

The Bridge Builder

Acts 9:19-31

Introduction

Today, we will pick our study up in the “book of action,” or Acts, in chapter 9, after Saul’s dramatic conversion on the Damascus road. Saul has become a disciple of Jesus Christ, which is an amazing thing to consider.

There is no doubt that the religious leaders in Jerusalem shuddered with fear and rage that they had lost their young, brilliant Pharisee to the cult of the Nazarene. The heir apparent to the preeminent Hebrew scholar Gamaliel had now become a follower of the Galilean.

Daring!

Saul does not waste time removing any doubt of his changed life. Notice verses 19b and 20 of Acts, chapter 9.

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.”

Can you imagine the uproar this caused? Here is the man who was coming to Damascus to hunt down and capture the Jewish traitors who had chosen to follow Christ. Now, he is the one declaring that Jesus Christ is the Messiah!

Dumbfounded!

I think the people were dumbfounded by Saul’s conversion! Look at verses 21 and 22.

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.

Wow! What a change in Saul, the feared hunter and executioner of Christians. He is now a Christian himself!

Though we cannot understand it, this would be as dramatic, if you study history, as reading that Ghengis Khan is now holding Bible studies in his home or that Attila the Hun is attending a men’s prayer breakfast. This is Saul who has now been captured by Christ.

Three years of solitary education

Now, even though the narrative continues on into verse 23, there is actually a change in events. According to Paul’s own testimony in Galatians, chapter 1, God immediately instructs Saul to go to nearby Arabia for a two to three year isolation. God enrolled Saul in a personal, private curriculum that would prepare him for what would happen years later. Luke says, in verse 23, that it was, “when many days had elapsed,” that Saul returned to Damascus. “Many days” literally means, eight or nine hundred of them. It was during that time in that obscure place that Saul was educated in the deeper things of God.

My thinking was provoked along this line by some of the men that I have been studying under, by way of their books in my library. One commentator asked a thought provoking question. He wrote,

Are you enduring an Arabian period, feeling lost and ineffective? From a human perspective, Saul had an impressive résumé. Though he was highly educated, in God's eyes Saul was completely useless until he graduated from God's Desert School of Character Development. If you're enrolled in that school right now, be encouraged. This is God's way of weaving steel into the fabric of your life.

Another writer agreed with that line of application and wrote,

Every Christian God has ever used has had a course or two in the university of Arabia – a wilderness training. The fees are large, the discipline exacting and many don't keep it up, but drop out. For those who graduate, the results are utter dependence on God, utter independence of man.

So, God's Spirit whisks Saul away to this private school where he stays in obscurity for nearly three years. I found it interesting, by the way, that this is in the same geographical area, near the base of Mount Sinai, where Moses, the great leader of that nation, received the tablets of the Law. It will be in that same location where this new leader of a new nation will eventually emerge, having been given from God, this new theology of grace.

Death-defying!

After Saul graduates from this solitary school of God's design, he returns to Damascus. Look at verses 23 through 25.

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.

It is interesting to me that the underground church in Damascus has already developed a network of communication. They had probably prepared it for the coming of Saul, who had come there to capture the Christians. Some high official on the "inside track" learns the plot and whispers into the ear of a messenger, "Go and warn Saul – they are after his head."

The messenger makes his way to Saul and warns him. Saul narrowly escapes.

The word for "basket" in this verse, refers to a large wicker basket, perhaps woven earlier to allow the escape of Christians – from the dreaded hunter Saul. It is now used by Saul himself. Do not miss the irony here. Saul intended to ride in and out of Damascus on a high, proud horse, having captured Christians. Now this brilliant Pharisee is a common fugitive, running for his life. He escapes in the night and heads for Jerusalem where he hopes to find support from the apostles and the Jerusalem church.

Defensive!

Saul is in for an unpleasant surprise in Jerusalem. Look at verse 26.

