

The Saul in Us All

May 14 – Acts 9:1-19a

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Day 134 – 231 Days to Go

Today in Your Reading

Saul, one of the great leaders of the early Church and main characters in the book of *Acts*, surrendered his life to Christ. Though he was set on persecuting followers of “The Way” (a name taken from *Jn. 14:6*), he joined them after meeting Jesus. Now Saul would experience great suffering on behalf of the Savior. The story of Saul’s conversion is a major event and transition in the book of *Acts*, as the spotlight shifts from Peter to Paul (Saul) and from preaching to Jews to preaching to Gentiles.

Saul was a remarkable man. He was a Jew from the tribe of Benjamin and quite possibly named after King Saul (*Phil. 3:5*). However, Saul was a Roman citizen born in Tarsus (*Acts 22:28*). He studied law in Jerusalem under Gamaliel (*22:3*) and became a Pharisee (*Phil. 3:5*). Among the Pharisees, Saul was the most zealous to protect Jewish tradition and beliefs from compromise. The followers of Christ were considered the biggest threat to their system. Thus, Saul assumed responsibility for seeking out and destroying the Church.

Because of persecution in Jerusalem, those who believed in Jesus had spread throughout the region. A large group of them settled in Damascus (about 160 miles north). Thus, Saul sought permission to go to Damascus. But Jesus confronted Saul and changed his life. Though the Lord temporarily blinded Saul, He was, in essence, revealing Saul’s spiritual blindness. In his zeal for the Jewish law and traditions, he had lost sight of God’s will and plan (much like the Jewish nation). Only after meeting Jesus face to face would Saul be transformed. God softened his heart and opened his eyes.

Because Saul witnessed the resurrected Christ and was commissioned directly by Him, Saul is considered an Apostle like the twelve Disciples. To mark this transition in his life, Saul took on a new name, with which we are more familiar — Paul (*Acts 13:9*).

Though Paul was a lot like Peter, John, and the others, the focus of his mission was different. God said, “He is a chosen instrument of Mine to bear My name before Gentiles and kings and the sons of Israel” (*9:15*). To reach the Gentiles and Jews, the Lord used someone with a foot in both worlds. A Roman Jew, who knew the Mosaic law very well, was the perfect choice.

Daily Reflection

Though Saul’s conversion was unique, it is similar to ours in several ways. First, **before he met the Lord, Saul’s heart was hard, and his eyes were blind**. Though Saul thought he was living for God, he was far from Him. Second, **Saul would not have been saved unless the Lord intervened**. The process of salvation begins with God, not us. In our sinfulness, we despise God. We would never turn to Him unless He reached out to us and stopped us in our tracks.

Third, **before we come to the Lord, we are prideful and full of ourselves**. God humbles us by showing us our sin. To Saul, He said, “Why are you persecuting Me?” (*v.4*). Saul didn’t know that he was committing evil until God exposed it. At that point, Saul was humbled, and he fell to his knees in repentance.

Fourth, **Saul was led to Christ by another believer**. Though the Lord began the process of regenerating Saul’s heart, He used Ananias to show him the way. It is likely that in your salvation story, a friend, family member, or church leader led you to Christ.

Finally, no one, not even the most zealous and callous murderer, is outside the reach of God’s grace. **The truth is, there is a Saul in us all**. Our hearts are wicked, full of unrighteousness and deceit. Yet God, in His mercy, has extended to us His forgiveness. Just as God transformed the greatest menace to the Church into the greatest missionary for the Church, he can save you (or anyone you know) and set you on a new path and give you a new mission.

The Proof Is in the Pudding

May 15 – Acts 9:19b-31

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Day 135 – 230 Days to Go

Today in Your Reading

In an ironic twist, Saul (Paul) received death threats for sharing Christ with the people of Damascus and Jerusalem. These events happened, of course, after his encounter with Jesus on the road (v.1-19a). He now faced the same persecution that he once instigated.

