

IMMEDIATELY HE PROCLAIMED JESUS

Acts 9:19b–31

Key Verse: 9:20

“And immediately he proclaimed Jesus in the synagogues, saying, ‘He is the Son of God.’”

Do you like putting things off? Some people are like the king or queen of delay. If we live by the motto “I’ll do it tomorrow,” we might become prone to panic attacks. Today’s passage (9:19b–30) contains a rare description in the Bible of what someone does right after encountering Christ. Saul’s story can seem so epic and so far from us. But really, it’s a lesson on how any Christian grows as a witness of Jesus. In this brief passage we find ten things vital to the spiritual growth of a witness of Jesus. Especially Saul, who’s a new believer, does something “immediately.” What does he do? Why does he do it? And what can we learn from him? May God speak to us through his word.

A witness of Jesus is a person whose life is completely turned around (1–19a)

Last week we saw how Saul was changed from a persecutor to a witness of Jesus. He’s a scary guy, but suddenly he’s called “a chosen instrument” (9:15). One minute, he’s trying to throw Christians in jail, and the next, he’s risking his life for Jesus. He’s so extreme, he’s hard to relate to. But when Jesus calls us by his grace, he always turns our life around. Our change may be more subtle than Saul’s. But in the amazing grace of Jesus we cannot but change from self-righteous to repentant, from hating to loving, from living for self to living for God and others, from indulging the sinful nature to crucifying it, from using and abusing people to healing them, from fearful to courageous. And the amazing grace of Jesus always changes us from proud to humble. If we live by faith in his grace, we’re changed from instruments for unrighteousness to instruments for righteousness (Rom.6:13). Even a man like Saul was changed by the grace of Jesus; so can we. To experience this change, we just need to present ourselves to God each day by faith, holding only onto the grace of Jesus.¹

A witness of Jesus joins the community of believers (19b)

Read verse 19b. “For some days he was with the disciples in Damascus.” Saul has just had a profound, unique, life-altering experience. But he doesn’t think he’s superior to others or can live this new life all by himself. It says “he was

¹ Rom.6:13,16,19; 12:1; cf. 1 Cor.15:10.

with the disciples in Damascus.” Saul is also a highly educated young man with an intense personality. But as a new believer, he really needs fellow believers. He needs their love, support and prayer. And despite all the evil he’s done, they accept him, simply because Jesus chose to show him grace. As part of his transformation, Saul needs to experience the grace of the believing community. So does every new believer.

A witness of Jesus acts immediately on faith (20a)

Read verse 20a. “And immediately he proclaimed Jesus in the synagogues...” Saul’s not hiding out among the loving believers, just enjoying their fellowship. He knows Jesus called him for a purpose. He knows the stakes are high, people don’t know the truth, and God has a mission for him. So he loses no time. It says, “Immediately he proclaimed Jesus in the synagogues...” He doesn’t do it once, then go and hide somewhere. He goes into many synagogues, proclaiming Jesus again and again. Immediately he engages in telling as many people as possible that Jesus came into the world to save sinners like himself (1 Tim. 1:15). He doesn’t dwell on his past. His immediate act of faith in Jesus is the catalyst that gets God’s grace in his life moving forward.

A witness of Jesus knows and shares who Jesus really is (20b)

Read verse 20b. “...saying, ‘He is the Son of God.’” Saul isn’t talking a lot about himself, like his sudden blindness and restored sight. He’s laser-focused on Jesus. This is the only time in Acts that Jesus is called “the Son of God.” It’s a key element of Saul’s faith. In his Jewish context, people considered this heresy, blasphemy. How is Saul suddenly so sure that Jesus is the Son of God? It’s because he vividly encountered Jesus right outside Damascus. The light he saw was the light of the living presence of Christ, the Son of God, who was crucified for his sins and raised again. In his letters Paul often calls Jesus “the Son of God.”² What does this mean? It means Jesus is way more than just a man, or even a prophet. The Bible says, “He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation. For by him all things were created, in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible...all things were created through him and for him. And he is before all things, and in him all things hold together. And he is the head of the body, the church. He is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, that in everything he might be preeminent. For in him all the fullness of God was