When he had come to Jerusalem, he was trying to associate with the disciples; but they were all afraid of him, not believing that he was a disciple.

The disciples point of view

Let us look at this from the church's viewpoint. The disciples have lived in fear of this dreaded man. Just the name "Saul of Tarsus" would chill their blood. They have heard news that he has left Jerusalem and they probably wiped the sweat from their brow. They hear he is in Damascus and they are sorry for the believers there, but are probably relieved he is no longer in Jerusalem. Soon, they hear a rumor that he is now a believer, but they do not believe it. Then, they hear that he has disappeared to Arabia somewhere and they think perhaps they are finished with him.

Suddenly, however, Saul appears back in Jerusalem. The text tells us that he tries to associate with the disciples there. Can you imagine that church meeting? The church in Jerusalem is about four or five years old. Perhaps they are singing, when suddenly, Saul slips in the back. Someone sees him and nudges the person beside them, "Hey, who is that? Do you recognize him?"

"No, I don't know who that is."

"Well, he must be a first time visitor. Let's get the visitor album for him."

So, they pass the visitor album to him and he signs his name and passes it back. They look at the

name he has written and they gasp, “Saul of Tarsus!! Stop the music! We’ve got an invader in the church!”

We are not given any details about this. We do not know whether Saul came to a church service or saw disciples in the street at the marketplace. The text tells us that he tried to associate with them, but they would not; they were afraid. They kicked him out, closed the door in his face, and would not believe he was now a believer. Perhaps they were thinking he was an undercover agent for the Sanhedrin. They were defensive, cautious, and maybe, even resentful.

Saul’s point of view

Now let us look at this from Saul’s point of view. Imagine how he must have felt when he knocked on disciples’ doors. Saul is nervous and probably even scared. He has left the world of Judaism that he knows. He has lost every friend that he knows – the learned scribes and Pharisees. He is suddenly the hunted one and is wanting to be accepted by the church he persecuted. Every door he knocked on was probably shut in his face. Saul is a pitiful young believer who is unwanted by both worlds. He is an outcast by Judaism on one side and unwanted by the fellowship of the saints on the other.

How do you think Saul felt when he knocked on one of those doors for the very first time? Think what it must have been like to be in Saul’s sandals. His heart is beating fast; his palms are sweaty. He is normal, just like you and me.

Now, Saul is going to introduce himself to a group of people. Have you ever been in front of people? Have you ever given your testimony? It is kind of scary, isn’t it?

I was reading about a fellow who was going to speak to several thousand people at a convention and was nervous about it. He was in a room adjacent to the auditorium just before he was supposed to go on and was pacing back and forth and back and forth. A woman walked into the room and recognized him as the speaker. She smiled and asked if he was nervous about speaking. He said, “Nervous? No, not me. I’m used to giving speeches.”

She responded with, “Then what are you doing in the ladies room?!”

Saul is afraid. The church is afraid. But let me ask a couple of questions at this point. Where was Peter, the apostle of the second chance? Where was Andrew, the one who was known for bringing

outsiders to Jesus? Where was the leadership of the church? They were all silent; they were all failing the test.

Saul is in desperate need of a bridge into that other world. And, at this point, something happens that is so wonderful that God wanted us to know it happened. A bridge builder named Barnabas, steps forward.

Different!

Look at verse 27.

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.

Perhaps Barnabas had been waiting in deference to the apostles. Perhaps he did not want to act out of place – this is a leadership role. Perhaps he waited for others in the congregation who had the gift of mercy. However, no one seemed to be acting on this. Perhaps Barnabas is a little afraid of Saul too. We do not know.

The text implies, however, that at some point, Barnabas meets with Saul and personally hears his story. Perhaps he saw Saul in the marketplace and walked up to him and said, “You’re Saul, right? Well, I’m Barnabas and I belong to the church in Jerusalem. I’ve heard you are now claiming to be a Christian. Let’s sit down somewhere and talk. I want to hear your story.”

