

The Power of a Transformed Life
Saul Begins Christian Ministry
The Empowered Church Series – part 17
Acts 9:19b-31
5/20/23-5/21/23

Introduction

- **Telling our story for His glory**
- **Power of Testimony** – Saul’s testimony was useful to the Lord right out of the gate. The key to our story is talking about the change, the transformation of our nature that happens. It’s not about what treats we got as much as who we are becoming.

God is GLORIFIED by our TRANSFORMATION

- **Recap of Last Week**
 - **Saul of Tarsus got saved!** – the persecutor got rocked on his way to Damascus to throw Christians in prison. Jesus personally came to him and called him into ministry (why he’s a *traditional* apostle – btw).
 - **The Prophecy Ananias Heard About Paul** – Acts 9:15-16 - *“Go, for he is a chosen instrument of mine to carry my name before the Gentiles and kings and the children of Israel.¹⁶ For I will show him how much he must suffer for the sake of my name.”*

Lesson

- **Chaos!**
 - **Saul Begins Christian Ministry**
 - **Ac 9:19b–21** – *“For some days he was with the disciples at Damascus.^{1 20} And immediately he proclaimed Jesus in the synagogues, saying, “He is the Son of God.^{2”} ²¹ And all who heard him were amazed and said, “Is not this the man who made havoc in Jerusalem of those who called upon this name? And has he not come here for this purpose, to bring them bound before the chief priests?”*
 - **Where is Damascus** – Damascus is the capital of Syria. Because it is so close to Israel’s border, there was a massive Jewish contingent there. Syria and Israel

¹ We know that from the time that Saul was converted to the time that he gets to Jerusalem to meet Peter, it’s 3 years. At some point early on, Paul did a side journey to Arabia (see below) but we don’t know for how long. It seems that he used Damascus as his home base for those 3 years. How it all breaks out is impossible to decipher with the little information we have.

² “It is more significant than might be supposed at first glance that the only occurrence of the title “Son of God” in Acts should be in this report of Saul’s early preaching. It was as the Son of God that Christ was revealed to him on the Damascus road (Gal. 1:16; cf. 2 Cor. 1:19; Rom. 1:4). This title, or its equivalent, is used in the Old Testament (1) of the people of Israel (Ex. 4:22; Hos. 11:1), (2) of the anointed king of Israel (2 Sam. 7:14; Ps. 89:26–27), and therefore (3) of the ideal king of the future, the Messiah of David’s line (see especially Ps. 2:7 as quoted below in 13:33; cf. also above, 2:25–26). For the messianic use of the title in the pseudepigrapha cf. 1 Enoch 105:2; 4 Ezra 7:28–29; 13:32, 37, 52; 14:9. That our Lord’s contemporaries believed the Messiah to be in some special sense the son of God is rendered probable by the wording of the high priest’s question to him at his trial: “Are you the Messiah, the Son of the Blessed One?” (Mark 14:61 par. Matt. 26:63; Luke 22:67, 70). As applied to our Lord, then, the title “Son of God” marks him out as the true representative of the Israel of God and as God’s anointed king; but it is no merely official title. As he himself understood the heavenly voice which said to him at his baptism, “You are my Son” (Mark 1:11 par. Luke 3:22), it expressed his unique relationship and fellowship with the Father. A. E. Harvey finds three aspects of sonship implicit in the ascription of the title to Jesus: his perfect obedience to God, his being the ultimate revealer of God, and his being the authorized agent of God.⁴⁹ The proclamation of Jesus as the Son of God represents an advance on the way in which his messiahship has been proclaimed thus far in Acts.” NICNT Commentary, F.F. Bruce

have a rocky history in the ancient world, lots of wars. In the days of the Roman Empire, Rome made them all get along, so Jews were traveling and living there as well. It's north of Israel.

