



Central Peninsula Church

Catalog No.
1307-17
Acts 9:19b-31
Mark Mitchell
April 22, 2007

First Steps of Faith

SERIES: *Acts: The Rest of the Story*

The beginning of any endeavor is a perilous time. Think about it: Babies are most vulnerable during just the first few hours of life; airplanes are more likely to crash on takeoff than at any other time; marriages can be ruined for good in the first weeks or months of the relationship; and the vast majority of new businesses fail within their first year. The early days of any new venture are the most risky, and getting off to a good start is crucial.

There's a story in Acts about Paul's first steps as a Christian, when he was still going by the name "Saul." Luke tells us what happened right after Saul's conversion on the road to Damascus. We often study the events of his conversion, but sometimes skip this passage that tells what happened immediately after his conversion; in the transition years between Saul the persecutor and Paul the apostle.

This story not only shows us the elements of a good beginning, but how to start the Christian life in such a way that will lay a foundation for a lifetime of growth. Of course, some of you began a long time ago. For you, this story will challenge you to think through and examine whether or not you've drifted away from some of those foundational elements that keep you strong and effective in the long haul.

We last saw Saul in the days after his conversion in the home of a guy named Judas. His friend Ananais baptized him and introduced him to some of his friends in Damascus. Let's pick it up at the middle of v.19b.

"Now for several days he was with the disciples who were at Damascus and immediately he began to proclaim Jesus in the synagogues, saying, 'He is the Son of God.' All those hearing him continued to be amazed, and were saying, 'Is this not he who in Jerusalem destroyed those who called on this name, and who had come here for the purpose of bringing them bound before the chief priests?' But Saul kept increasing in strength and confounding the Jews who lived at Damascus by proving that this Jesus is the Christ. When many days had elapsed, the Jews plotted together to do away with him, but their plot became known to Saul. They were also watching the gates day and night so that they might put him to death but his disciples took him by

night and let him down through an opening in the wall, lowering him in a large basket. When he came to Jerusalem, he was trying to associate with the disciples; but they were all afraid of him, not believing that he was a disciple. But Barnabas took hold of him and brought him to the apostles and described to them how he had seen the Lord on the road, and that He had talked to him, and how at Damascus he had spoken out boldly in the name of Jesus. And he was with them, moving about freely in Jerusalem, speaking out boldly in the name of the Lord. And he was talking and arguing with the Hellenistic Jews; but they were attempting to put him to death. But when the brethren learned of it, they brought him down to Caesarea and sent him away to Tarsus" (Acts 9:19b-30).

I. The principle of calling.

Notice how Saul doesn't waste any time. Immediately he goes into the synagogues and starts preaching about Jesus. And everyone was amazed. "Isn't this the guy who was hunting down Christians in Jerusalem? Didn't he come here with papers authorizing him to arrest some of those same Christians and bring them back to the chief priests? How can this same guy now be on their side? It doesn't make sense!" But Saul kept at it. He grew stronger and stronger in his faith and his impact. Luke says he proclaimed Jesus as "*the Son of God*" and he was able to "*prove that Jesus was the Christ (Messiah).*" We see that his conversion resulted in a new calling.

We almost get the impression here that Saul spent just a few weeks in Damascus and then headed off to Jerusalem. Verse 19 says that he was in Damascus for "several days." Verse 23 says he didn't leave until "many days elapsed." This is where it helps to look at how Paul described this same period in the book of Galatians. In Galatians 1 Paul says that this chapter of his life took place over a three year period and that at some point during this time he went to Arabia, which actually wasn't all that far away from Damascus. We know that this time in Arabia was important for Saul as the Lord met with him there and taught him. I'm sure he studied the Scripture and began to see the OT in a whole new light, pointing

to Jesus. This was a time of preparation for Saul.

But then he came back to Damascus and things began to heat up. There was a plot against his life and he barely escaped by being lowered through an opening in the wall in a large basket. He went to Jerusalem and we see that he had a ministry there just as he did in Damascus. Verse 28 says he was **“speaking out boldly in the name of the Lord.”**

The first thing we learn about Saul’s beginning is the principle of calling. His conversion resulted in a calling. Not all of us have the same calling as Saul. He was an Apostle. But all of us are called, and we’re called from the very start. Sometimes people talk about their coming to Christ and they say, “But I’m not ready yet to tell anyone about it. I’m just going to lay low for awhile. I don’t want to ruffle any feathers. I don’t really know what I’m talking about yet anyway, so I’ll just stay silent.” But we can’t stay silent. And we shouldn’t. One of the advantages a newer believer has is all those friendships he brings with him into the Christian life. Certainly, some of those friendships will change, but those friendships are opportunities to share about your new relationship with Jesus. Just tell them what Saul told them: Jesus has changed my life. He’s the Son of God.