That is all Saul would have needed. I’m sure Saul gushed out his whole story. Finally, someone would listen.

After the conversation, Barnabas becomes convinced that Saul is on the level; that Saul is genuinely born again. The phrase “Barnabas took hold of him,” could be translated, “Barnabas took an interest in him”. He literally took Saul by the hand and walked into the church with him. Everyone probably stopped singing then. Barnabas speaks to them about Saul. We know from a later passage, that Barnabas spoke specifically to Peter and James. “I have someone I’d like to introduce to you. This is my friend, Saul of Tarsus. If you don’t like him, you can’t like me. If he goes, I go.”

Four characteristics of good encouragers

Now, we have run into Barnabas before in our study of Acts. You may remember, in chapter 4, that he sold a piece of real estate and gave the money to the apostles so people could have food and shelter. Do you remember that he was so loved by the apostles that they gave him the nickname, “Son of Encouragement”? In our vernacular, it would probably be the nickname, “Sunshine”. Well, here he goes again.

I was reading a book by David Jeremiah, entitled, *The Acts of Love*. He suggested at least four characteristics of good encouragers as he reflected on the life of Barnabas. Let me give them to you.

They are genuine people

1. First, good encouragers have to be genuine people; they cannot be phonies.

You are never encouraged by someone who asks how you are doing, but you know they do not really want to know.

Paul would later write, in Romans, chapter 12, verse 9a,

Let love be without hypocrisy. . . .

There was a church, a body, apostles, deacons, elders, but they did not care.

They are diligent

2. Secondly, good encouragers are diligent; they are hard workers.

They are assertive

3. Thirdly, good encouragers are assertive; they take initiative; they get involved.

I want to add at this point, something I heard years ago. You may remember the comedian, Flip Wilson. One day, someone asked him about his religion. He answered, “I am a Jehovah’s Bystander.”

They asked, “What do you mean?”

“Well, they asked me to be a witness, but I didn’t want to get involved!”

The apostle Paul would later write, in Romans, chapter 12, verse 13b,

. . . practice hospitality.

That is another way of saying, “Be assertive; take the initiative; get involved!!!”

They are selfless

4. Fourthly, good encouragers are selfless; they are concerned primarily for others.

Every one of us could say, “Oh Lord, please give me an encourager like Barnabas. Could I ever use someone like that right now.”

It is not wrong to think that, but nowhere in the Word has God promised us, other than Jesus Christ, a Barnabas. However, in His Word, He has challenged every one of us to become a Barnabas.

Dismissed!

Now notice the result of Saul’s introduction to the fellowship. Look at verses 28 through 30, beginning with verse 28.

And he was with them, moving about freely in Jerusalem, speaking out boldly in the name of the Lord.

Do not miss that Saul was “with them”. He is finally accepted by them; he is finally a part of them. How he must have enjoyed the fellowship of the saints! Continue to verse 29.

And he was talking and arguing with the Hellenistic Jews; but they were attempting to put him to death.

The Hellenistic Jews were Saul’s former friends who had stoned Stephen to death. Now Saul is arguing with them and they are attempting to put him to death. Continue to verse 30.

But when the brethren learned of it, they brought him down to Caesarea and sent him away to Tarsus.

For the sake of Saul’s safety, they send him to his hometown of Tarsus. As quickly as he appears on the scene and even gains prominence, it is as if he is dismissed. His life is in danger, so they do what they think is best for him.

That must have been confusing to Saul. Ananias had earlier, learned from the Lord and communicated to Saul that he would one day speak before kings. Now, Saul is being sent back to his little village that he had left years ago. He did not understand, but he went.

God had other plans for young Saul, a man perhaps in his early thirties. There are roots to deepen, and he has to begin developing them at home.

Application

The leading teacher in this passage is not an apostle, and it is not the church body, it is Barnabas. Let me give several things that we can learn from him about being a bridge builder.

