous in his convictions, but he treated people with humility and respect.

Well, what about natural disasters? There are just bad circumstances in his life. Yep. Paul had lots of those regularly, including huge storms, several shipwrecks and a widespread famine. And how did Paul respond? He urged caution and wisdom, but he wasn't distracted from God's purposes. Although he was anxious to preach the gospel in far off Rome, he advised caution and warned against sailing unwisely at the beginning of storm season. He also carefully orchestrated a massive relief effort for the famine. He showed wise caution by building in checks and balances to build trust and to make sure that the contributions would get where they were intended. He showed wisdom, planned carefully, and made adjustments as circumstances changed. He used his best judgment balancing caution with calculated risk.

Paul wasn't either timid or foolish. He didn't demand God suddenly change his circumstances supernaturally. Of course he prayed and sometimes God gave him insight into his circumstances. And once in a while, God did miraculously intervene, but that was the exception and not the rule. Likewise, we can cultivate wisdom and become more skilled at adapting our plans as situations change and our lives get hijacked. But remember, growing in wisdom happens long before our circumstances test us. So we don't wait for all hell to break loose before asking God for wisdom. It's never too late to ask God for wisdom, but it's also never too early.

Well, our list is not complete if we don't talk about how do we respond when our lives are hijacked by opponents. The Bible talks a lot about this. Religious opponents regularly tried to assassinate Paul's character or just plain kill him outright. Civil leaders would unjustly beat and incarcerate him even though his privileged status as a Roman citizen made both illegal. Many of Paul's letters address supernatural evils, as well as systemic evils, like prejudice against women and the poor.

All this opposition he experienced is like climbing a steep grade. Paul had many uphill climbs, hardships that took extra strength. He learned to draw deeply on God's power to downshift and endure and overcome. He learned how to win uphill battles with spiritual power.

In Ephesians, he wrote, "Put on the full armor of God so that you can take your stand against the devil's schemes. For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms."

We also have steep grades. People, systems, and spiritual forces oppose us and negatively impact some more than others. How did Paul teach us to respond to opposition? First, and this might surprise you, avoid. Sometimes it's best to redirect around a situation or person. Paul did this on many occasions when his life was threatened and to avoid being distracted around God's purposes. He also counseled avoiding people who refused godly correction. But often we can't avoid opposition, and we have to face right into it. So then what? We take the high road. Paul says focus our minds and actions on whatever is good and right, on love and gratitude, joy, truth. If we followed Paul's advice with avoiding and focusing on what's admirable, well, it would eliminate a lot of social media posts. Just saying. It might even lower your blood pressure and save you time from reading all that stuff.

Well, if one and two doesn't help, number three, Paul says, "We stand against evil and injustice and we endure opposition." Paul said, everyone who wants to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted. We stand against evil and for good. And we patiently endure the suffering which can't be avoided. Above all, Paul tells us that we draw deeply on God's power in prayer and Christian community. Paul modeled prayer and he urged prayer. And his prayers were not usually to change circumstances, but he prayed to draw deeply on God's power and wisdom to know how to respond to them. So stop, maybe you turn, go, caution and overcome. That's Paul's guide to redirection.

So what's the good news in this sermon? First, God is with us through redirections. Just like we learned last week with Joseph, so also with Paul this week. Jesus never leaves us or stops helping us. Second, redirections actually strengthen us in powerful ways. Paul learned the secret of thriving in the face of any redirections. And we can too.

In his older years, Paul wrote, "I know what it is to be in need. And I know what it is to have plenty. I have learned the secret of being content in any and every situation. I can do all this through Him who gives me strength." We too can learn the secret of not allowing our peace and contentment to be dictated by our circumstances. These moments are opportunities for us to mature. This is the silver lining when we get redirected. It's an opportunity for us to go deeper and come out stronger. This is what we want for all of our kids. To be resilient, to be empowered, to not be overwhelmed with what life throws at them. And God comforts us in our troubles so that we can be equipped to comfort others.

I'm not saying all redirections are good. They're not. But no matter what, we can choose how to respond, like Paul, like Jesus. We can experience deep peace, joy, trust, wisdom as we allow Jesus to shape us no matter what comes our way. And more good news, redirection works both ways. Our choices can redirect the world toward God's purposes. Paul searched the scriptures and saw the long arc of God's intentions in history. Paul used his influence to redirect history for good. He redirected history toward gender equality by including women and men in his church leadership teams. Paul redirected history toward the abolition of slavery, especially in his letter to Philemon. Most importantly, he redirected history by insisting on the good news of God's free gift of salvation in Jesus Christ. That's the good news of redirection.

Now, fair warning. Here's the bad news, sort of. In this life, redirection is actually the rule, not the exception. We're tempted to think about it the other way around. But until Jesus returns and puts this world right, redirection is our normal. It always has been. Until Jesus returns and makes us mature and complete, lacking in nothing, we can expect redirection. That's how people have always matured and learned the secret of living in joy, trust, contentment and all the rest regardless of circumstances. We can choose to respond faithfully, to stop, to turn around, to go, to show caution and wisdom, to dig deep on God's power, to overcome adversity and continue to follow Jesus no matter what. And together, that's how we become the church of irresistible influence that God created us to be. Amen. Jesus, we want to trust you in every situation. Thank you for Paul's example. Make us joyful, content, wise, and also

dangerous to the devil's schemes. Fill us with your Holy Spirit and make us sensitive to follow wherever you lead. Amen.

Discussion Questions: Please read Acts 9:1-31

1. How many times were Paul's intentions redirected in these verses? By whom? How many were miraculous interventions of God?
2. What does Paul do when redirected by God (vv. 6-9, 15, 18-20)? How did/could these practices help you when your plans have been frustrated?
3. When Paul's plans needed changing (vv. 23-31), who helped him change them? How can you invite others you trust to help you when your plans go sideways?
4. What gives you confidence that you are following God's will in your life? How do you know, especially when your path is diverted somehow?
5. God promised that Paul would proclaim Jesus' name to Gentile kings and suffer for it (v.15-16).
6. Why did Paul escape rather than assuming God would miraculously save him from threats to his life based on this promise (cf. Matt 4:6-7)?
7. What can help you live in peace, trust, hope, and faith regardless of life's circumstances and especially when challenges come?