Remember the Samaritan woman and what she did after she discovered Jesus was the Messiah? She ran into town and announced to all her friends, **“Come, see a man who told me all the things that I have done; this is not the Christ, is it?”** (Jn.4:29). As a result of her, many Samaritans believed. Another example is Andrew. Andrew met Jesus and then he went and found his brother, Simon Peter, and he said, **“We have found the Messiah.”** And then it says, **“He brought him to Jesus”** (Jn.1:41-42). You see, these weren’t experts. They didn’t say, “Oh we can’t tell anyone about Jesus because we’re just starting out here and we’ll mess it up. What if they ask us something we can’t answer? I’ll just let the experts talk.” You see, sometimes novices make the best witnesses, because they haven’t learned all the goofy Christian jargon that so often gets in the way of talking to regular people.

The principle of calling tells us that becoming a follower of Christ involves a calling to bear witness for Christ; to serve Christ.

II. The principle of community.

The second principle for starting well is the principle of community. Throughout this period of Saul’s life we see how he had become a part of a

new community of people who like him had met the Risen Lord.

Of course, it started with Ananais. This guy just doesn’t get enough credit. I’ve heard of St. Peter and St. Thomas and St. Francis and St. Joseph, but there ought to be a St. Ananais! He’s the one who found Saul, blind and bewildered after his conversion experience. He’s the one who said those tender words, **“Brother Saul, the Lord Jesus, who appeared to you on the road, has sent me so that you might regain your sight and be filled with the Holy Spirit”** (9:17). Ananais shows us that whatever divided us before we came to Christ is superseded by that which unites us as brothers and sisters in Christ.

Then Ananais no doubt introduced Saul to the church at Damascus. Verse 19 says he was with the disciples who were there. He hung out with them. He learned from them. He worshipped with them. He ate with them. It was some of those disciples who helped him when he needed to escape. There is an interesting phrase in v.25. It says **“his disciples took him by night and let him down through an opening in the wall.”** After three years, Saul was already in a position where he was discipling others. And those disciples were there for him when he needed help. I love how resourceful they were. They could have said, “Well, Brother Saul, we’re sorry that people want you dead, but what can we do? God’s in charge. Let’s just stand by and trust him.” No! They said, “Hey, we had better think of something real fast or Brother Saul is going to go to heaven early. And we’d like him around for a while. So how can we sneak him out of here?” That’s what Christians do for each other. That’s being in community.

But that wasn’t exactly what he experienced when he got to Jerusalem, was it? Verse 28 says he was trying to associate with the disciples there. You see, Saul knew that they were all part of one church. He knew that the Apostles had laid a foundation for the church and he wanted to build only on that. But the believers in Jerusalem weren’t so sure. Luke says they were afraid of him and they didn’t believe that he was a disciple. They thought Saul had gone underground and was acting as sort of double agent for the enemy. Imagine how hard this must have been for Saul. He had been serving Christ for three years in Damascus, and now he was being treated like an enemy. Sometimes Christians disappoint us, don’t they? Sometimes the very people we look to for acceptance and support turn their back on us, don’t they?

That’s why we need guys like Barnabas. We first met Barnabas back in chapter 4 when he sold a piece of land and gave the proceeds of the sale to the Apostles for distribution to those in need. Originally his name was Joseph, but he got the nickname “Barnabas” because it

means “Son of Encouragement.” Barnabas was an encourager. That’s what he does here with Saul. He had heard all about Saul’s ministry up in Damascus and he trusted Saul so he took him by the hand and brought him to the Apostles. He’s like the fullback blocking for the halfback. Galatians tells us that he brought Saul specifically to Peter and James. Barnabas stood up for Saul and spoke on his behalf, risking his own reputation.

There are times when all of us have needed a Barnabas in our lives. But how often have we been a Barnabas? How often have we been willing to risk our own reputation to help an excluded brother or sister in Christ? When you come to church, do you look for people like Saul who might feel excluded or out of place? Do you take them by the hand and try to help them get to know people? Some of you are students. There are kids in your youth group that you wouldn’t be caught dead with at school. I want to challenge you in that. What’s more important—you being cool or being a Barnabas to someone who needs it?

As a result of Barnabas, Saul was free to preach the gospel in Jerusalem. But it wasn’t long before the Hellenistic Jews were trying to put him to death. And so, once again, as in Damascus, v.30 says that some of the brethren learned of their assassination plot and brought Saul down to Caesarea and sent him away to his hometown of Tarsus. Again, we see how this community looks out for one another.

The principle of community says that when you become a follower of Christ you become a part of a community. You hang out with this community. In times of crisis and need, you help each other in this community. Sometimes you even have to risk your own reputation by identifying with someone in this community.

I was thinking just this past week about how being a part of this community of CPC has impacted me. This past week I had a performance review and the elders were very kind to me. They told me that my preaching was effective and making a difference and that meant the world to me because I work hard at it. But they also reminded me that when I joined the staff here over twenty years ago that wasn’t one of my strengths. And I thought about all those sermons I preached in those early years which many of you had to endure. But somehow the people of this church knew that they were investing in someone; and allowing someone to develop their gifts was more important than being slick. It’s a hard balance to keep as a community, especially as we get larger, because you want things to be done well but I’m so thankful that this community was patient with as I took my first steps as a preacher. That has changed my life.