- **Who are the disciples at Damascus?** – Ananias, who prayed over Saul/Paul was one of those disciples in Damascus.
- **Damascus Jewish community in chaos** – Saul specifically received documents in Jerusalem to bring to Damascus to arrest Christians and defend the Traditional Jewish faith. They saw him as an intense patriot, and yet here he comes with the paperwork but with a totally different message! You've got to imagine they are all stunned and freaking out! What is happening here?
- **Preaching in the synagogues** – The synagogues were waiting for Saul to show up. They were ready for an anti-Christian rally, and what they got was something extremely different.
 - **Temporary windows of opportunity** – when we are first saved, we have access to our old world for a very short time. It's value to tell our past lives WHY we are leaving if we are able to handle the contact point (not overly tempted).
 - **Isn't this the guy that was doing so much Christian damage?** – the power of a testimony of change, sends shockwaves through the whole community on both sides.
- **Power of Boldness** – he went for it. He didn't care what it cost. That's hardcore. Saul is bold and courageous; we'll give him that. He immediately started debating that Jesus was the Christ.
 - **Shifting Pulpits** – how could Saul shift perspectives so quickly? He was ardently determined to destroy Christianity as wrong and he has one experience and now he's what, an apologist for Christianity? He doesn't even know all the stuff yet. What allowed him to make this radical switch and have any sort of foundation to speak from? Interestingly, this happens more than you'd think. People switching sides.
 - **Roger Martinez**, the lead vocalist of the Christian Thrash metal band Vengeance Rising, a band who played when I did and we had some of the same friends, went from Christian pastor, Christian musician, to Satanist, to angry Atheist.
 - **One degree from salvation** – Saul's entire anti-Christian crusade was hinging on the fact that it was bogus. The only way that it could be legit would be if all that they were saying is true, which of course could not be, in Saul's mind. But what if it was? What if this Jesus Christ was who He claimed to be, as impossible as that sounded? What if He was the Son of God? What if He was the promised Messiah and the Old Testament lens that he had needed to change? What if? And that's the case for so many in this world. They are one degree away from salvation. They seem so hostile, they seem so apathetic, but really all their resistance is due to the pieces not fitting. It could be: hating Christians; conflict with science;

being hurt by the Church; a non-supernatural worldview; etc. For Saul, it was an abomination because it was purporting to be true and clashing with his theology. But once Jesus showed up personally, it was all over. The resistance was over. He knew. All the pieces lined up. It clicked. And he was all in.

- **Why doesn't Jesus do more Damascus Road experiences?** – We all wish that God would just show up and freak people out into becoming Christians, because it seems so easy and effective. Why doesn't He do that more? Because he is leading not a revolution of force (that would be too easy and distort the outcome), but a revolution of love, and that requires gentleness and wooing. God is not so interested in making people bow, they will all do that eventually, it's more about leading people to love Him and connect to Him. That's not a shock situation. It's much more gentle than that.
- **The message: 'He is the Son of God'** – this is a HUGE statement and one that will draw fire from the Jewish people more than any other. Let's take a moment to talk about **what it means that Jesus is the Son of God, and yet God, at the same time**. It's a little confusing, yes? The first thing we need to note is that since God is eternal, self-existent, dependent on nothing, deity is deity. There is no baby deity. There is no half-deity. In the Christian theology God is All and cannot be parted out. There is no smaller version in its wholeness/essence. But there can and must be containment when it comes to interacting with non-God stuff. **Non-God stuff can't handle full-God stuff**. God cannot fully be present in His entirety to anyone or anything, only to Himself. What that means is that any time we are interacting with God, He is limiting Himself and only revealing to us a portion of who He is. When God accommodates Himself to His creation, instead of leading us to believe that's all He is, He tends to give names or titles to the current portion He is revealing. In other words, the Burning Bush was a manifestation of His presence, but He is not a fire nor a burning plant. When He operates and reveals the portion of making things, He is known as Creator. When He is lovingly giving life, He is revealed as Father. When He is empowering and guiding as an invisible Spirit, He is known as Holy Spirit. As you can see **many of His names are related to His roles**. When the portion of God who interacts with His creation as a person, an entity, an active agent, He is known as the *logos*, or *The Angel of Yahweh*.³ It was only when He added humanity⁴ that the Second Person of the Trinity took on the role of SON of God. Son of God means the role of engaging with humanity. It means there is now a portion of God integrated with His creation in a new way. By entering INTO humanity, He became especially tangible and was able to be engaged with in a new

