

## Chapter 23: Faithful Suffering

*Acts 9:19b–31*

What a transformation the Lord can make in the life of even the most hardened sinner! After Saul's sight is restored—both physical and spiritual—he does not delay to serve his new Master. Immediately, he hits the ground running in faithfulness to Jesus. In Saul's early ministry, we see a dynamic that will characterize the rest of his life: a blend of faithfulness in preaching Jesus Christ and him crucified along with a regular experience of suffering. Here, we see the first installment of a principle that will be true not only for the rest of Saul's life, but for ours as well: *faithful preaching leads to faithful suffering*.

### Faithful Preaching (Acts 9:19b–22)

As we begin our study of the ministry of Paul (whom we will call 'Saul' throughout the remainder of this study, in accordance with the use of his name here in Acts 9), it is helpful to supplement what Luke records in Acts 9 with what Paul relates in his letter to the Galatians:

[12] For I did not receive it from any man, nor was I taught it, but I received it through a revelation of Jesus Christ....[15] 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. (Gal. 1:12, 15–17)

The significance of Saul's time in Arabia made Paul able to say that he did not preach "man's gospel. For I did not receive it from any man, nor was I taught it, but I received it through a revelation of Jesus Christ" (Gal. 1:11–12). Now, in v. 19b, Luke tells us that "for some days [Saul] was with the disciples at Damascus"; however, it is unclear how this ministry relates to his time in Arabia. What Saul's statements in Galatians make very clear, though, is that this time with the disciples was not a time of learning the gospel of Jesus from the disciples at Damascus.<sup>1</sup> Either Saul engaged in a brief period of initial ministry in Damascus before going into Jerusalem, although it is possible that the word "immediately" could be translated as "straightaway" (i.e., "straightaway after returning to

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<sup>1</sup> Pace Polhill, who writes that this time with the disciples in v. 19b "probably refers to their instructing him in Christ. Even though Paul was steeped in the Old Testament and would have had some familiarity with Christian views from his experience as persecutor, he was still a new convert and needed further instruction to the teachings about Christ before he would be ready to strike out on his own witness." (Polhill, *Acts*, 238.)

Damascus from Arabia").<sup>2</sup> If so, we might be able to see Saul's trip to Arabia as happening before this initial ministry, without any significant time elapsed.<sup>3</sup> It is probably better, however, to understand Saul's trip to Arabia as taking place between vv. 22 and 23.

We should also remember that Saul had seen a vision while blind in the house of Judas while awaiting Ananias (Acts 9:12). It may be that Jesus revealed to Saul the basics of the gospel during that vision, although Jesus only tells Ananias that Saul has seen a vision about how Ananias would lay hands on him so that he might regain his sight. Regardless, it is remarkable that Saul should spend this time with the Damascus disciples in fellowship rather than in seeking their arrest, as his original intention had been (Acts 9:2).<sup>4</sup>

Regardless of how much time elapsed between v. 19 and v. 20, Saul began his ministry with a clear declaration about the identity of Jesus: “immediately he proclaimed Jesus in the synagogues, saying, ‘He is the Son of God’” (v. 20). More literally, Paul says that “*This one* [οὗτός; *houtos*] is the Son of God”; i.e., that “this one and this one alone” is the Son of God.<sup>5</sup> Significantly, this is the only time in the entire book of Acts that Jesus is described as “the Son of God.”<sup>6</sup> Yet, this message is not buried in an off-handed comment somewhere, but is the first summary we are given about the content of Saul's preaching. The title “Son of God” appears in the Old Testament, variously applied to “(1) of the nation of Israel (e.g., Ex. 4:22; Hos. 11:1), (2) of the anointed king of Israel (e.g., 2 Sam. 7:14; Ps. 89:26ff.), and (3) of the coming Messiah (the former use merges into this; see especially Ps. 2:7, quoted in Ch. 13:33, and cf. Ch. 2:25f.)”<sup>7</sup> Yet, the title takes on dramatically heightened significance in the person of Jesus, as Lenski observes: “Saul had seen this Son of God in his heavenly glory; he preached as an eyewitness. ‘I am Jesus’ he had heard him say with glorified lips, the very Jesus who had walked, wrought on earth, had been killed by the Jews, and raised to glory by God—him Saul preached as the Messiah.”<sup>8</sup> Indeed, when Jesus himself taught about his identity as the Son of God, the term “reflected His unique relationship and fellowship with the Father, and His function as the revealer of the Father; and it is this essential character of His Divine Sonship that is so prominent in the Pauline epistles.”<sup>9</sup>