² Rom. 1:3–4,9; 5:10; 8:3,29,32; 1 Cor. 1:9; 15:28; 2 Cor. 1:19; Gal. 1:16; 2:20; 4:4,6; Eph. 4:13; Col. 1:13; 1 Thess. 1:10.

pleased to dwell...” (Col.1:15–19). Saul personally meets Jesus as the Son of God, then immediately begins sharing this. To be a witness of Jesus, we too need to meet and know who Jesus really is, then immediately start sharing it.

A witness of Jesus increases in strength while sharing his faith (21–22)

When Saul starts speaking about Jesus in the synagogues, it says people are “amazed.” The Greek word means “displaced,” “thrown out of position,” even “beside one’s self” or “insane.” It means to these people, Saul’s change is just too overwhelming. How could this young man they’d heard was coming to arrest Christians suddenly be on Jesus’ side? Despite all the hype, Saul stays steady. In fact, he grows! Read verse 22. “But Saul increased all the more in strength, and confounded the Jews who lived in Damascus by proving that Jesus was the Christ.” No doubt, he’s proving it by showing them all the Messianic prophecies fulfilled in Jesus. The more this young man speaks about Jesus based on the Bible, the stronger he becomes. It’s not human strength, physical strength, or intellectual strength. His strength is spiritual—and increasing—because he’s received the Holy Spirit (9:17) and is learning to speak by the Spirit, rely on the Spirit and walk by the Spirit.³ The more Saul engages in Spirit-filled teaching and living, the stronger and more convincing he becomes. So can we.

A witness of Jesus is persecuted (23–24)

Read verses 23–24. “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.” This is just a preview of all that’s going to happen to Saul. So Jesus’ words “how much he must suffer for the sake of my name” (16) are fulfilled right away! As people plotted to kill Jesus, as they plotted to kill the original apostles, as Saul himself used to plot to kill Christians, now they are plotting to kill Saul himself. Just before his death, Jesus told his disciples: “If they persecuted me, they will persecute you also” (John 15:30). When we start sharing our faith in Jesus, we shouldn’t expect everyone to be happy and appreciative. In the last letter he ever wrote, Paul said, “Indeed, all who desire to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted...” (2 Tim.3:12).

A witness of Jesus begins to have disciples (25)

Read verse 25. “...but his disciples took him by night and let him down through an opening in the wall, lowering him in a basket.” It says “his disciples.”

³ 1:8; cf. John 6:63; 14:26; 16:13–14; Rom.8:4,26a; 2 Cor.3:17–18; Gal.5:16,25.

Saul's a new believer, but he suddenly has disciples? How does that happen? It's through his actively sharing the good news of Jesus. Obviously his disciples are those whom Saul has persuaded about Jesus, and they've begun to follow Saul to learn more about Jesus. Having disciples may seem to be only for the more mature believers. But it happens to Saul right at the start. Why? Because he's so focused on sharing his faith in Jesus. What's the secret of having disciples? In a sense it's so simple: if we really know Jesus and actively share our faith in Jesus, we will have disciples. When we help people know and believe in Jesus, they will want to learn more of Jesus through us. And here, Saul's disciples help him when there's a plot to kill him. By night they take him and let him down through an opening in the wall, lowering him in a basket. It's kind of humiliating. But in this way, Saul escapes getting killed in Damascus at the beginning of his Christian life. So, even a new believer who focuses on sharing his faith in Jesus can have disciples who not only learn but even become helpers.

A witness of Jesus needs to be accepted, encouraged, and defended (26–27)

Read verse 26. "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." Of course they don't believe it; it's too drastic a change. Probably they think it's all a ruse to infiltrate their ranks so that he can arrest them, too. It's understandable. Still, this must have been a hard experience for Saul. In Damascus he'd almost gotten killed on account of his teaching about Jesus. But now, even the believing community doesn't trust him. This, too, is just a preview of all that Saul will have to suffer.

