

Acts 9:20–31

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[0 : 00] Well, good morning and welcome to Holy Trinity Church. I want to add my greeting to you, especially those of you who are new, and also to those of you who are women in our congregation.

I just really want to make a last word of encouragement, if there's any way for you to get to the Women's Weekend Away. I know we already have over 145 women registered for the event. It is going to be one of those opportunities that, well, if you're not there, then it'll probably be a couple years away. So if you're relatively new to the congregation and trying to find your way with people in the neighborhood, just email Lucy Frerichs on our webpage today. She will get you in touch or go online and register today or tomorrow. It's really about the last opportunity to do so. Well, I have likened my growing love for the Book of Acts to that relatively new fascination of binge-watching.

It is a book that resembles for me a television series that provides that irresistible need to just keep pushing play.

[1 : 28] And today's text, we are taken immediately into an episode that brings before us all the fullness of Saul's early days as a Christian, especially these little vignettes provide for us the effect that becoming a follower of Jesus had upon him.

And I'm wanting to look at it in regard to what we can learn from him for ourselves. So take a look. Put it in front of you.

Push play. And the opening lines stream us into an episode where we'll see he's growing strong in his faith.

He's losing his old friends. And he's having a hard time making new ones.

He's growing in faith. That's the way last week's text finished, at least in regard to his physical growth.

[2 : 48] But this week's opening scene closes with his spiritual growth. Take a look. Verse 19, He took food, that is after becoming a follower of Jesus, a Christ follower, one who would be associated as being on the way and walking under the word of Jesus.

And it says he was strengthened. But by the close of that first scene in verse 22, it mentions again that Paul is increasing, or Saul, in all the more strength.

But by that moment, he's moved from a spiritual refreshment to a physical refreshment to spiritual strength. What was the effect on Saul when he decided to become a follower of Jesus?

Luke wants you to know, the first effect was, he was growing in strength. He was gaining strength. How? How does a follower of Jesus begin to grow?

How is their spiritual life nourished? What are the anchors for him or any who want to grow up in the fullness of the faith that is found in the word about Jesus?

[4 : 22] Well, first of all, he's in community. That's what the text says. For some days he was with the disciples at Damascus.

Now the word disciples simply is learners. The great learned one was now a learner.

And he was a learner among learners. He was with fellow learners. I was recently with Bing, Nee, and T.J.

Moore's set. And I asked them, now that we, the three of us, have been working together here for two years together as a triumvirate, we have different jokes now.

You know, what happens when a white guy, a black guy, and an Asian guy step into an elevator and the answer is simply they're having a staff meeting.

[5 : 33] And I said, what kind of church do you want to pastor? What kind of congregation do you dream about? What would the Holy Trinity Hyde Park family be characterized by?

This is something that's emerging and it's now in writing as I listen to them and learn from them and we think together. They want to pastor a church where it would be one that values the unique cultural and ethnic particularities of our diverse members to the extent that we joyfully choose the welfare of one another and a life of loving interdependence rather than isolated self-sufficiency. That's their heart. Not isolated, self-walk, Americanized living, but one that joyfully lives for the welfare of others who come from a variety of perspectives in a way in which we're actually demonstrating loving interdependence.

When Paul became a Christ follower, he sat with a local congregation in Damascus and was with them.

We talk a lot about the vision of Holy Trinity Church in regard to what we accomplish for Christ. What we will do on behalf of Christ.

[7 : 14] But the first indication of growing strong is actually learning to do life with learners. this is why the Sunday congregation is a watering hole, but the tactile sense I want you to have in our midst if you are learning to follow Jesus goes beyond a public weekly gathering but actually to an interpersonal, interdependent way of life.

Imagine. It's happening. May it happen all the more. That's the first descriptive movement in Saul's life toward physical refreshment to spiritual strength with learners.

Notice the second one though. It says, and there's a little bit of dovetailing here, he immediately proclaimed Jesus in the synagogues. He wasn't only with learners, he went to church.

