

Why Are You Here? - Acts 7:54-8:1; 9:1-32

Introduction: In 1992, Vice-Admiral James Stockdale was a retired decorated military hero who had faced many tough and demanding situations. But now he found himself in a very unfamiliar and uncomfortable position. He had been picked by presidential candidate, Ross Perot to be his running mate, and now found himself at the 1992 Vice Presidential debate with two seasoned politicians, Senators Al Gore and Dan Quayle. Vice-Admiral James Stockdale was well known in military circles, but being a political newcomer, he needed to introduce himself to the world of politics, so he began his opening remarks with the questions, “*Who am I and why am I here?*”

Well, Mr. Stockdale’s night didn’t turn out quite the way he planned as he came across as someone who was most definitely out of his element. In fact, because of those opening remarks, he became the butt of all the late-night comics.

This morning I want to pose that question to you: Why are you here? Why are you a part of this church? Why do you attend here, or why do you get involved in the programs and ministries of this church? Have you ever given it any thought?

We have all come here for different reasons. I don’t know your reason, but I know you must have one. So this morning, let us all ponder the question, “*Why are we here?*”

I’m here because you called me here and God called me here. I’m here because I have a desire to see this church grow. I have a vision for this church that becoming more of an influence and a source of comfort in our community. I believe God wants to accomplish some mighty things through this local church for His kingdom. But I can’t do it alone and you can’t either. We need each other’s help, and because of that, we all need to know why we are here. To get a better handle on this question, we must get back to the basics of our purpose as a church.

In Acts 7-9, we find three important people who were a part of the first church. In them, we can discover three purposes for being a part of the church. These three people had an influence on Paul’s life and ministry. As we examine these three men, Stephen, Ananias, and Barnabas, may we find the answer to our question of “*Why am I here?*”

1. You are Here As an Example (7:54-8:1).

How many of you were brought to the Lord by someone else or by their influence? God often gets our attention through another person. That places a tremendous responsibility on the Christian to know that

someone is watching them. For Saul, that someone was Stephen. In our text, Stephen was fulfilling his calling in life. He was preaching and witnessing in the name of Christ Jesus. Now, in the process, Stephen's actions and words agitated many of the Jewish leaders to the point of wanting to get rid of him. They became so furious, they took up stones to kill him, and laid their coats at the feet of Saul. In fact, 8:1 tells us that young Saul was giving his approval of Stephen's death.

You may be thinking, *"What a terrible thing to happen. Here was a man of God, doing God's work, and he is dying because of it."* So, the question arises, *"Why was Stephen there? It seems like such a waste!"* The answer is, he was there to serve as an example to young Saul.

And what did Saul see? He saw a faithful man. He saw a committed man. He saw a man of conviction. He saw a man able to face his own premature and undeserved death with faith, confidence, and courage. He saw a man dying, not in anger or retaliation, but with joy and peace in his heart as he died. Saul saw something in Stephen that would touch his heart, and change his life. He saw an example of a Christian he had not seen before, and it never left him. Stephen was there to be an example to a young misguided zealot named Saul.

From Stephen's example, we can see that we too are here to serve as an example to someone. Someone may be looking to you for guidance, for light, for direction, or for a model of Christlikeness. But one of the saddest things I have ever heard of is the fact that some folks have been run off from churches by someone's bad example. I wonder how many potential children's workers, youth workers, and teachers or deacons have been run off from the church by someone's bad example. It's a sin to let a bad example run someone off from a relationship with Christ. Jesus said to in Matthew 5:15 (NIV) that the Christian is to *"let your light shine before men that they may see your good deeds, and praise your Father in heaven."*

For Saul, Stephen was the light that penetrated his darkness of his heart for the first time. For me it was my parents. They were the perfect role models for a young impressionable boy. Not only did they work in church as teachers and leaders, they exemplified a lifestyle at home that was consistent with what people saw at church.

Now God doesn't call us all to be martyrs like Stephen, but He does call us in Romans 12:1 to be living sacrifices. We may not have to sacrifice our lives as Stephen, but we will have to sacrifice our wants, our feelings, and our own pleasures for the sake of maintaining our Christian witness. Think about that the next time you're tempted to gossip about a fellow believer in front of a new Christian. Think about that the next time you're in a restaurant and you're about to say something negative about your church when there's folks all around you listening. Why are you here? You are here to serve as an example, but that is not all.

2. You are Here to Equip (9:1-19).

Sometime after Saul witnessed the death of Stephen, he met the Lord. He had a dramatic encounter with the living Savior when he was on the road to Damascus to bring back some Christians to persecute them. There Jesus brought him to his knees and saved him. The Lord convinced him that his old way of life was wrong, and he needed to change his ways. But how? How could Saul unlearn all he had been taught in the Jewish rabbinical schools? How was he going to learn God's way? How could he change? He needed an equipper. He needed someone to show him and be there for him. Ananias was that man, and the Lord sent him to help Saul in his new walk.