This message would have created a stir regardless of the messenger. The people of Damascus, however, find this message particularly shocking considering that Saul was the one declaring it: “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?’” (v. 21). Although “all” were amazed, some resisted the message. Yet, in spite of their opposition, Saul “increased all the more in

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<sup>2</sup> The word is εὐθέως (*euthēōs*), the adverbial form of εὐθύς (*euthus*). Mark particularly plays on these terms to show the relationship between John the Baptist's mission to “make [the Lord's] paths *straight* [a form of *euthus*]” and the actions of Jesus to take his work *straightaway* (often translated “immediately”; e.g., Mark 1:10, 12, 18, 20, 21, 23, 28, 29, 30, 42, 43). If the word is taken in this sense, then it is possible that it does not mean “immediately” in time.

<sup>3</sup> “This need not exclude a short period of such witness as is described in v. 20. On the other hand, his preaching in the Damascus synagogues may have followed his return to Damascus (Gal. 1:17c); we need not press the word ‘straightway’ in v. 20 overmuch, the more so since Luke has nothing to say of the visit to Arabia.” (Bruce, *Commentary on the Book of the Acts*, 202.)

<sup>4</sup> Schnabel, *Acts*, 451.

<sup>5</sup> Lenski, *The Interpretation of the Acts of the Apostles*, 369.

<sup>6</sup> Bruce, *Commentary on the Book of the Acts*, 202.

<sup>7</sup> Bruce, *Commentary on the Book of the Acts*, 202.

<sup>8</sup> Lenski, *The Interpretation of the Acts of the Apostles*, 369.

<sup>9</sup> Bruce, *Commentary on the Book of the Acts*, 203.

strength, and confounded the Jews who lived in Damascus by proving that Jesus was the Christ” (v. 22). Bock writes that the word *proving* “often means to ‘unite’ something. But since here a proposition is being defended, it has the sense of ‘proving’ something to be so, combining the facts, if you will, to show something is the case.”<sup>10</sup> No doubt his training at the feet of Gamaliel (Acts 22:3) prepared him for skillfully pointing to the relevant passages from the Old Testament Scriptures to “prove” his case.<sup>11</sup>

Specifically, Luke provides here the second component of the case that Saul was proving: not only was Jesus “the Son of God,” but also “the Christ.” The *Christ* is the Greek term for the Hebrew word *Messiah*, which we would translated into English as “Anointed One.” In the Old Testament there were three offices whose officers were *anointed* to begin their service: prophets, priests, and kings. Thus, every prophet, priest, and king was a *messiah/christ*; however, the significant thing Saul preached is that Jesus is *the Christ*—i.e., the ultimate and final Prophet, Priest, and King. If the title “Son of God” points to the divine nature of Jesus, then “Christ” points to work that he accomplished according to his human nature.

## Faithful Suffering from Enemies (Acts 9:23–25)

In the early chapters of the Book of Acts, the persecution against the church in Jerusalem grew slowly, moving from warning (Acts 4:18) to flogging (Acts 6:40) and only to Stephen’s execution in Acts 7:60. Saul himself had been the spearhead of a sharp rise in persecution in Acts 8:3 before Christ stopped him on his way to persecute the church in Damascus. We are not told exactly how long the Jews in Damascus tolerated Saul’s ministry before seeking to kill him, but the plot kill him surfaces without any similar intervening measures: “When many days had passed, the Jews plotted to kill him” (v. 23). It is likely that these “many days” describe Saul’s time in Arabia, as Lenski argues: “It was thus after Saul’s visit to Arabia, when he renewed his activity in Damascus, that his Jewish opponents took decisive action.”<sup>12</sup> We do not know how much time Saul spent in Arabia specifically, but we do know that there was a total of three years after his conversion in Damascus before he went to Jerusalem (Gal. 1:18). Notably, this word for “plotted” was also used to describe how the Jewish religious leaders “plotted” against Jesus (Matt. 26:4).

When Saul learns of the plot against him, “his disciples took him by night and let him down through an opening in the wall, lowering him in a basket” (vv. 24–25). This was a harrowing memory that Saul wrote of long afterward in his letter to the Corinthian church (2 Cor. 11:32–33).<sup>13</sup> Importantly, this is the first “exercise” where Saul was “acquainted...with the cross” in fulfillment of the Lord’s word about Saul from Acts 9:16: “I will show him how much he must suffer for the sake

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<sup>10</sup> Bock, *Acts*, 366.

<sup>11</sup> Lenski, *The Interpretation of the Acts of the Apostles*, 371; Polhill, *Acts*, 239.

