



Staff Devotions

Saul

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 (Acts 9:4-5).

He was a confident man, boldly living what he had painstakingly assimilated through years of Biblical study. Advanced in learning he worked zealously, mindful of traditions that had been handed down from those who preceded him. Passionate about his faith, and willing to go above and beyond to ensure that falsehood was rooted out. He was confident his work gave him favorable standing with the Lord, for everything he did was focused on advancing God's church.

And yet, in the blinding flash of God's revelation and with a soul-piercing question from his Savior, Saul fell to the ground, suddenly aware that everything he once counted important was only rubbish. What a failure he had been!

You've had your failures. Your sinful nature has tempted you toward prideful service. You've invested countless hours and humanly speaking the results have paled. Your intentions to help have, at times, created little more than hurt and pain. And your message too often seems to fall on deaf ears. In moments of honest reflection, the deceiver whispers accusations and drives you to your knees to confess with Paul, "What a wretched man I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death?"

To his astonishment, kneeling in the light of divine glory, Saul, the persecutor did not find condemnation. Rather, his vision was forever changed through the gleaming gift of grace. Awakened by the Spirit to the *agape* love of cleansing found in the blood of Christ's vicarious atonement, Paul received the blessing to suffer for the name.

How blest are we to recognize and confess our sins! For in our weakness we find strength in Christ. Take heed of the forgiveness that is yours in the blood of the Lamb. In faith, go forth with Paul to the ends of the earth, confessing the name of Jesus who has called you by grace.

Do not be ashamed to testify about our Lord ... but join with me in suffering for the gospel, by the power of God, who has saved us and called us to a holy life—not because of anything we have done but because of his own purpose and grace. This grace was given us in Jesus Christ before the beginning of time... I am not ashamed, because I know whom I have believed, and am convinced that he is able to guard what I have entrusted to him for that day (2 Timothy 1:8-12).

Questions for deeper reflection:

- Why would God choose to use sinful human beings to proclaim his message of salvation to the ends of the earth?
- How does the Word in 2 Timothy 1:8-12 give you strength to carry out your ministry at this specific time in your specific location?
- What ministry struggles should you commit to the Lord in prayer today?

Lydia

One of those listening was a woman named Lydia, a dealer in purple cloth from the city of Thyatira, who was a worshipper of God. The Lord opened her heart to respond to Paul's message (Acts 16:14).

She was a prosperous and well-known merchant. Having gained her business acumen among the diverse guilds in the bustling city of Thyatira, she knew precisely what was required to grow a thriving commercial interest. Her attention to detail permeated not only her affairs within the marketplace, but also the way she ran her household in observance of the ceremonial laws, for she was a worshipper of God. In spite of all this, something was missing in her life. This seeker did not know Jesus.

You've met a woman like her, that sharp and fashionable young mother who is always so well put-together. She carries herself with self-assurance and always seems to have everything under control. An uncanny ability to relate with anyone in her path, she finds no trouble networking among the other parents, even though she is relatively new to your school. Her sociable nature aside, you've found your conversations get steered back to the surface when you approach deeper matters of the heart—her family's relationship with Jesus. How will you ever reach her?

We don't know the specifics of Paul's message to Lydia and the other women that first day when Paul had joined them at the river to pray, but we likely find an echo in Paul's letter to the Philippians. Imprisoned in Rome and awaiting trial, Paul wrote these heartfelt words to the believers who had cared for him in the wake of a brutal beating and false imprisonment at the hand of the Philippian magistrates.

Your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus: Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be grasped, but made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself and became obedient to death—even death on a cross! (Philippians 2:5-8).

You don't know when or how the Holy Spirit may work through you to reach the parents who have enrolled children in your school. But you know the Savior who loves them and died for them. Take Paul's exhortation to heart and let your personal outreach be characterized by Christ's humility. Embrace the heart of a servant and let them see Jesus in you.

Questions for deeper reflection:

- What might be entailed in serving parents with a selfless attitude at your school? How can you encourage and support one another in this mission?
- How does the Word in Philippians 2:5-8 provide you strength to serve your students and their parents in such a selfless manner?
- What mission outreach struggles should you commit to the Lord in prayer today?

The Slave Girl

Once when we were going to the place of prayer, we were met by a slave girl who had a spirit by which she predicted the future. She earned a great deal of money for her owners by fortune-telling (Acts 16:16).

What a pitiful creature she was! Looking into her eyes, one could see pain, confusion, and a deep longing to be valued for who she was and not what she had become. Starved of love, used for personal gain, and treated like a piece of property this little girl was being manipulated and debased. Much worse, the void in her wounded heart had been filled by a relentless demon whose abuse made the mistreatment of her owners look trifling in comparison.

You've peered into eyes like hers. How your heart has ached for the children in your care whose troubled lives permeate your church and school! You've watched impressionable young hearts deal with losses they should not have to endure: the breakup of a family through divorce, the ravages of a childhood disease, and the death of a parent. You've felt their frustration when disability has compromised learning. You've seen the damage of abuse, and you've struggled with the responsibility of bringing it to light. And yes, you've even suspected the involvement of demons in some really troubling cases. How will you ever meet the needs of such young souls?

Finally, Paul became so troubled that he turned around and said to the spirit, "In the name of Jesus Christ I command you to come out of her!" At that moment, the spirit left her (Acts 16:18).

