

Words and Deeds: Band on the Run
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Psalm 31:1-5; Matthew 10:16-26; Acts 9:23-31

Friends, today's final Scripture reading is from Acts 9:23-31. "After many days had gone by, the Jews conspired to kill Saul, but he learned of their plan. Day and night they kept close watch on the city gates in order to kill him. But his followers took him by night and lowered him in a basket through an opening in the wall. 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. 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. So Saul stayed with them and moved about freely in Jerusalem, speaking boldly in the name of the Lord. He talked and debated with the Grecian Jews, but they tried to kill him. When the brothers learned of this, they took him down to Caesarea and sent him off to Tarsus. Then the church throughout Judea, Galilee and Samaria enjoyed a time of peace. It was strengthened; and encouraged by the Holy Spirit, it grew in numbers, living in the fear of the Lord."

I had a Garfield T-shirt when I was younger that said, "It's hard to be humble when you're as great as I am." It's a pretty audacious statement, isn't it? But that's the motto of the modern world. You are great. If you're not great, there are a couple of options: either you need coaching to help you recognize your greatness you've been ignoring, or you need a self-help book that will help you unlock the greatness within. The ultimate way to be great is to be yourself, not a role someone wants you to follow. How many Disney movies taught us that, or that we had a prince or princess inside just waiting to get out?

In ancient Greek and Roman society, humility was not a virtue. They didn't believe everyone is great; they believed you had to take what you wanted and master it. The Roman Empire didn't come about through humility, but you could say it fell through hubris – through the emperors believing their own press that they were in fact gods on earth. You can see Christianity's effect on many parts of Western culture, but one of the biggest is that we still value some humility.

Humility and trust are two key issues we're going to be looking at in today's passage. We may be challenged by the picture we will see when the passage starts pointing at our lives. And yet we'll also find encouragement as God continues to build His church.

So just a quick recap – Saul, the man most responsible for the persecution of the early church, was heading to Damascus to stop the spread of Christianity to the far reaches of Jewish territory. Near the outskirts of the city, he was confronted by Jesus in a vision that left him blind for three days. By the faithfulness of the disciple called Ananias, God restored Saul's sight. And before you knew it, Saul was preaching in the Damascus synagogue that Jesus was the Son of God – the rightful Messiah the Jewish people had been waiting on for centuries. It's actually the first time in the book of Acts that Jesus was referred to by that title - "Son of God." Already, there was a clear understanding that Jesus was not just human but divine.

You'll also remember that Saul was incredibly convincing, to the point that people were baffled that this was the same man who had so recently been persecuting Christians so viciously. But his knowledge of Scripture was so impressive that Luke writes that Saul “proved” Jesus was the Christ. There was really no question that once a Jewish person heard Paul's presentation, they knew that the Scriptures pointed them easily towards Jesus.

Unsurprisingly, the Jewish leadership in Damascus realizes just what a threat Saul poses to them. If we read Paul's letter to the Galatians and Acts together, we understand that “after many days” refers to a period of likely about three years that Saul spread the gospel in and around the area of Damascus. He has become a real thorn in their side and now, with a lot of converts on his side, he threatens their power and authority. They want to see Saul out of the picture. They have spies watching the city gates so that when Saul leaves, they can kill him. Now keep in mind that a city like Damascus only has one way out – the city gates are there to protect the city from marauders or armies from other nations. It's the perfect trap.

Thankfully, news gets around and Saul gets word of the plan. Late one night, some of the people who had come to know Jesus through his preaching get him out in a basket let down through an opening in the city wall. Safely past the crew ready to kill him at the gates, Saul finally returns Jerusalem to meet the believers there.

Now this is where I wanted us to think of humility and seeing our position as Christians through the right lenses. Here's Saul, on top of the world. In his letter to the Galatians, Saul describes himself as “advancing in Judaism well beyond many of my contemporaries.” He was “zealous,” he said, for the ways of his Jewish ancestors. On the road to Damascus, Saul was on top of the world – a shoo-in to be a part of the leadership of Israel, the Sanhedrin. He was powerful, influential, able to get the high priest's recommendation and introduction. He was ready to go through those city gates as the chief inquisitor for the Jewish faith.

When he leaves the city, he leaves in a basket, dropped down from the side of the city wall in the dead of night, hoping beyond hope to avoid the deadly plans of his former friends and colleagues. He comes with a brigade of men; he leaves alone. He arrives in the peak of health; he leaves having experienced blindness at the hand of God that leaves his sight forever changed. And he's lost everyone's trust – his former compatriots consider him a traitor to the Jewish faith, and the church still can't believe that this guy who terrorized the believers is now one of them.