It would've been natural for the followers of Christ to be skeptical of Saul's conversion. After all, they had fled to Damascus to escape his threats against the Church. They heard that he was coming to arrest them and carry them away to Jerusalem. So then, how were the disciples in Damascus supposed to know that Saul had indeed given his life to Christ? **The proof was in the pudding.**

What does that mean? Someone can say that he is a chef. He might even act like a chef and mix a few things together. **But the proof that he is a chef is discovered when you eat the pudding that he's made.** The same applies to a disciple of Christ. One may claim to be a Christian. He may even act like a Christian at times, but the real proof is found in the fruit of his life. Jesus said, "You will know My disciples by their fruit" (Jn. 15:8; Matt. 7:20).

Did Saul exhibit the fruit of the Spirit, evidence that a radical change had occurred? He did. Luke wrote that he "immediately began to proclaim in the synagogues, saying, 'Jesus is the Son of God'" (v.20). Saul also "kept increasing in strength and confounding the Jews..." (v.22). Both in Damascus and Jerusalem, Saul "spoke out boldly in the name of the Lord" (v.27, 28).

Saul was a changed man, and he proved it immediately. Perhaps the most convincing proof of his surrender to the Lord was the fact that he endangered himself for Christ's sake. Both in Damascus and Jerusalem, he received death threats. False converts may talk a good game, but they will not put their lives on the line for

something they do not believe. Saul was the real deal. **Christ had radically and genuinely changed his heart and life, and the proof was in the pudding.**

Daily Reflection

There was another character in our story today. His name was Barnabas, which means "son of consolation, comfort, or support." As his name indicates, Barnabas was an encourager. He stood beside Saul when others were skeptical of his transformation. He vouched for Saul's conversion and gave evidence of the fruit in his life (v.27). Barnabas was a good friend, and the two men would, in time, make a great team.

I realize that Barnabas is a secondary character in the book of Acts, but his role is important. He may not have been a Saul (Paul), but he embraced, empowered, and encouraged Saul's ministry. Who are those "Sauls" in your life whom you could encourage or assist?

Don't hesitate to write them a note, speak a word of encouragement, be a good friend, or somehow show your support. The enemy may be at work to impede them, and what they need is a "Barnabas" like you to affirm them.

Jesus told His disciples that those who abide in Him will bear fruit (Jn. 15). In other words, **the proof is in the pudding.** You may claim to be a follower of Christ, and you may say all the right things, but **is there proof in your pudding?**

You may not be a Saul yourself, but you can be a Barnabas. The proof of your pudding is found in your desire to encourage and/or assist those whom God is using around you.

All For One

May 16 – Acts 9:32-43

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Day 136 – 229 Days to Go

Today in Your Reading

Peter healed a paralytic and raised a woman from the dead. The Holy Spirit had certainly empowered him to do miraculous deeds, but these miracles were not simply for show. They helped spread the gospel.

After Luke interrupted the story of Peter and John with the travels of Philip and the conversion of Saul (*Acts 8, 9*), he returned to Peter and followed his adventures. With so many exciting things happening in the early church, Luke wanted us to appreciate them all. But Peter will be the main character for the next few chapters (*Acts 9:32-12:24*).

Because of the persecution in Jerusalem, followers of Christ fled throughout Judea (another fulfillment of *Acts 1:8*). Peter was visiting them and sharing the gospel wherever he went. While Peter was in Lydda, he helped a paralytic. But notice that Peter healed the man in Jesus' name and that the result of the miracle was more people believing in Christ (*v.34, 35*).

The same was true when Peter raised Tabitha (Dorcas) from the dead. He did not perform the miracle for attention (as he had everyone leave), and the result of the miracle was that "many believed in the Lord" (*v.42*).

Why were these miraculous things happening? Was Peter a superhero? No, Peter did not perform miracles in his own superhuman strength but with the power of God through the Holy Spirit (*Acts 1:8*). Second, Peter made sure that those who witnessed the miracles credited Jesus, not him. Third, these types of miracles — healing paralytics and bringing the dead to life — are uncommon today. While miracles still occur, they do not happen as regularly as they did then. Why? The Lord used these miraculous events to validate Peter's ministry and to elevate the gospel. They were meant to bring glory to God and multitudes to Christ.

Daily Reflection

Besides Peter, there were three others in the story — Aeneas, Tabitha, and Simon. **These people represent the spectrum of society.** As a paralytic, Aeneas was down and out, bedridden for eight years, often overlooked. But Peter found him and shared Christ with him (*v.33*).

