

SERMON FOR THE 4TH SUNDAY IN LENT 3-11-18

Acts 9:1-20 "Tools in the Hands of God"

Dear Fellow Redeemed

As I reviewed the lesson from Acts assigned for this fourth Sunday in Lent, a phrase from that lesson, Saul's dramatic conversion on the Damascus road, jumped out and stuck in my mind: God called Saul "**my chosen instrument.**" (9:15). Then I thought about the theme for our service this week: "God's Will and My World View," and it seems to me that those two things kind of converge together in the Lord's description of Saul; in other words, what God wants and what we should desire is to be 'instruments in the hands of God!'

Instruments: What does that make you think of? I know that many of you enjoy tinkering in your garage or workshop, building things or repairing small things around the house. If I went into your basement/garage I would no doubt find a large peg board on which you hang your tools—hammers, screwdrivers, pliers, wrenches, saws, and so forth. When you have a task to do, you pick out the tools you need to do your job.

Instruments: Isn't that exactly how God works! All of us are instruments or tools in the hands of God. He chooses those that He needs for specific tasks. He comes into your life and into mine and He says: "I have chosen you as my instrument." Today we will look at how Paul, was a chosen instrument in the hands of God. We will use as a guide or blueprint three P's: Problem, Power, Plan. We pray that each of us will think of ourselves as:

Tools in the Hands of God!

1. The problem

The first "P" is "problem". Is there a problem with being a tool in the hands of God? Yes, says our sinful nature. We are basically self-centered; our dreams, our ambitions, our desires focus on ourselves. We don't really want to give up our own plans to be used by someone else. Why be someone else's "go-fer"?

Look at Saul. He was a proud, respected Pharisee. He had power, position, prestige. He was even entrusted with the assignment from the top leaders in Jerusalem, the center of the Jewish world, to round up Christian "heretics" as far away as Damascus. He had rejected the claim that Jesus of Nazareth was the Messiah and was zealous to stamp out those who believed in Jesus as Lord and Savior. Be a tool in God's hand to spread that message? Never!

The Danish philosopher Soren Kierkegaard told the story of an emperor visiting a village in his kingdom. From the crowd in the marketplace came a young farmer with a special request, "Grant me a favor. Give me a special blessing." The emperor thought a moment and surprised everyone with his answer. "Get into my carriage and come home with us. Marry my daughter and become my son-in-law. Live as a prince in my palace." That sounded good, at first; but as the peasant thought of how people in the palace lived and dressed, he had second thoughts.

- No more Saturday nights at the tavern with the boys;
- no more comfortable peasant clothes.
- There would be baths every night, manners of the court, official duties.

He stopped, lowered his eyes and said, "No thank you, Sire. It would be too much for me." He was not ready.

How about you? Are you ready to give up your own dreams for God's plan for you? Do you really want to be a tool in the hands of God?

2. The Power

The problem of our reluctance, of our self-centeredness, of our thinking that we know best what God wants, doesn't stop God. He has the power to deal with that. In Saul's case it was the bright light and voice of Jesus on the Damascus road. Saul was led into the city and for three days he did not eat or drink; he simply prayed. What do you imagine Saul thought about in those long hours of waiting? No doubt, he thought about Jesus. Was he really the

Messiah? Was he really alive? Why were people like Stephen ready to die for him and with such a look of peace on his face as the stones knocked him out?

Then God told Ananias to go over to that praying man in the house on Straight Street. Ananias wasn't quite ready, either, at least at first, to be an obedient tool in the hands of God. He reminded God of who this man was, of all the harm he had done to the church, and why he was even in Damascus. But God gave the order: **"Go! This man is my chosen instrument to carry my name before the Gentiles and their kings and before the people of Israel."**

"My Chosen Instrument." The Greek word used here is *skeuos*, which is a general term for anything you use to accomplish your purpose: a vessel, utensil, container, equipment, or a tool. And when God used that word, Ananias – and Saul – knew what he meant. They were to be used as tools to carry out God's plan for building his kingdom.

- So Saul was baptized, forgiven, and filled with the Spirit.
- He was changed from self-centered to God-centered.
- He was a tool in the hands of God.
- Now he understood who Jesus is and what it meant for Jesus to die on the cross for our sins.

Later he expressed his commitment by saying in essence: **"I am ready not only to be bound but also to die in Jerusalem for the sake of Jesus Christ"** (Acts 20:22-24). By God's grace, Paul was shaped by God, the master Potter, to **become** (as Paul himself said) **all things to all men so that by all possible means I might save some"** (1 Corinthians 9:22).

God dealt with the sinfulness, the self-centeredness, the reluctance of Saul through the Gospel. How about us?

- Jesus died for our sins.
- He was raised for our justification.
- We have been baptized, and the Holy Spirit has been poured into our hearts.
- The Spirit gives us new life in Christ.
- Do we sense how God continues to change, shape, and mold our lives so He can use us to be a tool in His hands?

3. The Plan

God's big plan, his unchangeable will, is that all people come to the knowledge of the truth and be saved (1 Timothy 2:4). So He commissions His church to **"make disciples of all nations."** That is done through baptizing and teaching. God has special assignments and tasks that are necessary to do the job.

- God used Ananias to baptize Saul and lay hands on him, to lay the foundation for his acceptance as an apostle.
- For Saul God's plan was to **"carry the Gospel to the Gentiles, to kings, and to the people of Israel,"** from Jerusalem to Rome; to plant churches, to train leaders, and to write the majority of the New Testament letters. It's like taking down different tools from the tool board, the saw to saw the board, the hammer to drive the nails, the screwdriver to set the screws.

A four-year old was playing in the back yard while his parents were there. After tiring of playing with his dog, he went to his father and began to play his favorite game—asking rapid questions and getting quick replies.

- "What is Spot doing?" "Spot is running around the yard."
- "What's mommy doing?" "Mommy is pulling weeds."
- "What is daddy doing?" "Daddy is planting a rose bush."
- And then in the same tone of voice and manner, "What is God doing?" But there was no quick reply. His father had to stop and try to figure that one out.

How would you answer? "What is God doing right now?" Do you see God at work, making disciples through Baptism and teaching of the Gospel? Are you involved in the spread of the Gospel? We can look back into our past and see many things God has done in our lives; many tools God has used to help us:

- A Damascus road experience in our Baptism;
- Ananias: pastors, speaking forgiveness in the worship service; encouraging us in our faith-life and faith-walk.
- So many different assignments and tasks too.

But right now? I don't always have to see the complete picture and know the outcome. But one thing I am sure of! I am a tool in the hands of God. I don't want to be hanging on the tool board, or sitting on the work bench. I want to be busy with an assignment that is part of God's plan.

A little boy came home from Sunday School and his mom asked, "Who is your teacher?" The boy thought for a moment and said, "I don't know her name, but I think she is Jesus' grandmother." "Jesus' grandmother?" the mom asked, "Why do you think that? The boy replied, well, for two reasons: first, she has pictures of him all over the room, and second, she can't stop talking about him."

Does that describe you? She truly was a tool in the hands of God. May each of us find ways to be used by God as tools who are carrying out His saving work in the world. Let that be your world view because it is truly what God wants, what His will is. **Amen.**