As we read in his letters, Saul is not naturally a humble person. Yet he is humbled in his experience with Jesus, and from here on out, Saul has to rely on the grace of the Holy Spirit just to keep him alive. With all this knowledge he has, he says in 1 Corinthians 2 that he resolved not to speak in wisdom or persuasive words but only with demonstrating power in the Holy Spirit.

That's one of the things I'd like us to think about today: *is Christianity primarily a means to self-improvement, or is it the way of losing ourselves in Christ and gaining salvation in the process?* Because Saul lost everything he had when he became a Christian. Everything he thought he knew about Jesus was proven wrong in an instant. It's not even clear how much of a choice Saul had in the matter. One moment with the risen Jesus changed him forever.

He follows in a long line of people who wind up humbled at God's feet. Remember John the Baptist? His followers became worried when more people started going to Jesus than to him. Do you remember his reply to them? "He must increase; I must decrease. He must become greater; I must become less." He knew that he was the voice in the wilderness preparing the way for Jesus. Once Jesus arrived and began his ministry, John's role is finished.

Jesus Himself always took the path of a servant. He ate and drank with the dregs of society. He stopped to talk to women and Samaritans in His path. When He entered into Jerusalem, He didn't ride in on a steed like a king; He rode in on a donkey, a symbol of peace and subservience. He died a criminal's death to save us. Jesus did not aspire to become great in the eyes of the world; all He desired was to please His Father. He showed us the path of humility – not saying we are worthless, for He was the King of the World. As C.S. Lewis aptly put it, "Humility is not thinking less of yourself, but thinking of yourself less."

Look, the reality of the self-improvement world is around us every single week. We meet in a Weight Watchers, people! It's all about losing weight so that you can be great – as if greatness were determined by a scale. Oprah, the queen of self-help, owns 10% of the company and has made over \$110 million dollars from it since 2015!

We so want our circumstances to improve that we throw money at anything that promises a return for our investment. And the church growth folks know what sells. They tell us, have courses on money management; have courses on self-worth; have courses on how to have a great marriage. All "biblically-based," of course; follow the biblical principle we've ripped out of context and it's sure to work.

But Saul did not preach your best life now, because he certainly wasn't living it! He preached on giving because we as Christians have a responsibility with the funds God has given us, but he didn't teach money management principles and how to get a return on your 401K. His marital advice was for husbands to love their wives as Christ loved the church and to give themselves up for them, and for women to submit to their husbands – neither idea popular in our day and age.

Ultimately, our calling is not to become better people. Our calling is to become like Christ, which means dying to ourselves entirely and following Him and His example instead. That is so tough precisely because it is so humbling, because we are constantly aware of our inadequacy, how much we aren't like Jesus. And yet it's also incredibly rewarding, because in finding out that we don't have what it takes, we simultaneously find that God has more than enough for us to accomplish any task He sets in front of us. Humbling that we cannot do it on our own, no matter how many self-help books we read? Sure. But we serve a God worth bragging about. The better phrase is not, "It's hard to be humble when you're as great as I am." Instead, the better phrase is, "It's hard to be humble about Jesus when He's as great as He is."

For the remainder of our time together, I want to switch gears into the second section of this passage. Because if the first section is humbling, the second section is frustrating, even discouraging for Saul. He's preached through the region of Damascus; he's made converts; he's suffered for the faith already. And now everybody down south in Jerusalem's afraid of him!

As we talked about last week with the reluctance of Ananias, this is totally understandable. Saul's reputation preceded him. He was a bitter enemy of Jesus before Damascus. We have no idea just how many Christians suffered and even died because of the persecution he brought upon the church. So everyone in Jerusalem is scared to death of him. He tries to join the disciples – probably through references from the believers in Damascus – but there's no way they're going to let him in. It's too much of a risk.

Then comes along Barnabas. You might remember him – he showed up briefly in Acts 4. He sold a field and gave the money to the apostles for their work. His given name was Joseph, but the apostles gave him the name Barnabas, which means “son of encouragement.” And Barnabas steps up and acts just like his name would expect. He not only takes Saul to the apostles, the “inner circle,” but he explains exactly what happened to Saul and why he's had this radical change. Based on Barnabas' testimony, he's accepted into the community, and he preaches the Word of God boldly.

