

ON A STREET CALLED STRAIGHT
Sermon Series: "Being Led by God"
August 12, 2018 --Acts 9: 10-22
The Church of the Covenant

God is trying to break through all the time, to lead us, direct us and guide us through the Holy Spirit, to break through our self-imposed spirit of legalism. But as human beings we are very good at ignoring the clear nudges of Almighty God. The antidote for a spirit of legalism is being led by God, daily, hourly, minute by minute being led by the Spirit of the Living God.

Just recently I had been praying for my dear friend, Dr. Nat Roe, who has been a friend and mentor to me throughout my life. We had a whole series of wonderful, life-giving conversations, and these always helped me with ministry and my walk of faith. So I was praying that we would have one more great conversation. Perhaps it was selfishness on my part. And last Tuesday the Lord prompted me to go visit him in the care facility in Waynesburg. I was busy and I was tired. And there was an internal struggle and I almost induced myself to put it off until the next day, as I said to myself, "when I had time". The Spirit nudged me –"Go NOW". And I did and arrived and Nat was awake and alert when I arrived and we had a great conversation. I was able to share with him all that he meant to me. We were able to share with one another some special memories of our friendship. And pray together one more time. The Lord answered my prayer to have one more good conversation. Because in the wee hours of the next day Nat passed into his eternal reward. And if I had delayed I would have regretted missing my opportunity for one more great conversation. For every story where I have acted immediately when I have received the nudge of the Holy Spirit there is also one where I have delayed and stopped up my ears and regretted it. But the more one is obedient to the Spirit's leading, the more God will prompt us in our lives.

In our Bible story the disciple Ananias is nudged by the Holy Spirit. He is told "*Rise and go to a street called Straight.*" (Acts 9: 11) By the way, I have read that there is still a street in Damascus, Syria to this day that is long and straight and dissects much of the most ancient part of this historic city. Ananias is told that there is a man named Saul who is praying there who is blind and is praying for his sight to be restored and that God has told that man that another man will come by the name of Ananias to pray and restore Saul's sight. The only problem for Ananias is that he knows who Saul (soon to be Paul) is. How much "*evil he has caused to thy saints in Jerusalem*" (v. 13) And how Saul has the power from the chief priests "*to bind all who call upon thy name*". (v. 14) Saul is one dangerous, scary dude. Lord, you're asking me to go pray for a guy who may kill me or bind me up into chains and take me as a prisoner to Jerusalem. Lord, this makes no logical sense whatsoever. Notice that the direction of the Spirit may make no logical sense at all and that a human being, like Ananias, first reaction is to hesitate and to disagree with God and the leading of the Holy Spirit.

I break into this story with an aside. Please note that the first thing that happened with Saul is that he sees a blinding light on a Road Called Damascus. And this light does not illumine him; it does not OPEN his eyes. No, rather it blinds him and causes him to understand that he is blind; he is blinded by the light. He understands that there is something covering his eyes so he cannot see the spiritual reality all around him every day. He has viewed his world a particular way; through the spirit and the eyes of legalism. All the things he MUST and OUGHT and SHOULD do. All the lists of thousands and thousands of things which are the rules and regulations which enslave his life. He has thought he is following God and being obedient to God's law when in point of fact it is quite the opposite –he has been persecuting the Way, and standing in the way of God's will, and

frustrating the purposes of the Lord. He has been persecuting the church but who he has really been persecuting is GOD. Jesus says, *"Saul, why do you persecute me?"* So the first part of the redemption of Saul is his spiritual blindness. He thought he saw clearly. But in reality he was blind. The scales over his eyes were scales of legalism and perfectionism and being whipsawed by expectation...not being led by God.

Later in Acts it is recorded another iteration of the Damascus Road experience. There Paul then Saul adds a line to the story. *"It is hard for you to kick against the goads"* (Acts 26: 14) The goads are things attached to the saddle placed on donkeys. Their effect is that when a donkey kicks or bucks against its rider, the goad digs into its side just a bit and causes some pain. The more the donkey kicks against being ridden by its owner, the more pain it causes itself. Legalism, Phariseeism, a rule-based religiosity, trying to lead your life by lists of things to do or not do, is kicking against the goads. It is causing yourself pain. Paul is riding hard a donkey with goads on it to Damascus, is blinded by the light of God, hears a voice, and falls to the ground, and the Lord uses the example of the donkey and its goads to say to Saul –Saul this is exactly what you are doing. You are kicking against the goads and making your own life miserable. Please notice that the first step of spiritual redemption is realizing you are blind to all the true spiritual reality all around you every day. The first step is realizing our legalisms are the scales on our eyes that keep us from seeing God's hand at work in the world.