³ The Angel of the LORD/Yahweh is referenced many times in the Old Testament. The definite article THE is key. This role was primarily a protector and warrior god. Logos was the creative force we call WORD, when things are spoken from the heart of Yahweh into being.

⁴ I know I said that deity is ALL, but we know that only means 'all that is supernatural'. He is not sin. He is not a plant. He is not human. Those are things that are created. So when He added on humanity, He took a portion of His creation and entered into it in a fresh new way.

way. As Son of God, the 2nd Person of the Trinity was able to do things that the other persons of God could not: eat, drink, sleep, die. **Son of God is not just a title it's a role.** A scholar named A. E. Harvey was cited by F.F. Bruce in a commentary on Acts when he said that there are 3 key aspects of sonship present in Jesus Christ: 1.) his perfect obedience to Yahweh; 2.) as ultimate revealer of God; 3.) the authorized agent of God. What this means is that the God-Man Jesus Christ fully reflects God as a perfect offspring does his father. Jesus shows us what God is like in a beautifully perfect way. Prior to that revelation, the Second Person of the Trinity did not hold the title 'Son'. That happened at conception in Mary. The bottom line is this: Yahweh is GOD. The name of all of God together is Yahweh. But when you start talking about the Personal Revelations (persons), or roles those Persons play, you are now using different terms that are explaining something less than the whole. Therefore Jesus can be both Son of God AND the Second Person of GOD at the same time. One is role and the other is essence.

- **Traitor!**
 - **Saul's Ministry Draws Jewish Fire**
 - *Ac 9:22–25 – “But Saul increased all the more in strength and confounded the Jews who lived in Damascus by proving that Jesus was the Christ. ²³ When many days had passed [about 3 yrs], the Jews plotted to kill him, ^{5 24} but their plot became known to Saul. They were watching the gates day and night in order to kill him, ²⁵ but his disciples took him by night and let him down through an opening in the wall, lowering him in a basket. ⁶”*
 - **But** – circumstances were going one way, but God had other plans...
 - **Saul proved that Jesus was the Christ** – wow! That's incredible.
 - **The Arabia Situation**⁷ - Paul's later recounting of this part of his life, in the letter to the Galatians, says that when he first got saved, he didn't talk to anyone about it from the Christian side of things, nor did he go to Jerusalem for affirmation immediately. He said he went away into Arabia⁸ for an undisclosed amount of time and then came back to Damascus to pick up where he left off. He said that he didn't get to meet the Apostles in Jerusalem until 3 years later. What part was in Arabia vs. Damascus is unknown.

⁵ this story is also told in 2 Cor 11:32-33.

⁶ “The word rendered “basket” here is σπυρίς (otherwise spelled σφυρίς), the word used in the narrative of the feeding of the 4,000 (Mark 8:8). The word in 2 Cor. 11:33 is σαγύανη, “a large woven or network bag or basket suitable for hay, straw ... or for bales of wool” (Lake-Cadbury, *Beginnings* 1.4, p. 106).” NICNT

⁷ “19b–20 According to the autobiographical outline supplied by Paul in Gal. 1:15–17, he did not confer with any human being after receiving his “revelation of Jesus Christ” but went away to Arabia (the Nabataean kingdom, which lay on the eastern frontier of Syria and stretched south to the Red Sea). This need not exclude a short period of such witness in Damascus as is described here—either before he set out for Arabia (which seems more probable) or after his return to Damascus (“without delay” in v. 20 need not be pressed overmuch, especially since Luke has nothing at all to say of the visit to Arabia).” NICNT, FF. Bruce.

