

Acts 9:19-31

So, let's backtrack for a minute....for the last two weeks, we have been looking at Saul's conversion. He has this amazing experience on the road to Damascus. He acknowledges Jesus as Lord. Ananias gets a vision and the Lord tells him to go and see Saul. He's a bit nervous – he knows who Saul is – at least we know he's heard about him. We know Saul was at the stoning of Stephen – likely Ananias would have known this. He knows Saul was persecuting Christians. I'd be a bit nervous, wouldn't you? But he goes and ministers to Saul and baptizes him. I think this is interesting too as we move forward. I can't necessarily prove this, but I'd imagine that Saul had sometimes picked those he would imprison by seeing them baptized – he knew they were now professing a belief in Jesus as Messiah and Lord. So I think it's worth thinking through this a minute. We don't know much about the men who were with him. We don't know if they became followers or not. Ananias comes and Saul gets baptized. He would have known this was sealing his fate. He would forever be labeled as a Christ follower. But he knows that is the cost of following Christ and he does it. And I think this sets up the passage we are in this morning - this is the start of Saul's ministry.

One more note.....we all understand that Saul will become Paul in name right? We still hear his name as Saul here, but just to be clear for those that may not know – this is the same man that we will begin to refer to as Paul later on in Acts and throughout the New Testament.

Now....moving on....

Saul's ministry starts off right away. We don't see a delay. We don't see him waiting until he finished his MDiv degree at Damascus Seminary. He spends some days with the disciples in Damascus and then he starts preaching. Now let me be clear, I'm not suggesting good Biblical training isn't important. And I'm certainly not endorsing what we see today – self appointed bishops, apostles and evangelists. There is danger in this and we know this from warnings later on given to us by Paul. But you have to understand who Saul was.

In Philippians 3 we see Paul's qualifications...let's read this together...

***Finally, my brothers,<sup>[a]</sup> rejoice in the Lord. To write the same things to you is no trouble to me and is safe for you.***

***<sup>2</sup> Look out for the dogs, look out for the evildoers, look out for those who mutilate the flesh. <sup>3</sup> For we are the circumcision, who worship by the Spirit of God<sup>[b]</sup> and glory in Christ Jesus and put no confidence in the flesh— <sup>4</sup> though I myself have reason for confidence in the flesh also. If anyone else thinks he has reason for confidence in the flesh, I have more: <sup>5</sup> circumcised on the eighth day, of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews; as to the law, a Pharisee; <sup>6</sup> as to zeal, a persecutor of the church; as to righteousness under the law,<sup>[c]</sup> blameless. <sup>7</sup> But whatever gain I had, I counted as loss for the sake of Christ. <sup>8</sup> Indeed, I count everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things and count them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ<sup>9</sup> and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which comes through faith in Christ, the***

***righteousness from God that depends on faith—<sup>10</sup> that I may know him and the power of his resurrection, and may share his sufferings, becoming like him in his death,<sup>11</sup> that by any means possible I may attain the resurrection from the dead.***

Saul had the qualifications....he knew the law. He was versed in opposing the very things he now believed. He was a scholar of scholars – a Jew of Jews. No one would have argued with Saul on the issues and won. So, he didn't just jump up and appoint himself to preach. He knew he could argue for Christ with knowledge and wisdom. He was more than qualified – maybe more than the disciples. But he goes on...

***<sup>12</sup> Not that I have already obtained this or am already perfect, but I press on to make it my own, because Christ Jesus has made me his own.<sup>13</sup> Brothers, I do not consider that I have made it my own. But one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead,<sup>14</sup> I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus.***

He also has humility. Which is lacking in many self appointed “men of God” today. He says it very clearly in verse 12 and 13. He admits that he hasn't obtained it yet. He admits his imperfections. He admits to still struggling with knowing everything. I know I'm on a bit of a rabbit trail here, but it's important. I've heard people point to this verse and claim they have the same rights as Saul had to start preaching. I would disagree adamantly. Saul would have studied the scrolls of the Old Testament and he would have known all Jesus was teaching. He might have been the best “biblical” scholar of the times. He would have known it so well because he was much like many current pastors like Josh McDowell and Lee Strobel who set out to disprove Christianity only to find Christ.

Be warned young men. Know the Bible well. Be scholars of God's Word. Know it in context – not simply picking the verses that fit what you are trying to preach. At Sojourn we preach the Word of God. We take it in context and try to help people understand it. When our pastors are wrong, they admit to it. When our pastors don't understand, they seek out the counsel of others to better understand. We sit as Elders of this church and talk through the passages we are preaching from each week. So many today, do this in a vacuum – without the advice and counsel of others. Be students of God's Word. Develop humility. Be willing to say you are wrong. And be willing to simply say, “I don't know.” And then dig deeper into God's Word to better understand it. Okay....off my soapbox.