Read verse 27. "But 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." Barnabas is first mentioned at the end of chapter 4. He encouraged people when he sold a field he owned and brought the money as an offering for the needy among them. His name "Barnabas" means "Son of Encouragement." Here again, he's living up to his name. He's an unusual man. Too often we see only the negative in people. Or we jump to conclusions with very little evidence. But look at Barnabas. He's not just sympathetic, or picking favorites. He's gone to the trouble to learn the facts about Saul. And the facts themselves speak volumes. Barnabas now knows why Saul has changed: Saul has seen the Lord, and the Lord has spoken to him.

If Jesus has spoken to Saul, and he's still alive, it means Jesus forgave him and chose to use him. For Barnabas, that's good enough. Also, Barnabas has heard about Saul's ministry in Damascus for the name of Jesus. Not everyone grasps the facts, but these facts persuade Barnabas. Why? It's because, as Acts says later, Barnabas is "a good man, full of the Holy Spirit and of faith" (11:24a). Saul's past record made it hard for anyone to trust him, but Barnabas takes a risk to accept, encourage, and defend Saul. Barnabas is so credible, he persuades everyone. This, too, is a preview of what Barnabas will do later. Those living for Jesus by faith in his grace often have a negative past record. But everyone trying to live as Jesus' witness needs to be accepted, encouraged, and defended.

A witness of Jesus preaches boldly, even to the harshest critics (27–29)

Jerusalem was resistant to Saul, not just in the Christian community but in the broader Jewish community. Saul knew it well, for he used to be part of that hostility. But through the blessing brought by Barnabas, Saul has the freedom to come in and out among the believers in Jerusalem. And again, he's not using this blessing for his own enjoyment. Read verse 28b. "...preaching boldly in the name of the Lord." It's the second time his boldness in preaching is mentioned (27). Where's this boldness coming from? It's not from his human character. It's boldness from the Holy Spirit (4:31). It's boldness from his faith in the Risen Jesus. His faith in Jesus has set him free, deep within, from all fear. It's truly a great thing when a man becomes bold in his daily life in living for Jesus and sharing his faith in Jesus.

Read verse 29. "And he spoke and disputed against the Hellenists. But they were seeking to kill him." Saul knew these Hellenists well, because he'd been one of them. He'd been a Greek-speaking Jew living outside of Israel, just like them. He'd been opposed to the name of Jesus of Nazareth, just like them. He'd been trying to prove his zeal for the law of Moses, just like them. Being from Tarsus in Cilicia, he probably even argued with Stephen in the synagogue of the Freedmen, just like them (6:9). When we know how hardened people are, it's easy to think, "It's not worth it. I should pick my battles." It seems smart. But Saul spoke and disputed with these people, not to prove his superiority or debate skills, but because he really wanted them to have the blessing of knowing Jesus. Jesus' witnesses are bold to speak about him, even to the most difficult people.

A witness of Jesus needs to wait on God's time (30)

Read verse 30. “And when the brothers learned this, they brought him down to Caesarea and sent him off to Tarsus.” No doubt the brothers were moved by Saul’s strength and persuasiveness. They also knew that the plot to kill him was serious. They’d seen how these same people had plotted to kill Stephen and succeeded. So they made a decision of faith to protect Saul. They got him out of Jerusalem at once, and probably paid for his travel back to his hometown. Saul might not have liked this. But he cooperated. He trusted the wisdom of his Christian brothers.

Read verse 31. “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.” It was God who brought this time of peace about. They’d been through such persecution, so now God wants them to be built up and comforted by the Holy Spirit and learn to walk in the fear of the Lord. Now’s not the time for more conflict. Ultimately, bold witnesses of Jesus need to wait on God’s time to do what God calls them to do.

This passage illustrates how the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ has the power to change even the most unlikely person. It also shows us what we all need to be doing for healthy spiritual growth. May God help us immediately to share our faith in Jesus, so that we can increase in strength and be used for his kingdom.