Now Ananias wasn't too crazy about going to Saul. After all, he was persecuting the church. But the Lord was strongly urging Ananias and assuring him that Saul was a changed man. Besides, the Bible says that Saul was praying (9: 11). And apparently, that is all Ananias needed to be convinced that God had changed Saul's heart, and had called him to equip him for His service.

Ananias went to where Saul was and began equipping and enabling Saul to begin his ministry (READ 9:17-19). So, why was Ananias there? He was a part of the New Testament church as an equipper. He was a disciple of the Lord called upon to equip another disciple.

Let me ask you, when does a Christian know everything there is to know about serving God? Never! When we are saved, we begin a life-long relationship of learning and doing and trusting and obeying in the name of Jesus Christ, and it never stops! We are all growing in our spiritual walk. However, that walk is not a solitary journey. As the Beatles sang, we all need a little help from our friends. As Bill Withers sang, we all need somebody to lean on. In order to be effectively involved in the Lord's work of ministry, we need to be equipped.

Just as it wouldn't have been right for Saul to head to Damascus First Baptist Church and start teaching a Sunday School class, it's not right for us to win people to Jesus and expect them to jump right in and get involved in the work of the church right away. But, unfortunately, that is what we often do. We all need time to grow and learn. We all need the right equipment if we are going to be effective ministers in God's kingdom.

I've had some wonderful equippers down through the years, and I still need them. We all need each other to work together. If you are not involved in both equipping and being equipped by someone, you need to be. That is why you are here - to serve as examples and equippers.

That is why it is so important to be involved as a member of a church, so you can be involved in the

equipping process. We belong to each other. We all have our gifts and we need to be using them to work together to enhance and build God's kingdom. We are the body of Christ. Why are you here? To equip others and to be equipped for service, but there's one more thing.

3. You are Here to Encourager (9:20-32).

After Saul was saved and began the equipping process by Ananias, Saul set out to do the work of the Lord. Vs. 20 tells us how he began to preach Jesus as the Son of God. Vs. 22 goes on to tell us how he grew in wisdom and spiritual strength as he obeyed God. Apparently, Saul gained enough confidence to propose some changes within the Jewish synagogue. Of course, this aroused the suspicion and the anger of the religious establishment, including the disciples themselves (23 - 26). Many were simply afraid of him. If ever there was a time to give up and quit, it seemed to be now for Saul. Here he had given his life to Christ, given up his livelihood and forsaken his old way of life and adopted a new life, and now nobody would listen to him. Nobody trusted him. He could have said. *"My feelings are hurt and I'm just gonna quit."*

But verse 27 says that Barnabas came to his rescue. In effect Barnabas said, *"Saul, you need a friend, and I am here for you. I'll stand up for you. You can count on me."* Barnabas became Saul's encourager, and he gained the necessary strength from their relationship to go on. Verse 31 says that the whole church was built up as a result of Barnabas' encouragement and friendship. You don't think your friendship means anything? Here a whole church was lifted up because of it.

Now I know that as Christians, we are not supposed to work for man's applause, but it doesn't hurt to hear it once and awhile. Just because that is not our reason for serving God, doesn't mean that we are not supposed to encourage each other by a little praise and encouragement.

Some folks have a problem with clapping or with saying *"Amen!"* in church. I don't. It not only gives God the glory, but it encourages us as well. Let's face it; it is difficult to maintain our enthusiasm if we are only met with criticism and unconcern. We all need encouragement from time to time. Sure God encourages us, but a little from our church friends doesn't hurt either. It shows we care and it shows our appreciation.

Barnabas was Saul's encourager. I have had my encouragers down through the years too. It means a lot to me when they call me up just to encourage me. Now, I'm not saying that we should go around pouring syrup on people all the time, but we do need to know that part of the reason we are here is to watch out for each other's well being. Give a hug. Give a smile. Send a card. Say thank you to someone who has meant a lot to you.

It encourages me to see you sitting there service after service, especially when I know you are sick or hurting. I remember a gentleman in my former church who had Lukemia for 35 years, and felt bad all the time. It took him about 2 hours to get ready, but he was at church Sunday after Sunday. That was a real encouragement to me because sometimes, I didn't feel like going if I had the sniffles – and I was the Pastor! Why are you here? To be an encouragement to others to serve the Lord with gladness and to be encouraged to keep on keeping on.

Conclusion: Why are you here? I hope it's not just to get something, but to give something; to do something, to be something. I hope you are here to be an example to others, to be an equipper of others, and an encourager of others. Why are you here?