So back to the text.....Saul starts preaching. It says, he immediately proclaimed Jesus in the synagogues. What do you think the leaders thought when Saul comes and he stands up and starts preaching Christ as the Messiah? Likely, many doors would have been open to him because he was a persecutor of Christians. You see Saul coming in and you relinquish the pulpit right? Okay...you guys are in for it now – Saul is going to show you why this whole Christ stuff is false. And instead, he stands up and preaches the exact gospel you are trying to prevent your people from hearing. Would have been quite a surprise I imagine.

And the people are confused. They look at him wondering who this man really is. They still think he is there to arrest people. This would have been confusing for all the people listening – those who wanted to hear more about Christ and the Jewish leaders listening hoping he would help them in the battle

against the Christians. I love the word in verse 22 – he confounded the Jews. The word confounded means to confuse or cause surprise – or another definition – to mix up. He was mixing it up in their heads. They didn't know what to think. And it says he was doing this to the Jews – the greek word used for Jews here, specifically meant the Jewish religious leaders and others under their influence who were opposed to the Christian faith. These are the guys leading the charge against Christian teachings. And likely many of them had heard Saul's arguments and had been using them – and now this guy is coming in and completely confusing them. I love the picture in my head when I read this.

Let's move on....

He is there for many days continuing to teach and preach. And this was really ticking these guys off. So much that the same man they had counted on to lead the persecution against the Christians, they were now plotting to kill. This is like one of those action movies. They had people watching the gates waiting for Saul and waiting for a time when they could move in. So what happens.....his disciples lower him out of a hole in the wall so he can escape. This was the start of Paul's ministry. He preaches boldly and flees for his life. He took a stand and people didn't like it.

Testimony of my journey....

It's interesting to note that this period of "many days" in actuality was a period of three years. We know this from Galatians 1.

***"...nor did I go up to Jerusalem to those who were apostles before me, but I went away into Arabia, and returned again to Damascus. Then, after three years I went up to Jerusalem to visit Cephas (Peter)..."***

While this isn't vitally important, it is good to know that while Saul fled Damascus, he did return after things had cooled off a bit. Many scholars believe that Saul used this time to study and to refine his arguments for Christian beliefs. I do think however, that it is important to note that it took him three years to finally get to Jerusalem in verse 26. Why? I think the disciples would have needed some time to adjust to this new found faith they would have heard about. Would it be easy for you if someone who was out killing Christians all of a sudden starting preaching the same message. I'd like to think we would all celebrate and rejoice. But likely, we would be suspicious. We would be looking for what motive he had for doing this. Is he trying to earn our trust so he can betray us?

So Saul shows up in Jerusalem – what do we know about this time?

In Galatians, we know that he stays with Peter for 15 days. Likely they had a lot to talk about. If I was Peter, I would have had a lot of questions to ask. I'd want to feel this guy out and see if he was for real.

We also know from that passage that he sees no other apostles except for Peter and James, Jesus' brother. At least when he arrives – we will learn more in a minute. Is this significant? In Acts 26, it states that "he tried to join the disciples, but they were all afraid of him, not believing that he was really a disciple." I can imagine that they had heard about Saul coming and some were still afraid. They didn't know what was coming. They might have still doubted the story.

What is significant and a guy we can learn from is Barnabus. Barnabus comes alongside Saul. He is his advocate. He actually takes him to the apostles and speaks on his behalf. He testifies to Saul being a

changed man and tells of what he has heard of his bold preaching. For some reason, Barnabus stands up for Saul. Would you do that?

It's hard to stand up for what's right. The other apostles were afraid of him. Many doubted the stories. It had been three years with no stories of Saul persecuting Christians and they still didn't believe. I think this is a lesson for all of us. People can and do change when they encounter God. Do we give them the benefit of the doubt? Do we accept them and love them – or do we simply judge?

I think it is ironic that we all pray for people to come to know Christ and when they do, we get judgmental about it? God often calls those we least expect and we better be ready for it.

So wrapping up....Barnabus advocates for Saul and then he moves in and out among them. He spoke out against the Greek speaking Jews (the Hellenists), they too want to kill him – so where do the apostles send him? Back to Tarsus – where he is from? They send him to a place where the Gospel needs to penetrate – possibly a stronghold for Christian persecution.

And then a beautiful picture.....the church had peace, was being built up and multiplied! Ultimately, that is what we should all be striving for isn't it? That the church would be multiplied.

We all need to quit fighting one another and running people off with hypocrisy and start standing together to see the church multiplied!