<sup>12</sup> Lenski, *The Interpretation of the Acts of the Apostles*, 371–72.

<sup>13</sup> “At this point, Luke’s narrative must be squared with the account in 2 Corinthians 11:32–33, where we are told that ‘the governor under King Aretas had the city of the Damascenes guarded in order to arrest me’ and that Paul was ‘lowered in a basket from a window in the wall and slipped through his hands’. Aretas IV ruled the Nabateans (Arabians) from 9 BC to AD 40, but we do not know whether he was ever in control of Damascus. The ‘governor’ (*ethnarchēs*) may have been his appointed leader to the Nabatean community in Damascus....But Luke’s focus is on the Jews who *conspired to kill him* and who *kept close watch on the city gates in order to kill him*....There is no need to favour one account against another, because they put the focus on different opponents and depict the same event from different perspectives.” (Peterson, *The Acts of the Apostles*, 314–15.)

of my name.”<sup>14</sup> Here, Saul escapes in a manner similar to the way that Jesus often escaped from those who sought him harm (Matt. 12:14–15; Mark 3:6–7; Luke 4:28–30; John 7:30; 8:20, 59; 10:39; 11:53–54). In the case of Jesus as well as Saul, the reason for escape is not that God will not permit his people to die for his sake, but only that God’s people cannot die before their appointed time (see John 7:30).

## Faithful Suffering within the Church (Acts 9:26–31)

Saul does not suffer only from his enemies. As every true disciple of Jesus understands, a significant part of Saul’s suffering arises from those within the church: “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” (v. 26). As Calvin notes, Saul “might...have been quite discouraged and out of hope as one expelled out of men’s company.” Nevertheless, he waited “with a quiet mind until God reconcile them unto him.” Calvin concludes that this kind of patience as he suffered humiliation was a necessary part of Saul’s preparation for fulfilling the full range of his duties as an apostle: “no man is fit to be a teacher in the Church save only he who willingly submitteth himself, that he may be a fellow disciple with other men.”<sup>15</sup>

Even so, we may be grateful for the ministry of Barnabas, who boldly ventures to acquaint himself with Saul to learn what the Lord had done in Saul’s life: “But Barnabas took him and brought him to the apostles 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” (v. 27). This interaction between Saul and Barnabas would not be the last, as Saul and Barnabas would later travel together preaching the gospel of Jesus (Acts 11:25–26; 12:25; 13:2ff; 14:12ff). Certainly Barnabas’s boldness to bridge the fear of the church toward Saul established a foundation of trust and mutual admiration that benefited all those who heard about Jesus through these missionary journeys.

In Jerusalem, opposition quickly arises against Saul: “So he went in and out among them at Jerusalem, preaching boldly in the name of the Lord. And he spoke and disputed against the Hellenists. But they were seeking to kill him” (vv. 28–29). It is notable that the Hellenists (i.e., Greek-speaking Jews) were also instrumental in opposing Stephen (Acts 9:9). Indeed, Saul, a man from Tarsus in Cilicia, was likely a member of that Hellenistic synagogue that opposed Stephen! Nevertheless, Luke does not tell us specifically that the Hellenists here are the same who opposed Stephen, so we should be careful drawing such conclusions.<sup>16</sup>

Once again, when “the brothers” (i.e., the Christians in Jerusalem) learned that about the desire to kill Saul, “they brought him down to Caesarea and sent him off to Tarsus” (v. 30). Here again, we do not have an example of cowardice any more than when Jesus withdrew from places where those sought to kill him. Jesus was not seeking to escape suffering, but he knew that his time had not yet come. Here also, Saul has a great mission to accomplish in spreading the gospel of Jesus. For now, he moves on to the next place—specifically, he returns to his home town of Tarsus. Peterson summarizes this passage—and the gap between now and the next time we encounter Saul—well:

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<sup>14</sup> Calvin, *Commentary upon the Acts of the Apostles*, 1:388.

<sup>15</sup> Calvin, *Commentary upon the Acts of the Apostles*, 1:389–90.

<sup>16</sup> Lenski, *The Interpretation of the Acts of the Apostles*, 376.