Tabitha (Dorcas) was popular. She had many people at her funeral. Her popularity was a result of her kindness, charity, and selfless service (*v.36, 39*), which is fitting since her name means "gazelle," gracious and gentle.

Finally, Peter stayed at the house of a tanner named Simon (*v.43*). Since tanners touched the skins of dead animals, they were considered unclean, a pariah, outcasts in Jewish society. But Peter resided in Simon's home for many days. **He looked past the stigma and saw a valuable person who needed Christ.**

Which of the three characters are you more prone to seek out — the popular, the paralytic, or the pariah? Explain why.

Which one would Jesus want you to seek out? Why, and for what purpose?

All people are valuable, made in God's image. Yet all people are sinners; therefore, all people need Christ. Don't let society determine your ministry outreach. **They all need to hear about the One, so we are to give our all for one.**

A New Work

May 17 – Acts 10:1-11:18

BiAY.org | Daily Reflections NT
Day 137 – 228 Days to Go

Today in Your Reading

Peter visited the home of a Gentile named Cornelius, and he and his entire household received Christ. Luke dedicated 66 verses to this story. Why? It was (and still is) a momentous event in the history of the Church.

Because of its significance, Luke did not spare any details. He wanted us to see how the Lord providentially arranged for this event to occur. First, he introduced us to Cornelius, a Roman military leader stationed in Caesarea. Though he was a Gentile (non-Jew), he worshiped God. Luke's description even indicates that Cornelius may have converted to Judaism and followed the customs of the people of Israel. An angel told him to seek out Peter who was in Joppa.

Second, God gave Peter a vision of clean and unclean animals and told him that it was okay for him to eat them. The Jews had strict dietary laws. They were forbidden to eat unclean animals. Therefore, Peter was perplexed by the vision until Cornelius' servants arrived and invited him to Caesarea (10:1-23).

When Peter arrived in Caesarea, he found many people in Cornelius' home — family, friends, and staff members. After Peter inquired why Cornelius had sent for him, he shared the gospel of Jesus with them. Not only did they believe in Jesus as the Messiah, but the Holy Spirit also came to indwell them. Soon after, the entire group was baptized (v.24-48).

The event was so significant that Peter reported it to the Apostles in Jerusalem. He shared the vision of the animals and his understanding of its meaning. **He believed that God was doing a new work, extending the good news of salvation to the Gentiles (11:1-16).** If that was indeed the Lord's will, "Who am I," he said, "to stand in His way?" (11:17). While the others were stirred up at first, they soon quieted down. When they began to grasp what the Lord was doing, they couldn't do anything but glorify Him (v.18).

Daily Reflection

Imagine being a Jew hearing this report. For 1500 years, the people of Israel had practiced the Mosaic law, following all the rituals and regulations. They adhered to the dietary laws, they circumcised their males, and they viewed Gentiles as strangers, outsiders, and unclean. Now, they were being told that all that was going away, **replaced by the new work of Christ.** There were no more rituals or regulations, no more dietary laws, no more circumcision, and no more treating Gentiles as outsiders.

The prophets had foretold this event (*Isa. 42:1, 6; 49:6; Gen. 12:3; Acts 3:25*), and Jesus confirmed it while He was on earth. The Gospel of Christ not only changed everything, but it would also be offered to everyone! What a departure from all they knew. **God was doing something new and fresh. The question was would they get on board or stand in His way?**

Have you ever experienced a time like this in your life, when God was doing a new work in you, your family or church, something that you did not anticipate? Explain. How did you react?

When God throws us a curve ball and begins a new work, our natural tendency is to recoil, refuse to cooperate, or even push back. What should we do in that moment? Pause, pray, and reflect on what it is He wants to accomplish. **As hard as it is, we must look beyond ourselves, what we like, what we've accepted as normal, and ask a difficult question — are we going to get on board or stand in His way?**

The Second Step

May 18 – Acts 11:19-30

BiAY.org | Daily Reflections NT
Day 138 – 227 Days to Go

Today in Your Reading

We were introduced to the second hub of the early church, the northern city of Antioch in Syria (near the island of Cyprus). As Jerusalem was the base for sharing the gospel with the Jews, Antioch would become the base for sharing the gospel with the Gentiles (another fulfillment of *Acts 1:8*). Believers in Christ had fled to Antioch after the persecution that followed Stephen's murder (*Acts 7:54-58*). It was in Antioch that they were first called Christians (*v.26*), a derogatory term at first but later one that became dear to all believers.

