



Walking Through the Scripture Together

May 11 - 17, 2008

Acts 9:19-31

Baby leaps

Text Acts 9:19-31 (TNIV)

19b Saul spent several days with the disciples in Damascus. **20** At once he began to preach in the synagogues that Jesus is the Son of God. **21** All those who heard him were astonished and asked, "Isn't he the man who raised havoc in Jerusalem among those who call on this name? And hasn't he come here to take them as prisoners to the chief priests?" **22** Yet Saul grew more and more powerful and baffled the Jews living in Damascus by proving that Jesus is the Messiah.

23 After many days had gone by, there was a conspiracy among the Jews to kill him, **24** but Saul learned of their plan. Day and night they kept close watch on the city gates in order to kill him. **25** But his followers took him by night and lowered him in a basket through an opening in the wall.

26 When he came to Jerusalem, he tried to join the disciples, but they were all afraid of him, not believing that he really was a disciple. **27** But Barnabas took him and brought him to the apostles. He told them how Saul on his journey had seen the Lord and that the Lord had spoken to him, and how in Damascus he had preached fearlessly in the name of Jesus. **28** So Saul stayed with them and moved about freely in Jerusalem, speaking boldly in the name of the Lord. **29** He talked and debated with the Hellenistic Jews, but they tried to kill him. **30** When the believers learned of this, they took him down to Caesarea and sent him off to Tarsus.

31 Then the church throughout Judea, Galilee and Samaria enjoyed a time of peace and was strengthened. Living in the fear of the Lord and encouraged by the Holy Spirit, it increased in numbers.

Thought

"How did you start your great missionary career, Paul?"

"I was let down through the wall in a basket and ran away!"

Actually, this is more or less what Paul himself wrote, at the end of 2 Corinthians 11, quite deliberately showing the proud Corinthians that the God he was proclaiming is the one who takes delight in standing everything on its head. All human boasting, all human pride, has to be up-ended, so that God's glory can shine through. So we shouldn't be surprised that the first chapters in what was, indeed, a great missionary career are full of plots and running away. You can almost feel the sigh of relief in verse 30, as the Jerusalem apostles and the rest finally pack Saul off by boat from Caesarea to Tarsus. Phew! That's one bit of trouble out of the way. Perhaps there was a shade of irony then, in verse 31: once he was gone, Jesus' followers could have a bit of peace.

Actually, of course, Luke means a lot more than that. There was a new energy about the place, a new spring in the step. The fact that someone like Saul of Tarsus, with the reputation he had had, had been confronted by Jesus himself, stopped in his tracks and turned around, and was now using his very considerable biblical skill and way with words to demonstrate to all that Jesus really was the Messiah — well this was bound to encourage all the Jesus-followers who heard about it.

And not just encourage them: inform them, show them more clearly how to read the scriptures, how to understand the vast sweep of God's promises on the one hand the fascinating but telling details on the other. And, in particular, this is the first time in Acts that we find Jesus being referred to with the title which became standard right across early Christianity: he is the Son of God (Acts 9:20).

To have him (Saul) of all people announcing it, demonstrating it, arguing it from scripture — it was intolerable. And so there began the sequence of plots and persecutions from which Saul was never again to be free. He runs away from Damascus. In Jerusalem he begins under heavy suspicion from the Christians and ends with a Jewish plot against his life. What is one to do with someone like that? The answer is significant. He must go back home. He needs to start where they know him. There will be pain there...but there will be missionary opportunities of the sort he must grasp. And so, not for the last time, Saul takes a ship to go preaching. The pattern of the rest of his life has been established.

NT Wright, Acts for Everyone

Small Group Discussion Guide

Lean In

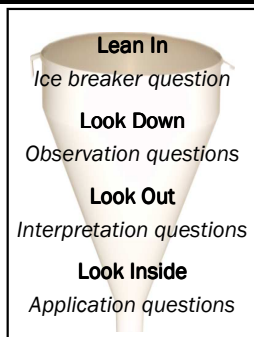
- What was one of your most embarrassing moments as a believer — a time when you took a risk and perhaps looked and felt a bit foolish?

Look Down / Look Out

- What does Saul do following his conversion experience? How did his conversion change him? How do you account for him jumping with both feet into preaching Jesus so quickly?
- What was the initial response to him in the synagogues of Damascus? Put yourself in one of those synagogues, expecting the great champion of the faith and then hearing his radical about face. How do you think you would have responded?
- How did the believers react to Saul's presence in Jerusalem? How do you think this would have affected Saul? Who "broke the ice" for him?
- How is Saul's Damascus experience repeated in Jerusalem? What do the believers there do with him? How do you think they felt at his departure?

Look Inside

- What changes did people notice in you following your conversion to Christ? How did they react to you? Disbelief? Amazement? Rejection? Anger? Confusion? Or what?
- When and with whom have you had a hard time being accepted? What happened? Who has been a Barnabas for you — befriending you when no one else would?



details, details...