⁸ The New Testament Arabia is not the same territory of Saudi Arabia of today. It was called the Nabatean Kingdom which was dominant in the area for about 300 years. It was basically the whole portion on the Eastern side (right side) of Israel. It covered what we know as Southern Syria, western Iraq, Jordan, and a large portion of Northwest Saudi Arabia. It had the famous city of Petra as it's political center. At this point it was under Roman rule but still operating. The king during Paul's day was King Aretas IV

- Ga 1:15–17 – *“But when he who had set me apart before I was born, and who called me by his grace,¹⁶ was pleased to reveal his Son to me, in order that I might preach him among the Gentiles, I did not immediately consult with anyone;¹⁷ 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.”*
- **The Jews plotted to kill him** - Immediate persecution/trial – life is still hard for him. Incredible experience but life is too hard. Paul never had the whole cool Christian, things are going awesome, experience. He was in turmoil all the time. He was on the front lines.
 - **God exposes the plot** – why does God expose some plans for some Christians but not others and lets them be killed? The more you read the Bible you see how it feels very random regarding who gets away and who dies. We’ll see James get killed but Peter freed from the same prison. We see one guy escape (Paul) and another stoned (Stephen). So, is it random? No. God has certain assignments for each of His children and those are simply playing out.
 - **The disciples lowered him over the wall** – this is totally covert, I love it. It’s risky but it was their only way. God let them sneak him out. Sometimes God works through plans (why not just walk out boldly and let God blind their eyes?). There’s no indicator in Scripture that we need to make things harder than they are. If we can escape...great! God will determine if it works or not anyway. But there’s no extra honor in ignorantly forcing the hand of God by being belligerent for him to do a miracle to save you (i.e. walk in front of the enemy and taunt them).
- **Rejection!...Wait...Ok**
 - **Saul Tries to Join the Jerusalem Church**
 - *Ac 9:26–28 – “And when he had come to Jerusalem, he attempted to join the disciples. And they were all afraid of him, for they did not believe that he was a disciple.²⁷ But Barnabas took him and brought him to the apostles⁹ [Peter & Jesus’ brother James] and declared to them how on the road he had seen the Lord, who spoke to him, and how at Damascus he had preached boldly in the name of Jesus.²⁸ So he went in and out among them at Jerusalem, preaching boldly in the name of the Lord.¹⁰*

⁹ “When Luke says that Barnabas brought Saul “to the apostles,” the narrative of Gal. 1:18–20 compels us to interpret this as a generalizing plural. According to Paul’s own solemn affirmation, the only leaders of the Jerusalem church whom he met on that occasion were Peter (Cephas) and James the Lord’s brother (whom Paul calls an apostle, although he would not have satisfied Luke’s conditions for that designation).” NICNT

¹⁰ “It is not so easy to reconcile Luke’s description of Saul’s public activity at Jerusalem in association with the apostles with the statement in Gal. 1:22 that, until the time of his departure for Syria and Cilicia (and after that), he “remained unknown by face to the churches of Judaea,” which knew of him only by hearsay. One commentator removes the phrase “in Jerusalem” from verse 28 (taking it to be a gloss) and regards verses 28 and 29 as a continuation of Barnabas’s description of Saul’s activity at *Damascus*. Verse 30 would then go on: “And the brothers recognized him (that is, as a disciple) and brought him down to Caesarea and sent him off to Tarsus.” Thus, we are assured, “the whole difficulty vanishes.”⁶¹ It does not, and even if it did vanish, one must have reservations about an emendation, however ingenious it may be, which is proposed not because it has any textual attestation but because its adoption will help to remove a discrepancy. It is true that there is a marked resemblance between the account of Paul’s activity at Damascus (his bold preaching and the consequent plot against his life) and that of his activity in Jerusalem. Luke’s sources probably supplied him with little detail about the Jerusalem visit; hence the generalizing terms in which he reports it.