Let me just take a word or two on synagogues because it's a foreign concept to many of you, especially if you're not from a Jewish background, which to this day informs the entire life of those who are following Judaism.

But if you're not from that stream, you need to know that when Solomon's temple in the far ancient world fell, a whole religious group of people no longer had a meeting place.

[9 : 06] And the question that emerges in that transitional centuries between the Old Testament and the New is how do you retain a religious worship that's collective when you no longer have a centralized place to go and you've been dispersed?

Well, what emerged was a life of the synagogues. Smaller, built structures that proliferated almost in a ubiquitous sense throughout the ancient world where those who were following Judaism would go regularly and learn and be with those who were holding on to the Torah.

There's a Greek inscription that's found from the first century that reads Theodotus who built the synagogue for the purpose of reciting the law and studying the commandments and as a hotel for those who, in a sense, were the itinerants from abroad.

The synagogue then was the town hall of what was American life. The synagogue was the place where you actually attended regularly for the purpose of studying the scriptures, learning them exactly, and collectively living it out when you left.

So that by the time you get to the New Testament, there are some archaeological works that will say there might have been as many as 360 synagogues in Jerusalem alone.

[10 : 54] Almost like the church on the corner. We already know from the text that there were at least multiple synagogues in Damascus, 135 miles north to which Paul was going when he met Jesus.

What I'm trying to tell you is that the purpose of the synagogue was a weekly commitment of people who wanted to know the word of God, wanted to understand the word of God, wanted to grow in their command of the word of God, and wanted to together live out that word in their neighborhood. It's fascinating. So the New Testament Christian community almost mirrors the life of that very world.

Josephus also claims that the synagogue permitted, they were permitting the people to leave off their other appointments. It's like you can get out of work to go to church.

Leave off their other appointments and to assemble together for the hearing of the law, learning it, not once or twice, but every week. So how does Saul begin to grow?

[12 : 12] He's living with fellow learners and he's regularly giving himself to study, knowledge, and a life that would be in conformity to the scriptures.

Let me bring it back to our own staff again. I asked Bing and TJ, what kind of church do you want to pastor? pastor. Another thing they mentioned to me was this, one in which everyone, young and old alike, desires to live under the word of Christ and therefore is eagerly attentive to the word of God

read, preached, discussed, and applied.

Well, imagine if that begins to be shaped here. If these become the emerging characteristics of our life, if they are, people will begin to grow.

That's how Saul grew. That's how we grow. Not only though was he in community, but notice another thing that helped him grow, again in this very first scene that we're just seeing, Saul's early life, he began to hold a new set of convictions.

Take a look at verse 20 again. And immediately he proclaimed Jesus in the synagogue saying he is the son of God. That's a brand new conviction for Saul.

[13:50] Jesus is the son of God. Not only did he begin to believe certain things about Jesus, but he began to herald it.

He held it and he heralded it. Jesus, son of God. Let me pause on that. What does it mean to believe Jesus is the son of God?

Well, typically we might think and wrongly so that Jesus was God. God. That would be God the son. But the son of God is a phrase in the scriptures that is first used of Adam. In other words, a person who was in a unique and special relationship with God.

The son of God moves from someone like Adam as his rightful representative in the world to Israel. Exodus 19 or Exodus 4, Moses is told, Israel will be my son.

[15:03] And so then, when Jesus finally comes on the scene as the son of God, it means, I am confessing that Jesus is the rightful heir, the one that proceeds from the father, the one who is the righteous man to whom all rule is rightly given.

Whereas then, Jesus would use the phrase the son of man to equate himself with God himself. For the ancient of days in Daniel 7 gives his kingdom to the one who is a throne like the son of man. So, in the scriptures, the son of man has this divine connotation and the son of God has this human righteous heir of all the Lord. This is what the early confession of the church was.

This is the conviction you need to hold. Do you believe Jesus was the son of God? Look across the page back at the Ethiopian eunuch's confession, verse 37, when he said, what prevents me from being baptized?