Sometimes I weep when I see what parents do to their children. Their children are 5 years old. Dear, you need to be in advanced, midget traveling lacrosse and miss Sunday School and Church every Sunday, just so you can go to the right preschool and one day get into Harvard University. That's the spirit of legalism imposed on children. That's kicking against the goads. That's thinking that driving children to success somehow will make them happy. Did it make you happy? That's placing spiritual scales over their eyes so they cannot see the hand of God. And also take piano lessons and ballet and have a tutor to get into the right preschool AND AND AND...Aw. Isn't that sad?

The antidote to legalism is asking the Lord to lead and guide you. Lord, you show me; you lead me. You show me where I am blind and you show me where I need to see. I'm tired and I'm weary and I'm hurting because all I'm doing is kicking against the goads. Lord, take me off a Road Called Damascus and place me on a Street Called Straight...just like Saul, please.

So God directs Ananias to go to a street called Straight and to lay hands on Saul and to pray for him. And to Ananias' credit he indeed follows what the Lord has told him to do. He says: *"Brother Saul, (notice he calls his persecutor his brother!) the Lord Jesus who appeared to you on the road by which you came (on a Road Called Damascus) has sent me that you might regain your sight and be filled with the Holy Spirit."* (v. 17) And immediately something like scales fell from Saul's eyes. Note the CONTRAST of the two stories –Paul being led by legalism on the Road Called Damascus...and Ananias being led by the Holy Spirit on a Street Called Straight.

Several years ago I am walking down some steps of a club in Pittsburgh after lunch and am nudged to go across the street and pray in the sanctuary of old historic First Presbyterian in downtown Pittsburgh. By the way, this is long before I am to serve there as their interim pastor! And I am reluctant to do so; I am too busy and it seems a frivolous exercise. But I do it any way. And I sit in a pew in their grand sanctuary and am praying and am led to get up and go to the office and speak with their Associate Pastor, David Brown, who I have never met. I demur. Lord, its Monday its probably his day off. Lord, he's probably not in. Lord, I don't even know where the office is. I

don't want to do this, Lord. And it was almost like the pew became hot and uncomfortable. So I rose and went to find David Brown. I am buzzed into the office and am asked by the receptionist why I want to see David Brown and of course I am embarrassed because I don't know why I am there. So I make something up that I am a fellow member of Pittsburgh Presbytery and just wanted to drop by and say hello. After a time I am escorted back and am seated opposite David at his desk and again have no idea why I'm there. So a great conversation unfolds and finally I tell him the story of how when I was a young associate pastor in Michigan God asked me to stay after the senior pastor had left to be part of the glue that held the church together. And David began to cry. Because unbeknownst to me the pastor of First Presbyterian had left and David and his wife Loganie were praying the previous night, Sunday evening about whether or not they were to take a call to another church or to stay at First Presbyterian. The Holy Spirit had directed me to speak with David to encourage him to stay and not to leave. Oh, and by the way, something neither of us would have known at the time –I was going to be called to become the Interim Pastor there and to work with David. So the Lord had already cemented our friendship even before I arrived. God is able to do far more abundantly than what we could ever think or hope. If we follow HIM. If we get the scales of legalism off our spiritual eyes to see HIM. If we follow the nudges of His Holy Spirit that He nudges us with every single day of our lives...

So you can “kick against the goads” and stay on the road of legalism, a Road Called Damascus, OR you can open your spiritual eyes and be led by God daily, have the Holy Spirit show you what you are to do and who you are to be, and get on a Street Called Straight. You have nothing to lose but your self-inflicted pain. You have everything to gain –the joy of being led by the Holy Spirit in your daily life! Amen and Amen.

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IF THIS HAS BLESSED YOU, PLEASE PASS IT ALONG TO A FRIEND!*