Next week, we're going to move away from Saul's story for just a little bit, and this is why: Saul got on the wrong side of another set of people. This time, it's the Grecian Jews. Now to understand this, you've got to know that Saul is a Roman citizen. He's from Tarsus, which is a Greco-Roman city far north of Jerusalem. Saul not only knew Hebrew culture, he knew Greek and Roman culture from being raised there. He understands what it is to be a Jew who's had to prove himself in the Hebrew culture of Jerusalem, where if you're not from Judea, that part of Israel surrounding Jerusalem, you're suspect. So he goes to these folks being native to their way of thinking. But it doesn't matter – he sets them off so badly that they try to kill him too!

Probably fearing for his safety, the believers take him about 35 miles north of Jerusalem to Caesarea, where he could catch a boat back to his hometown. Tarsus is about 570 miles away from Jerusalem by road, but considerably less by boat. They get him to safety, and then things settle down a bit.

And notice how this section ends: “the church throughout Judea, Galilee and Samaria enjoyed a time of peace.” By this point, the church has been established throughout all of Israel and the Samaritan lands. Word of Jesus has spread and the church is gaining ground. Not every Jewish person has heard the news by a long shot, but the ancient territory God gave to His people has received the Messiah. They are encouraged by the Holy Spirit, they are growing, they are strengthened. In the weeks to come, we'll see more of Peter following in the steps of Christ and then being called to move the church beyond the borders of Judiasm.

But I want to touch back on Barnabas and what he did. Unlike Ananias last week, Barnabas doesn't have a vision from God about Saul. He listens, he prays, he pays attention, and he sees in Saul a changed man. He is not worried about who Saul used to be; he sees the man Saul is now. He is secure in his faith and believes everyone warrants a second chance – as we'll see later in the book of Acts. And so he stakes his reputation on Saul's conversion. He is an encouragement to Saul and becomes Saul's way into meeting the apostles – a group that Saul joins by the grace of God and God's calling on his life.

Now the circumstances are different, but my question for us all this week is the same as last week's question: *who's your Saul?* Last week, we saw that question from the perspective of Ananias. We asked, who is it that might be transformed in your life if you treated them with grace and forgiveness instead of fear and unforgiveness you might have towards them? This week, we're asking "who's your Saul?" from the point of view of Barnabas.

Who is it that needs spiritual encouragement in your sphere of influence? Who is it that you should be standing up for, who's been wrongly judged and needs another opportunity? Who around you needs a second chance to be judged on their life now versus their life in the past? Who might need a good word from you to move past their current situation into a future of hope in Christ?

If you don't know somebody now, it's likely you'll know someone soon. Because our society is fleeing from Christianity and its values quickly, our culture has within the last few years become a place of unforgiveness on all sides, conservative and liberal alike. People are determined to get even and to make long-past grievances into major issues.

Perhaps you remember the baker Jack Phillips, out in Colorado, who was sanctioned by a civil rights commission because his Christian conscience told him he could not bake a cake celebrating a same-sex marriage. He won the case at the Supreme Court in early June. In late June, the civil rights commission charged him again with not baking a cake celebrating a transgender's transition from male to female. Those of us on the front lines standing up for our faith will need encouragement.

On the other side, James Gunn, the director of the Guardians of the Galaxy movies, was fired from the third movie for vulgar and offensive tweets he wrote as an edgy comedian fifteen years ago, which he apologized about profusely nearly a decade ago. His films, which he wrote, were about a crew of misfits who regularly did the wrong things on their own and made stupid decisions who wound up finding a family together. Ironic? Forgiveness is becoming hard to come by, and so is encouragement.

You don't know what it might mean to someone at your work that you're praying for them and they know you actually mean it. You don't know what it means to someone at school who is dangerously close to the edge who just needs someone to talk to them and say, "Don't worry – I'll help you on the next test." You don't know what it will mean for someone when you say, "I believe in you," when everyone else doesn't.

In our Bible study this week, we took a brief look at the Great Commission in Matthew 28 – Jesus' final call to His followers to go and make disciples of all nations. In that passage, Jesus first says that all authority on heaven and earth has been given to Him – an encouragement that He has the right and power to send them on their mission. After He tells them their task, He confides, "And lo, I will be with you always, even to the end of the age." Sure, the work will be harder than they can imagine, but He encourages them – they don't go it alone. Jesus is the example for our encouragement of others.

This week, go in peace to love and serve the Lord. As you do, remember – you are a humble servant of Jesus who already served you and gave His life for you. Don't let your pride get in the way of your service. And may God put someone in your way that needs you to be a Barnabas, a son of encouragement, to them – and may you be encouraged in the process.