If that was important for me as a young pastor, how

much more important is that for baby Christians. We all know babies can only develop into healthy adults through interaction with loving and caring people. Without that, they can become sociopaths. This is something we have to continually work at. It’s something that all of us are responsible for. What kind of community are we? How do we express our commitment and our love for one another? How much of our own safety and comfort are we willing to risk for a young believer to develop? How resourceful are we in all of that? Would we have the guts and the creativity to lower an endangered brother in a basket through an opening in the wall?

III. The principle of cost.

The third principle for starting well is the principle of cost. First, there is a death threat against Saul’s life and he escapes by the skin of his teeth. You wonder how that would have felt to Saul. Actually, he gives us a hint over in 2 Cor. 11:30-33. Paul is talking about his own weakness. He says if he will boast about anything he will not boast about his strengths but about his weakness. He says, **“If I have to boast, I will boast of what pertains to my weakness. The God and Father of the Lord Jesus, He who is blessed forever, knows that I am not lying. In Damascus the ethnarch under Aretas the king was guarding the city of the Damascenes in order to seize me, and I was let down in a basket through a window in the wall, and so escaped his hands.”** So Paul saw this as something that revealed how weak and small he really was. It was something which forced him to depend on God’s strength because his own strength was gone.

Then when he gets to Jerusalem he’s shunned not just by the Jews, but by the very community he identified with—the church. When he’s finally accepted and free to preach the gospel to the Jews, the people he felt he had the most to say to, they devise a plot to kill him. In Acts 22:17-21 Paul says that during this time he was praying in the temple when God said to him, **“Make haste, and get out of Jerusalem quickly, because they will not accept your testimony about Me.”** And then Paul said, **“Lord, they themselves understand that in one synagogue after another I used to imprison and beat those who believed in you. And when the blood of your witness Stephen was being shed, I also was standing by approving, and watching out for the cloaks of those who were slaying him.”** In other words, “I’m the right guy for this job, God! You need me here!” But God said to Paul, **“Go! For I will send you far away to the Gentiles.”** So

he goes back to his hometown of Tarsus. Most scholars believe that Saul spent about TEN years in Tarsus, completely out of the limelight. And do you know what happened after Saul left? Look at v.31. **“So the church throughout all Judea and Galilee and Samaria enjoyed peace, being built up; and going on in the fear of the Lord and in the comfort of the Holy Spirit, it continued to increase.”** If I were Saul I would kind of hope that after I left everything would fall apart. But it didn't fall apart; rather it thrived. And for ten years Saul lives in virtual obscurity, no doubt feeling like God had put him on the shelf.

We wonder how all of this must have felt to Saul. He had great aspirations to make a difference for Christ. But everywhere he went trouble seemed to follow like white on rice. Every believer, especially new ones, need to understand that this is part of the cost of being a Christian. Someone has said, “We've smoothed the cross and sanded it and polished it and hung it in our sanctuaries and forgotten what it means. We fashioned it out of gold and silver and hang it around our necks, but have forgotten what it means.” We invite someone to become a Christian and we want them to know that God has a wonderful plan for their life, but they also need to know that there will be a cost. Saul understood that. Do we understand that?

I heard a story that took place about a year ago in Athens. Athens is part of the "Refugee Highway," where people from around the world pass through on the road to a better life. In May 2006, a missionary in Athens reported what happened to an Iranian man identified as "M." In 2003, everything "M" knew was destroyed by an earthquake measuring 7.45 on the Richter scale. He was tortured by the question of why something like this would happen. "M" went to live with relatives in Afghanistan, got married, and had a daughter. But he was still filled with despair. Leaving his family behind, he headed west and ended up in Athens, staying with more relatives. Though he and all his family were Muslim, "M" became interested in Christianity, finding himself strangely moved by the sight of the crosses he saw decorating the Orthodox churches in the city. He was given a Bible and started reading. Since his relatives forbade such a thing, "M" used a tiny flashlight to read during the night after his uncles were asleep. He studied the Bible this way for two years. Finally "M" realized God was calling him

to be born again. He contacted the refugee ministry center, declaring his faith in Christ and asking for more information.

On Sunday, May 7, 2006, he set his alarm for 6 a.m. He wanted to spend time reading his Bible and praying that morning, because on that day he was to be baptized at a fellowship with other Iranian believers. But "M's" cousin had discovered the plan. Before "M's" alarm went off, the cousin boiled water in a saucepan and poured it on "M" while he slept, scalding both thighs and one arm. "M" came to the baptism anyway. Standing before those gathered, the burns on his arms clearly visible, "M" declared, "No matter what they do to me, I will love Jesus." After the baptism, "M" said he felt like standing in the center of the city of Athens and shouting to everybody, "I belong to Christ!"

CONCLUSION

It doesn't matter if you are just starting out in your faith or just trying to finish well, you need to remember that you have a calling to live out to proclaim that you belong to Christ. You have to remember that the only way you can really live that out is in the midst of a supportive community of believers. And you have to remember that there will be a cost.

©2007 Central Peninsula Church, Foster City, CA