- **Back in Jerusalem** – After 3 years, Saul decided it was time to connect with his community officially. Jerusalem was still the current hub of Christianity. This is where the 12 apostles are serving. All the other Christian leadership were scattered out of the area but they stayed and held down the fort. It was a tough place to minister because it's the hub of the traditional Jewish faith & culture, the very theological battle that is raging. It's ground zero.
- **He tried to join the Jerusalem church** – they weren't having it. They thought he was lying to get in and destroy them. I don't blame them. There is nothing wrong with being wise and discerning. We don't just accept everyone who says they want to be in church.
- **But Barnabas** – this guy is awesome! Let's talk about him for a second. We have a lot of Barnabas' here at Bridgeway.
 - **The Power of Reputation** – why they trusted Barnabas. All the groundwork for this amazing situation was done BEFORE this. The Christians trusted Barnabas. They knew his character and how he vetted out the character of others. They knew that if Barnabas put his name on the line of them, then they were legit. Are you a person like that?
 - **Barnabas the Connector** – Consider the risk of putting himself out like that. He was putting his reputation on the line. But he was a connector. He got people together. He knew how to work it. He knew how to get the right people into the right room and in the right conversations. Which by the way is a gift many of you have and we need to be using it strategically for the Kingdom of God. How would we do that? Think about it like a Kingdom Business. Who would you need someone to know to make a bigger kingdom impact? Get them together.
 - **Barnabas the Encourager** – The name Barnabas means, 'son of encouragement.' It's a nickname. His real name is Joseph and he's a Levite Jew originally from the island of Cyprus. What it tells us is that what everyone knew about him was that he wanted to bless other people. He was one that lifted others up. How cool is that? Are you one of those people? You are priceless in ministry. We need you desperately.
- **Presenting Evidence** – Saul's conversion story AND evidence that he was the real deal in Damascus by risking for ministry. Barnabas knew a lot of people and knew what went down. He testified on Saul's behalf.
- **Accepted!** – Saul is welcomed into the church, and they are quite the hardcore group. 13 apostles in one church! Wow!

He describes Saul, during his Jerusalem visit, as taking up the work which Stephen had laid down at his death, by engaging in debates with the Hellenists. Their reaction was swift and violent. Saul was worse than Stephen: he was in their eyes a traitor to the true cause, and by his volte-face he had let down those who formerly followed him loyally as their leader in the suppression of the new movement. With the information given here we have somehow to combine Saul's account (reproduced at a later point, in 22:17–21) of Jesus' appearing to him in the temple and telling him to leave Jerusalem because his witness would not be listened to. He protested that he was a specially valuable witness because the people of Jerusalem knew his earlier record as a persecutor and his approval of Stephen's death. But the Lord repeated his command to him to depart from Jerusalem, adding that he would send him to the Gentiles. Jerusalem was too hot to hold Saul. His friends saved his life by getting him safely away to Caesarea, where they put him on board a ship bound for his native Tarsus. Thus, as he says himself, he "came into the territories of Syria and Cilicia" (Gal. 1:21). Syria and Cilicia at this time formed a united imperial province." NICNT, F.F. Bruce