The Lord's will was not for him to die in Jerusalem but to move out with the gospel into the Gentile world. The journey to *Caesarea* appears to have been the first step towards a sea trip to his home town (v. 11). Tarsus was in Cilicia (cf. Gal. 1:21), on the southern coast of what is now called Turkey. When Saul next appears in the narrative (11:25), Barnabas has gone to Tarsus to find him and bring him to Antioch in Syria, to share in the ministry there. 'One section of the story of Saul ends by placing him in the location where the next section of the story will find him.' Although Luke is silent about Saul's activity in Tarsus, given what we know of him from 9:290–29, it is likely that he continued to be occupied with evangelism there.<sup>17</sup>

We should also remember how much ministry Jesus did in Caesarea—so much so that Matthew tells us that Jesus "lived" in Capernaum, and called Capernaum Jesus' "own city" (Matt. 4:13; 9:1). Just as Jesus spent much time ministering in an area of familiarity, so it seems Saul does as well. Furthermore, we should remember that even though Saul escaped suffering in Jerusalem now, he would later return to Jerusalem to face charges that would ultimately lead to his exile in Rome and his eventual execution at the hand of the Roman emperor (Acts 21–28).

The summarizing statement in v. 31 is important for a number of reasons: "So the church 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." First, it is significant that Luke uses the singular word "church" for the various *churches* spread throughout three very different regions: "The term ἐκκλησία (*ekklēsia*, church) carries its technical, theological meaning of the community of believers, but with a new twist (earlier 5:11; 8:1, 3). The term here is singular; it is one community in three regions that is in view. This sense of the church in many locales appears only here and in 20:28. Usually the word refers to a specific local gathering (13:1; 14:23, 27; 15:3; 16:5; 18:22; 19:32, 39, 40; 20:17)."<sup>18</sup> Second, the phrase translated "throughout" here is καθ' ὅλης (*kath holēs*), from which we get the word "catholic." Here we can see the proper use of the term *catholic* to mean *universal*, and spread *throughout* the world. The great issue with the *Roman* Catholic Church is not in the aspects of the faith that they hold in universal commonality with the rest of the church. Rather, the issue is with the *Roman-ness* of that church, which has been skewed in many ways by attempts to model itself after the Roman Empire (e.g., where the pope is less like a biblical pastor and more like a Roman emperor).

Third, we should see here that even as persecution persists (especially directed against Saul), the Lord is at work. As Calvin writes, "Therefore, let us learn not to abuse external peace in banqueting and idleness; but the more rest we have given us from our enemies, to encourage ourselves to go forward in godliness whilst we may. And if at any time the Lord let loose the bridle to the wicked to trouble us, let the inward consolation of the Spirit be sufficient for us. Finally, as well in peace as in war, let us always joyfully go forward toward him who hath a reward for us."<sup>19</sup> Indeed, the word for "comfort" here is a word that does not necessarily refer to something that we might find *comforting* or *comfortable*, but a word that often refers to exhortation to press forward.

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<sup>17</sup> Peterson, *The Acts of the Apostles*, 317, citing R. C. Tannehill, "Narrative Criticism," in *Dictionary of Biblical Interpretation*, ed. R. J. Coggins and J. L. Houlden (London, SCM; Philadelphia, Trinity: 1990), 124.

<sup>18</sup> Bock, *Acts*, 372.

<sup>19</sup> Calvin, *Commentary upon the Acts of the Apostles*, 1:393.

## Discussion Questions

1. Read Galatians 1:11–17. How does this passage shape what we understand might have happened during Saul's time "with the disciples at Damascus" (v. 19b)? When does Saul probably go to Arabia? How might Saul have known what to preach about Jesus immediately? What two phrases summarize the content of Saul's preaching (vv. 20, 22)? What does it mean for Jesus to be the Son of God and the Christ?
2. What is the initial reaction to Saul's preaching within Damascus (v. 21)? How does Saul respond to opposition from the Jews (v. 22)? How do the Jews respond to Saul (v. 23)? What should we think about Saul's escape from Damascus through the window (v. 25)? How did Jesus similarly escape from danger before his time had come to go to the cross? What lesson should we learn from Saul's example in the face of persecution?
3. How did the church in Jerusalem respond to Saul when he arrived (v. 26)? Why? How was the reaction of the church likely a part of Saul's suffering for the sake of Jesus (see Acts 9:16)? What does Barnabas's name mean (Acts 4:36)? How does he live up to the meaning of his name here (v. 27)? What kind of relationship do Saul and Barnabas have through the rest of Acts? How does this act of kindness begin that foundation of trust?
4. Why is the use of the word "church" in v. 31 unique? How is the word "church" normally used? How do these uses show the distinction of individual churches as well as their connectionalism? What English word do we get from the Greek words for "throughout" in v. 31? How does this help us to understand what we do and do not mean by that term? What is the "comfort" of the Holy Spirit, and what does that comfort consist of (v. 31)?