A bridge builder is available to listen

1. First, a bridge builder is available to listen.

A blind singer, by the name of Ken Medema, wrote a powerful song a number of years ago. He was talking about the church. Listen to the words of this song:

If this is not a place where tears are understood,

Then where shall I go to cry?

And if this is not a place where my spirit can take wings,

Then where shall I go to fly?

I don't need another place for trying to impress you

With just how good and virtuous I am, no, no;

I don't need another place for always being on top of things.

Everybody knows it's a sham, it's a sham.

I don't need another place for always wearing smiles,

Even when it's not the way I feel.

I don't need another place to mouth the same old platitudes,

Everybody knows that's not real.

So if this is not a place where my questions can be asked,

Then where shall I go to seek?

And if this is not a place where my heart's cry can be heard,

Then where shall I go to speak?

And if this is not a place where tears are understood,

Where shall I go, oh, where shall I go to cry?

A bridge builder is someone who makes a difference in the church. In fact, if you look at verse 31 of Acts, chapter 9, you read a result for the church.

So the church throughout all Judea and Galilee and Samaria enjoyed peace, being built up [edified]; and going on in the fear of the Lord and in the comfort of the Holy Spirit, it continued to increase.

The church deepened and broadened at the same time – it matured spiritually and added numerically. It is no surprise that a church that could hurdle all of this, that could have divided it, would be even more attractive. It would then be seen as a church that was willing to forgive and to listen. That brings me to the second point about a bridge builder.

A bridge builder is inclined to forgive

2. Secondly, a bridge builder is inclined to forgive.

I happen to believe that Barnabas stuck his neck out in this. By going to Saul, he is implying that the apostles are wrong. This kind of leadership probably is not told they are wrong very often. Barnabas helped the church avoid a tragic mistake. He helped them open their hearts, not only to Saul, but to all the believers who were new in their faith, while the church was wrestling with what to do with them. These new believers had been persecuting them, but now that they were Christians, the church was not sure whether to let them in.

The church in Russia faced the same difficulty, especially in Hungary. One of the missionaries that our church supports, told me that one of the greatest challenges was with the underground church. Once the law changed and allowed the church to surface in freedom, they had to decide what to do with those who had persecuted them, but had now come to faith in Jesus Christ. Also, they had to decide what to do with those who had come to know Christ, but had kept it a secret and would not go public.

What should a church do with former persecutors? This church was in the process of putting up steel doors and saying, "Sorry, we're closed."

Barnabas' one act taught this church how to forgive their chief enemy. That is what bridge builders do.

A bridge builder is determined to resolve

3. Thirdly, a bridge builder is determined to resolve.

Anyone following after Barnabas today, needs to know they are giving up the luxury to gossip and to float downstream with all the other Christian fish. They are personally taking on the challenge to resolve issues. For the sake of Christ's name and cause, they become involved and take initiative. It is easy to spot the problems. A bridge builder says, "How can we resolve the issues? Let's say what needs to be said. Let's put it all out on the table where we can all look at it and carve it up. But, let's put it on the table and say it."

This, by the way, is good advice for Christians in relationships. In times when you think, "Maybe I shouldn't say anything," perhaps you should confront or warn. This is good for families as well, to say those things that are hard to say, especially as children age.

I was moved by the story of one mother concerning her teenage son. Let me read the story.

They were growing apart, as he grew older. Words were harder to say, but she resolved to say them anyway.

When she went upstairs, all she could hear coming from her boy's room was the loud sound of his drums. She had a message she wanted to deliver, but when she knocked on the door, she got cold feet.

"Got a minute?" she said, as her son answered her knock.

"Sure, Mom."

"You know, son, I . . . I . . . I just love the way you play the drums."

He said, "You do? Well, thanks Mom!"

She started back downstairs. Half-way down, she realized that she had not conveyed the message she had intended, so back she went to his door and once again said, "It's Mom again! Do you have another minute?"