- **Odd Bedfellows**
 - **God Uses Saul to Encourage the Christian Church**
 - **Ac 9:29–31** – *“And he spoke and disputed against the Hellenists. But they were seeking to kill him.³⁰ And when the brothers learned this, they brought him down to Caesarea and sent him off to Tarsus.^{11 31} So the church¹² throughout all Judea and Galilee and Samaria had peace and was being built up. And walking in the fear of the Lord and in the comfort of the Holy Spirit, it multiplied.”*
 - **Who are the Hellenists?** – Hellenists are Jews by birth (or religion) who speak Greek and who likely affirm a more Greek lifestyle. They tended to clash with the Hebraic Jews, who spoke Hebrew and had a more traditional Jewish culture.
 - **Why did they want to kill Saul?** – it doesn’t say what ticked them off so much, but regardless of whether the Jews spoke Greek or Hebrew, Saul was still saying that Christianity was right and the traditional Jewish rejection of Him was wrong. That’s going to anger them plenty. This is the same region of the world that killed Stephen with rocks. They weren’t going to take kindly to this traitor.
 - **The Church sneaks him out back home to Tarsus (via Caesarea)** – Caesarea was a port city so that is how they were going to get him back to Tarsus, his birth town. Tarsus was in modern-day Turkey but called the region of Cilicia of Asia during Paul’s day. It was a hotspot of intellectual training. It was not as big as let’s say the international Alexandria training headquarters, but it was the largest in the region and they were proud of that fact. Saul had been educated there.
 - **Suddenly the church in all of Israel had peace? How?** – This reveals that one of two things happened: 1.) the chief persecutor Saul changed teams and it all calmed down; 2.) the anti-Christian Jewish movement was in such a spiral with the loss of the main fiery guy, Saul, that they were too confused to persecute in that time. It’s likely a combination of the two. Bottom line, God saved the main fire source and provided peace for His people.
 - **What if we prayed for our leaders?** – what if we prayed more for our leaders who we constantly complain are not leading us well and even against us? What if they got saved and it brought us peace? What if we prayed more than we verbally fought? Maybe...
 - **The Church was being built up** – This is the beautiful concept that Paul fought so hard for. He wanted Christians building one another up. He wanted leadership equipping and guiding. He wanted everyone to reach maturity in the Lord and continue to reach out to non-Christians.

¹¹ *“Tarsus, the chief city of Cilicia, was now about a thousand years old. It had been subject, from time to time, to the Assyrians, Persians, and Graeco-Macedonians. It passed under Roman control in 64 B.C., but retained its autonomy as a free city. Under Augustus the administration of the city was entrusted to his former teacher, Athenodorus the Stoic, himself a native of Tarsus, who appears to have established a property qualification for its citizens. Tarsus was a leading center of culture, with schools devoted to philosophy, rhetoric, and law, although they did not have the international standing of the schools of Athens and Alexandria. It is unwise, however, to exaggerate the influence which the educational system of Tarsus exercised on its most illustrious son.”* NICNT, F.F. Bruce

¹² *“Luke uses the singular “church” here where Paul prefers to use the plural and to speak of “the churches of Judaea” (Gal. 1:22; cf. 1 Thess. 2:14). It was, in fact, the original Jerusalem church, now dispersed and decentralized. “The Ecclesia,” said F. J. A. Hort, “was still confined to Jewish or semi-Jewish populations and to ancient Jewish soil; but it was no longer the Ecclesia of a single city, and yet it was one: probably as corresponding, by these three modern representative districts of Judaea, Galilee and Samaria, to the ancient Ecclesia which had its home in the whole land of Israel.”* NICNT

- **The Church grew as they walked in the fear of the Lord & comfort of the Holy Spirit** – What does this mean? It's two odd descriptors for why the church grew and was doing so well. Maybe there's something in there that we can learn from.
 - **Walking in the fear of the Lord** – Usually the fear of the Lord is used as respect and under alignment. Most famously we know the line, 'the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom.' That passage means that when we align ourselves with God's perspective then things start to make sense and connect. It appears that the early church here are more and more aligned with the heart of God and not their own agendas or worldviews. This is where we need to continue to grow. We have so many opinions when we should only have one.
 - **Walking in the comfort of the Holy Spirit** – It was a hard and difficult time to be a Christian in the Middle East (not that it's easy now). With all the persecution, the scattering, the loss, the lack of resources (many started poor, and it went worse from there). But in this season the Holy Spirit came close and comforted the church. The persecution died down. The fire calmed. And it was a time when they could recoup and restore.

Conclusion

- How can we walk in the fear of the Lord and comfort of the Holy Spirit today?
- The impact it can have in our region if we do.