Since numerous Christians were gathering in Antioch, news of them made it to the Apostles in Jerusalem. They sent Barnabas to confirm what the Lord was doing and to build up the believers there. Barnabas was impressed with what he saw in Antioch, and he encouraged the Christians to "remain true to the Lord" (*v.23*). Evidently, their ministry was effective, as many more were coming to Christ (*v.23*).

At this point, with so many new believers, Barnabas recognized their need for discipleship. Believing in Jesus was the first step. Now they needed to be taught the deeper truths of God and His Word. He knew a man who was knowledgeable of the Scriptures and able to teach — Saul. The problem was that Saul had returned home to Tarsus in the province of Cilicia. Barnabas left to find him.

Once Barnabas and Saul returned to Antioch, they spent a year teaching the believers there, helping them to understand the Scriptures. As the church grew in number, it also grew in its depth of gospel knowledge and spiritual maturity. These Christians were beginning to see the big picture of God's plan. Thus, when a prophet named Agabus spoke of a world-wide famine, the Antioch Christians did what they could to send relief to Christ-followers in Jerusalem (*v.28, 29*). Because of the famine, historians place this story around 45-46 AD.

One minor detail not to overlook here is Luke's mention of the elders in the Jerusalem church (*v.30*). While the Jews were familiar with the concept of eldership (*Ex. 18*), this was the first mention of elders in the church. Thus, we observe a transition of church leadership from Apostles to elders. As the Apostles could not oversee every church across the Roman Empire, self-appointed elders could. Thus, later in his letters, the Apostle Paul instructed churches to choose elders (i.e., *Titus 1:5*).

Daily Reflection

While evangelism is key to the spreading of the gospel and the growth of the church, it is not the end of our great commission. Though we are to "make disciples of all nations," we are also to "teach them all that Jesus commanded" (*Matt. 28:19, 20*). In other words, we must not leave new believers with salvation only, but we must disciple them to know the Scriptures and to understand and live the Christian life.

Salvation is the first step (along with believer's baptism), but the second step is discipleship.

In your opinion, what should be included in the discipleship of a new believer?

How are you involved in the discipleship of believers? Is there more you could do?

At Peace in Prison

May 19 – Acts 12:1-25

BiAY.org | Daily Reflections NT
Day 139 – 226 Days to Go

Today in Your Reading

Despite Saul's conversion, persecution of the church continued, this time under the leadership of King Herod Agrippa (nephew of Antipas who had John the Baptist beheaded). As a zealous Jew, King Herod took aim at the Apostles themselves, believing that if the leaders were eliminated, then the Church would dissolve (v.1). As a result, James, the brother of John (one of the Sons of Thunder) was killed (v.2). He was the first of the Twelve to die for Christ.

James' death was so well-received by the Jewish people that the King arrested Peter (v.3-11). But, because of the holiday (Feast of Unleavened Bread), he imprisoned him for a few days. As Peter was a prized possession, the King ordered for him to be guarded by four squads of soldiers (a rotation of four guards every six hours). But even that was not enough to prevent God from rescuing Peter with His angel.

Once he was released from prison, Peter went to Mary's house, the mother of John Mark (writer of the book of *Mark*). The church had been praying for Peter's deliverance, yet as he stood at the gate a free man, they did not believe it was him (v.12-17). After reporting to the church of God's miraculous intervention, Peter went into hiding. In fact, we will only see Peter one more time in the book of *Acts*.

A natural question to ask here is why did the Lord spare Peter when He did not save James? We don't know the answer to that question except to say that God had His purposes. Peter would die for Christ, but it was not yet his time.

However, we must note God's judgment on His enemies. The soldiers who were guarding Peter (and may have been involved in James' murder) were executed (v.18, 19). Also, the Lord struck down King Herod with intestinal worms (v.20-23). While Satan may have success in harming God's people, the Lord will have His justice. We can be confident that He will win in the end.