At that moment in the text, some of the manuscripts, which aren't included in the translation given to us here, but perhaps in a note below, you will find a tradition of biblical text that read, and Philip said, if you believe with all your heart, you may, and he replied, I believe that Jesus Christ is the son of God.

[16:36] So the phrase son of God is the earliest confessional phrase to what it meant to be a member of the church. So that 1 John will actually say, the whole issue is whether or not you believe Jesus is the son of God.

So Paul is now holding the words that the earliest members of the church of Jesus Christ would have had to confess upon being entered into the community.

Did you know that today, as we had 16 people across us today, one of the questions they have to respond to takes us all the way back to this very thing. Do you believe that Jesus Christ is the son of God, savior of sinners, and do you place your trust and faith in him alone for your salvation as he is offered in the gospel?

What's happening today is we here at Holy Trinity are still holding the very phrase that Saul holds by way of a newfound conviction.

Jesus righteous one, Jesus, the only representative person who bestows the life of God upon the world that he has created.

[18:03] And so this is what he began to do. Not only did he hold it, but it says that he proclaimed it. And it's one of these words that really kind of says he heralded it. So here he was growing in his faith.

What was the effect? And believe me, I'll move quickly on this. The effect of this was that he was increasing in strength. He was in a sense surprising all of those around him.

That's verse 21. When a man began to give himself to other learners, when he began to go regularly to learn, when he began to hold new convictions, when he began to speak them verbally, it surprised everyone who had known him before.

Because this was a changed man. It startled them. Not only did it startle them, it strengthened him. That's what Luke wants you to see in the episode.

What was the effect of becoming a follower of Jesus for Saul? Gaining strength. He almost looks like a little Jesus here, doesn't he?

[19 : 23] I don't know if you're familiar with the Gospels, but Jesus as a young boy is in the temple and he's taking in all this material and he's astounding the others with his awareness and then Luke says that he was growing in strength and in stature.

Paul, Saul is just following in the way of his master. In other words, it was beginning to stick. If you're watching a television, it fades to black. The commercial comes, the return to your episode. What was the effect upon Saul as an early Christian?

Not only was he gaining strength, but verses 23 through 25, he also was losing friends. Losing old friends.

When many days had passed, the Jews plotted to kill him, but their plot became known to Saul. They were watching the gates day and night in order to kill him, but his disciples took him by night and let him down through an opening in the wall, lowering him in a basket.

[20 : 44] I've been watching a few of these binge television series. Sometimes when you come back after the break, they're in the lower left-hand corner in block letters, tells you kind of where you are.

this one is obviously still saying Damascus, but let me tell you what I think is also here. Right between verses 22 and 23, I think there's another statement that you wouldn't know.

It says three years later. Now the reason I think that is we have a letter from Paul called the letter to the church at Galatia, in which he recounts those early years of his life as a Christian.

And he will reiterate there that while he was converted on the road to Damascus and he was originally strengthened, that he left and went down to Arabia for the better part of about three years. And then it says in verse 18 that he returned to Damascus before finding his way to Jerusalem. So it's possible that when you get to verse 23 you are looking at a scene that is the same location and setting Damascus but Saul three years later.

[22 : 13] And notice look, verse 25 perhaps he's even returning with some of his disciples, his own learners, some people that he had been teaching along the way.

But what it relays to you is that while he is there they are plotting to kill him. Gaining strength, losing friends.

I've seen this happen so often for people in our own congregation who begin to become followers of Jesus. Whether it's family or those they ran with in the past, all of a sudden they're not with you anymore.

Here they're taking up a way to actually kill him. In other words, becoming a Christian brings relational disruption.

Are you familiar with this new thing going on called disruptive technology? NASDAQ actually has a list now of the 50 most prominent disruptors.

[23 : 32] It's a term. So a disruptor is one who is really forward thinking, out of the box, and they begin to challenge the status quo and the large market-making powers.

Paul is the ultimate religious disruptor. All of a sudden, he's losing old friends because he has a new word on the street.

I just want to say that for some of you, if you are considering becoming a follower of Christ, not only do you need to give yourself to fellow learners, you need to know now that it's very possible you begin to lose old friends.