Paul used the sword of the Spirit to drive out the demon in the name of Jesus and to introduce the girl to the Savior who had died to set her free from the bondage of sin. Our world is filled with disturbing influences that are competing every day for the hearts of the children in your midst. Take courage for your task of shepherding tender young souls; heed Paul's encouragement to put on the full armor of God.

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. Therefore, put on the full armor of God, so that when the day of evil comes, you may be able to stand your ground, and after you have done everything, to stand (Ephesians 6:12-13).

Questions for deeper reflection:

- What troubles and temptations appear to be plaguing the children in your area of ministry?
- Review Paul's detailed description of the full armor of God in Ephesians 6:14-18: How does each item of armor or weaponry assist you in your ministry?
- What concerns for God's children should be included today as you "always keep on praying for all the saints?"

The Jailer

The jailer called for lights, rushed in and fell trembling before Paul and Silas. He then brought them out and asked, “Sirs, what must I do to be saved?” (Acts 16:29-30).

His line of work was not highly regarded in society. It involved significant risk, as it required him to interact with the most hated of people. Self-protective fear likely fueled aggressive behavior when dealing with those wretched criminals. His own feelings of guilt drove him to loathe the repulsive offenders; it soothed his conscience to goad them for the ugliness of their sin. Constantly on the look out for surprises, he chafed under the responsibility of controlling captive sinners, but the sudden earthquake caught him off guard. Believing his execution was imminent, he stood at the brink of suicide.

You’ve met a broken man like this. His professional accomplishments and his active participation in the ministry of your congregation masked the reality of his sinful nature. Your close friendship led him to your office, where he broke down, fell to his knees and confessed his many sins to you—sins of which you wouldn’t have imagined him capable. When confronted with a broken sinner, a flood of emotions may nearly level you. At once feeling betrayal, repulsion, anger, fear, and compassion; you find yourself struggling for air, much less for the words to say. How do you meet the needs of the broken sinner?

The jailer called for lights, rushed in and fell trembling before Paul and Silas. He then brought them out and asked, “Sirs, what must I do to be saved?” They replied, “Believe in the Lord Jesus and you will be saved—you and your household” (Acts 16:29-31).

Note the simplicity and the certainty of the gospel Paul proclaimed. Believe, and you will be saved! Whether it is the gruff and aggressive parent at your school, a man or woman of tainted reputation in your congregation, the repeat offending students in your classroom, or the continuously complaining coworkers on your staff; there is but one balm that calms the consciences of repentant sinners, including yours. His name is Jesus, and you have the distinct privilege and joy of pointing the brokenhearted to his cross and his empty grave where they will find peace and joy.

Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: Rejoice! Let your gentleness be evident to all. The Lord is near. Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus (Philippians 4:4-7).

Questions for deeper reflection:

- How is sin destructive of not only the individual sinner’s relationship with God, but of everything in his or her life?
- What treasures are available for the broken and repentant sinners in the Word recorded in Philippians 4:4-7?
- Who should you remember in your prayers today, as you reflect on God’s rich grace for fallen sinners?

You

Surely you have heard about the administration of God's grace that was given to me for you, that is, the mystery made known to me by revelation ... that through the gospel the Gentiles are heirs together with Israel, members together of one body, and sharers together in the promise in Jesus Christ (Ephesians 3:2-3, 6).

They lived on the outside. It wasn't that they were envious, longing to be part of the group from which they were excluded. More likely, they looked down on the Jewish people with contempt. To them, Israel represented strange religious customs and ridiculous dietary limitations. They detested the Hebrews who had labeled them as "gentiles," and they took offense at the Jewish claim that there was only one God and the Jews were his "chosen people." How arrogant and intolerant it was for Israelites to think and behave that way.

You are surrounded with people like this. In a relativistic society, where political incorrectness is nearly an unpardonable offense, your Christianity is viewed as problematic. The message you proclaim that the only way to heaven is by believing in Jesus is viewed not just to be out of touch, but also to be unacceptably intolerant. And yet, this is the context in which you have been called to preach the gospel. How can you be expected to produce a harvest?

Paul asks a similar, but more insightful question: **How, then, can they call on the one they have not believed in? And how can they believe in the one of whom they have not heard? And how can they hear without someone preaching to them? (Romans 10:14).** The gospel must be communicated to people if they ever are to come to faith. And to have the opportunity to communicate the gospel to unbelievers, believers must develop relationships with unbelievers. So, this work of evangelism basically starts with friendship.

Each generation of believers must carry the gospel forward to the next. And each set of spiritual parents longs to see their spiritual children taking the gospel to the generation that follows. Your role in taking the gospel to the ends of the earth is critically important, as God has called you to carry out this ministry. May he so bless your efforts that the apostle who began this work might be filled with joy as the fruits of your labor are revealed at the wedding feast of the Lamb.

Do everything without complaining or arguing, so that you may become blameless and pure, children of God without fault in a crooked and depraved generation, in which you shine like stars in the universe as you hold out the word of life—in order that I may boast on the day of Christ that I did not run or labor for nothing (Philippians 2:14-16).

Questions for deeper reflection:

- How have you been blessed by Paul's ministry of taking the gospel to the ends of the earth?
- What hopes and prayers regarding your own ministry and the people you serve are prompted by the Word recorded in Philippians 2:14-16?
- As you close this devotional series, what additional prayers are on your heart? Take them to the Lord with confidence in his blessing.