There are two details to note in this passage. First, when Peter reported his escape to the followers of Christ at Mary's house, he told them to report it to James and the brethren (v.17). This James, the writer of the book of *James*, is not one of the Apostles but rather the brother of Jesus. He had become one of the elders and leaders of the church in Jerusalem.

Second, these events took place while Saul and Barnabas were in Jerusalem. They had been sent by the church in Antioch with a gift for the believers in Jerusalem (11:30). Once they had fulfilled their mission, they returned to Antioch with John Mark (v.25). As Peter faded into the background, the stories in *Acts* would revolve around Saul and Barnabas.

Daily Reflection

While this passage was amazing for many reasons, I was struck by how Peter was described in prison. "On the very night when Herod was about to bring him forward (meaning to be killed), **Peter was sleeping between two guards...**" (v.6). Even when the angel appeared, he had to poke Peter to wake him up (v.7).

What amazes me is the peace that Peter had amid his circumstances. He either believed that God would deliver him, or he was at rest knowing that he was going to die for Christ. **Either way, Peter was calm amid the crisis.** He did what the Lord had called him to do, and now he had given himself to God's will. Whatever the Lord wanted, Peter was okay with it.

Would you have been at rest in that situation? What does it require for us to be at peace then?

Lessons From a Missionary

May 20 – Acts 13:1-52

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Day 140 – 225 Days to Go

Today in Your Reading

Paul and Barnabas left Antioch to begin their first missionary journey. They took the gospel west to the island of Cyprus and then sailed north to Asia Minor. Thus, the final part of Acts 1:8 was fulfilled, as the followers of Christ were bearing witness “to the ends of the earth.”

The church at Antioch was a special place with several leaders and teachers. But rather than keeping them all in one location, the Lord called two of them — Paul and Barnabas — to take the gospel where it had not been. Rather than resist this call, the church rejoiced and commissioned them to the work (v.2, 3). Notice that believers in Antioch were not focused on what they could get from God or the church. Rather they were “ministering to the Lord” and asking Him what they could give or do and how they could serve.

We can learn a great deal from Paul and Barnabas on this trip. **First, they simply made themselves available to the Lord’s direction.** So often we get busy with life, work, and family that we are unavailable to go where the Lord leads. But Paul and Barnabas were unattached and, therefore, free to pursue His call.

Second, Paul and Barnabas had no formal plan to execute on this journey. **They simply put themselves in a position to speak on Christ’s behalf, and the Lord opened doors for them.** For example, they went into synagogues where the local Jews attended (v.5, 14). In time, they were asked to share their message (v.15). When the opportunity presented itself, Paul used it to tell others about Christ. Even Roman officials asked to hear about Jesus (v.7).

Third, **Paul and Barnabas used what was familiar to the people and related it to Christ.** For example, in Paul’s message to the Jews (v.16-41), he shared the history of Israel and ended with the Messiah, demonstrating how the prophecies foretold of the Savior. This method was effective, and many responded (v.42, 43).

Fourth, **when Paul and Barnabas met with resistance** (which we knew they would), **they did not let it stop them.** They simply “shook off the dust of their feet” and moved on to the next town (v.51). As a result, the gospel spread, and people believed in Christ (v.49, 52).

This first missionary journey provides the backdrop for the book of *Galatians* (which we will read soon). Galatia is the region in Asia Minor where Paul and Barnabas preached. The specific context to note is Paul’s message to the Jews, “Through Christ everyone who believes is freed from all things from which you could not be freed through the Law of Moses” (v.39).

Another detail to note is Paul’s warning to the Jews. When the leaders stirred up the crowd against him, he made a sobering statement, “It was necessary for the word of God to be spoken to you first, but since you repudiate it..., we are turning to the Gentiles” (v.46). Here is a pivotal moment and a fulfillment of God’s call on Paul’s life, that he would be the Lord’s instrument to preach the gospel to the Gentiles (*Acts 9:15*).

Daily Reflection

We should have great respect and admiration for those among us who drop everything to follow the Lord’s direction wherever He leads. However, **what foreign missionaries do in distant lands, we can practice here at home.** The ministry plan and strategies are the same.

Review the four lessons of a missionary. Which of these lessons are you applying in your life? Which ones have you yet to apply?