He only got out by way of escape. They let him down through an opening in the wall, put him in a bread basket. Must have been a pretty strong weave.

Or maybe he was a small, light-weighted man. losing old friends is never fun.

[24 : 53] Paul knew what it was to walk alone. Not only that, last scene, verse 26, he was having a hard time finding new ones.

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. Strong words.

Not that they wondered, not that they wanted a hearing. No, they disbelieved. Paul believes in Jesus. They disbelieve his confession. They thought his profession was a fake.

They thought that somehow he was just an infiltrator into their local community that he might actually do them harm. followers of Jesus early in their life have a season where you're actually trying to find new friends.

This is what's there for him. He found it tough. He had cut ties with old friends. He was having a difficult time establishing the ties that bind with new friends.

[26 : 07] And so he's in this swirling moment of isolation. This swirling moment of isolation relationally. Thank God for Barnabas.

Verse 27, 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.

So he went in and out among them at Jerusalem literally in a sense being bold in the name of the Lord.

Barnabas is an early adopter. This is a word for you. I want to pastor a church that is filled with men and women who are early adopters on the faith of others who believe that God actually changes lives.

Who believe that when someone begins to follow Jesus there may be a lot more yet down the road. There may be a lot of mess along the way. They may be like a little puppy that's so adorable but keeps!

[27 : 19] leaking everywhere they go and you got to clean up after them but I would like to see people who actually adopt in faith those who are professing Christ as they begin to learn.

That's Barnabas. What a wonderful thing. And notice the church often gets it wrong. Here are the big power brokers in Jerusalem Peter and the boys behind that door who won't allow the guy to become a member because they don't believe him until someone can bridge that world for them. it's a sad commentary on the early apostles who thought that Jesus could change their life but weren't quite sure he could do it for someone else.

So he begins now to finally find his way and notice verse 29 the disruptor element of Paul comes out and he spoke and disputed against the Hellenists and now they're seeking to kill him.

Everywhere Paul goes he's beginning to fulfill those words that Ananias told him at his conversion from God namely how much he was going to have to suffer in light of the name.

[28 : 57] And so the Jews remember his own guys in Damascus the Jews were turning against him and now the Greek speaking Jews in Jerusalem are also turning against him but thank God at least he had enough in Barnabas and a few others to say you know what time to get out of town and so he goes and they send him down to Caesarea which I love because we already know that that's where Philip landed and I like to imagine Saul coming into Caesarea speculatively under the protection of one like Philip who's already himself given himself to Gentile mission and then from there he boards a boat and heads up the coast into Tarsus his own hometown and contemplates what will happen for his life work that's the effect of becoming a Christian on Saul gaining strength by living in community and beginning to articulate new convictions losing old friends and feeling like you're isolated and on way of escape having a hard time finding new friends but all you need are one or two one or two and if you have one or two you can grow from there and begin to find your way with

Christ don't you love the end and with this I'm done 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 we haven't seen a summary statement like that since before Stephen came on the scene and ended up getting stoned in other words there was probably about a three to three and a half year run where this spasmodic flare of Christianity emerged and kind of outfires of persecution but then suddenly and Paul is the main disruptor but finally when we get Paul back in his own hometown get Paul out of Damascus get Paul out of Jerusalem all of a sudden there must have been a little window where the church had peace well may that peace be ours may the comfort of the Holy

Spirit be yours may there be multiples of men and women even here today who determine as a result of the text I'm in I'm in I want to be baptized and become a member of a new community and family I'm in even if it means the loss of old friends I'm in even if it means I'm not readily or initially finding it easy to get new friends I'm in and I'm looking for one or two others here who will come alongside me and help me grow so it was for Saul may it be for us all our heavenly father we enjoy these episodes in

Acts where we move from one stunning image to the next and today as we see this scene this episode come to a close I pray for many who are here especially those or anyone who's been hardened to Christian community or reticent to verbally proclaim Jesus as the unique son enable

them to do that and enable us to be the congregation you would have us before them in Jesus name amen Ž Ž