He said, "Mom, like I told you before, sure!"

She went over and sat on the bed. "When I was here before I had something I wanted to tell you and I didn't get it said. What I really meant to say was, your dad and I . . . we just really think you're great."

He said, "You and Dad?"

She said, "Yes, your Dad and I."

"Okay, Mom, thanks."

She left and was again aware that she had gotten closer to the message she intended, but had still not told her son what she wanted. So up the stairs again and back to the door again, and this time he heard her coming.

Before she could knock, he shouted, "Yeah, I have a minute!"

Mom sat down on the bed once more. "You know, Son, I've tried this twice now and haven't gotten it out. What I really came up here to tell you is this. I love you. I love you with all of my heart."

He gave her a great big hug and said, "I love you too, Mom."

She started out of the room and was back at the head of the stairs when her son stuck his head out of his room and said, "Mom, do you have a minute?"

She laughed and said, "Sure."

"Mom," he asked, "did you just come back from a seminar?"

Bridge builders, ladies and gentlemen, are the ones who make the first move.

A bridge builder is sensitive to potential in others

4. Finally, a bridge builder is sensitive to potential in other people.

Barnabas was the only one who said, "Let's give him a chance. Let's hear him out. Let's forgive and forget."

By the way, Saul will disappear following verse 30, and not re-appear for eight years. There will be eight years of silence before Saul comes back to his hometown. He has returned a failure in the eyes of everyone who used to boast of his intellect and his future as Gamaliel's brightest student.

Saul's family had been wealthy enough to support his move to Jerusalem, even though he did live with his married sister. His father had also been wealthy enough to pay the fees so that Saul could have the finest tutoring known to the Jewish world.

Yet, when Saul resurfaces, he is making tents to survive. Why? That is, by the way, where the phrase "tent-making" came from, for those who want to pursue ministry, but must work another job to support themselves. So, why was Saul making tents, when his

family was prominent and wealthy? Some believe, including myself, that Saul was disowned by his Jewish parents; he was disinherited by his prominent father because he followed the Messiah.

Eight years would go by before we hear of Saul again. As far as the Jerusalem church believed, Saul was not the leader or teacher we know him to be. They did not know, as we know, that Saul was the prominent leader of this new Gentile church. I have no doubt Saul was involved in Tarsus, as there were believers there later. But, it did not seem at this time, that he would ever speak to kings. This was true until something happened. Believe it or not, it was true until Barnabas acted again. Turn to Acts, chapter 11, and notice something in verses 21 through 26.

And the hand of the Lord was with them, and a large number who believed turned to the Lord. The news about them reached the ears of the church at Jerusalem, and they sent Barnabas off to Antioch. Then when he arrived and witnessed the grace of God, he rejoiced and began to encourage them all with resolute heart to remain true to the Lord; for he was a good man, and full of the Holy Spirit and of faith. And considerable numbers were brought to the Lord. And he left for Tarsus to look for Saul; and when he

had found him, he brought him to Antioch. And for an entire year they met with the church and taught considerable numbers; and the disciples were first called Christians in Antioch.

Have you ever thought about the fact that the reason the church, then and now, would have the apostle Paul as its predominate teacher was because of the persistence of a man who saw in Saul what no one else seemed to see? A man, so used by God, that when he is in Antioch leading this massive movement, in the midst of that, he says, "I know who would be perfect here. That young man named Saul that we sent back to Tarsus. I wonder if he is still there."

So, a bridge builder named Barnabas, went to Tarsus and finally located Saul, who was probably living in humble quarters, stitching tents. Barnabas came and took Saul by the hand again and said, "The church needs you Saul. I need you, Saul. Come work with me to build bridges in the lives of new believers in Antioch."

This happened because of a man who was willing to listen; to forgive; to resolve; to see in Saul potential that no one else could see. Let's build a bridge together in the hearts and lives of people who are about to become known as Christians today.

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