He began to preach that Jesus is the Son of God

Just a side note — this is the only time in the entire book of Acts that this title for Jesus occurs. In Acts Jesus is normally called "Lord" or "Savior" or "Ruler" or "Judge" or (of course) "Christ" or Messiah. "Son of God" would have been a much more inflammatory title for Paul's Jewish audience, but it's what Paul leads with as he begins preaching in Damascus. The encounter on the Damascus road left no doubt in Paul's mind as to who Jesus is — as Paul would put it later to the Colossians: "All the fullness of Deity lived in Jesus in bodily form."

They lowered him in a basket

The persecutor becomes the persecuted but eludes his opponent's designs rather ingeniously (if ingloriously). Perhaps someone in the church had a house adjoining the wall (cf. Rahab in the Old Testament) and they lowered him in a very large basket through a window there. This basket is a *spuris* — a basket large enough for a person to crouch down into (it's the size the disciples used to gather up fragments of bread after Jesus fed the four thousand — see Matthew 15:37).

They watched the city gates...2 Corinthians 11:32-33

Aretas IV, the father-in-law of Herod Antipas, ruled over the kingdom of the Nabataean Arabs from c. 9 B.C. to A.D. 40. Why did he or the governor in Damascus want to arrest Paul? Probably because Aretas had been offended by Paul's evangelistic activity in his kingdom (Gal 1:17). Luke's account of Paul's escape (Ac 9:23-25) reveals that the Jews were watching the gates in order to kill Paul; yet here we are told that the governor under King Aretas was guarding the city in order to arrest Paul. What was the relation between the Jews and the governor? Since it seems likely that Damascus was still under Roman rule, the governor was probably the head of a semi-autonomous colony of Nabataeans in Damascus. According to this view, a coalition of Jews and Nabataeans, acting through the governor, was trying to arrest and kill Paul.

Family Discussion Guide

Day One Acts 9:19-21; Galatians 1:10-12

How has knowing and following Jesus changed your life? How have other people reacted to that change? Has it been mostly positive or negative?

Day Two Acts 9:22-25; 2 Corinthians 11:30-33

How do you think Saul felt about being lowered through the wall in a basket? Sad? Angry? Embarrassed? Disappointed? Excited about the future? Or what? How well do you handle change? Why?

Day Three Acts 9:26-27; Galatians 1:16-20

When have you had a hard time being accepted by someone or by a group? Who has been a "Barnabas"— befriending you when no one else would?

Day Four Acts 9:28-30; Galatians 1:21-24

When have you seen trouble and arguments follow someone just about everywhere? Is this always a bad thing? How do you know when you need to speak up and risk causing an argument? How can we speak in such a way that we reduce the chance of a fight?

Day Five Acts 9:31; Romans 15:4-6

How peaceful would you say your home is right now? What is the key to peace in your home and family? How can you help bring peace at home? At school?

Looking Closer

An early chronology of Saul's life

Luke's references here to what Saul did immediately after his conversion is difficult to fit in with Paul's own account of his conversion and the immediately subsequent events (see Gal 1:15-24). But these differences help substantiate Lukan authorship of Acts. Certainly no later admirer of Paul would have disregarded Paul's most important autobiographical statement about his conversion and commission and given a portrayal that can be taken as ambiguous and contradictory. But if, as seems likely, the letter to the Galatians was written before Luke himself joined Paul's missionary team, then it may very well have been the case that Luke was unfamiliar with the specific contents of Paul's earlier Galatian letter.

Of more importance, however, is the fact that the purposes of Paul in Gal 1:15-24 and Luke here are different, with these purposes affecting both the selection and shaping of each writer's presentation. Thus in his desire to assert the revelational nature of his Gentile ministry, Paul emphasized in Galatians that he was not dependent upon "any man" (Gal 1:16) for his distinctive gospel, and particularly not upon the Jerusalem apostles. Luke, however, while also interested in depicting the heaven-ordained nature of Paul's conversion and commission, is concerned here to stress the genuineness of Saul's conversion and call. This he does by speaking of the new convert's distinctly Christian proclamation in the synagogues of Damascus and his persecution by the Jews of the city because of his preaching (neither these are ruled out by Gal 1:15-24).

A likely historical reconstruction is as follows: (1) Saul's conversion and commission (9:1-19a); (2) his preaching in the synagogues of Damascus for a time immediately following his conversion (9:19b-22); (3) his prolonged residence in Arabia (Gal 1:17); (4) his return to Damascus (9:23-25); and (5) his first visit to Jerusalem as a Christian some three years after his conversion, with his subsequent travel to Caesarea, Syria, and Cilicia (9:26-30; Gal 1:18-24).

Zondervan NIV Bible Commentary