

The Oppressor Becomes the Oppressed

February 3, 2019

Acts 9:19-31

This morning, in our ongoing study of the book of Acts, we come to Acts 9:19-31. In some ways, it is a text that gives us historical information, describing what happened during the period of time right after Saul became a follower of Jesus. This happened, then this happened, then that happened. But if that is the main purpose of the text, then it was designed to confuse us. You see, in the book of Galatians, Paul gives his own take on what happened right after he called upon the name of Jesus. And...the two accounts are difficult to bring together, particularly regarding a three-year period of time in Arabia mentioned in Galatians 1:17. So, if the purpose of this text is to provide historical information, it is less than completely helpful. But, it seems to me that this text is designed to be more than that. It is designed to give us a picture of what it was like for this premier foe of Christianity to become a powerful spokesman for the same group. It seems to me that this text is as much about the established church as it is anything else.

These church leaders, all of whom witnessed the horrific treatment of their Lord while He was on earth, followed by the increasing hostility directed toward them, with the stoning of Stephen as perhaps the lowest of low points. They have seen their group, the Church, scattered out of fear, with them remaining in Jerusalem, being exposed to bitter opposition and persecution. And they surely were keenly aware of this young Jewish zealot named Saul, armed with cruel hate and official papers sent out to places like Damascus to arrest, mistreat, and put into prison anyone calling on the name of Jesus. They all knew what was going on.

But imagine what would have surely gone through their minds when they heard reports that this Saul of Tarsus had ceased his mission, had an encounter with Jesus, and now was preaching the gospel to all who would listen. Do you think they would have believed the reports? That's what I believe this passage is

all about: what happens when your worst critic becomes one of you? Do you accept him or not? That is the drama unfolding in the text before us. And then we figure out that there is a three-year block of time in the middle of this text that Luke chose to gloss over. So, the reports of Saul's conversion were followed by three years of Saul off studying and preparing for ministry, then the initial meeting in Jerusalem with the disciples. As we are beginning to sense, change comes slowly. Acceptance comes slowly. Indeed, a special character shows up in the text who helps make it happen. We know him from earlier in Acts. His name is Barnabas, the son of encouragement.

Read with me Acts 9:19-31 and this crucial period of time between Saul's conversion and his acceptance by the leaders of the Jerusalem church. READ.

Main point: When an enemy becomes a brother, it is not always easy for us to accept the transition.

We all say that we believe in the power of the gospel. We all say it has the power to dramatically, radically change people's lives. And yet, when we have been on the brunt end of mistreatment, it is simply not easy to accept the one who persecuted as our new best friend. Indeed, we often need a time of "watch and see." Again, here we see the difference between Ananias from last week's text and his immediate embrace of Saul, calling him brother and the skepticism that gripped those from afar who only heard about the conversion of Saul. They were not so eager to accept him as their brother.

Why do we gathered here today need to hear this message? Because I am regularly put in the position of calming the nerves of new believers that they will be accepted by the church. I believe it to be true, but I say it in faith, knowing that such acceptance is hard on both ends. But for the future and growth of the church, we must learn this lesson well. (2 parts)

I. A changed man can't help but tell others what has happened to him. vv. 19b-25

We see here why God might have chosen Saul to be a key figure in this early church. When God got ahold of his heart, he dove in head first. When he learned the truth about who Jesus really was, he just couldn't help preaching and pleading for others to believe the same. Experiencing the good news of the gospel might just lead us to risk life and limb to tell others about it.

v.19b- Saul spent several days with the disciples in Damascus. 20 At once he began to preach in the synagogues that Jesus is the Son of God.

We are struck by the suddenness of the transition. Saul went from a zealot set on destroying the lives of Jesus followers, to becoming one of them, no to becoming their zealous spokesman. Notice he went to the place where the Jews gathered, to their "church" to preach to them about Jesus. He went to the place where until recently he would have felt most at home, among friends, a visiting celebrity perhaps. But now, he went where he would have been mocked, ridiculed, persecuted, perhaps kicked out. He didn't slink back. He didn't wait until he had learned it all. Indeed, if he had waited until he knew everything before he started preaching, he would never have started preaching. We don't know the extent to his insight, his knowledge, his understanding of how Jesus fit into the Jewish mindset. What he did know was that Jesus was the long awaited Messiah, the Christ, the very Son of God. He went from thinking Jesus was a phony to Jesus was God of very God, His Savior, indeed His Lord. Saul, the Jewish persecutor of Christians had become one himself!

21 All those who heard him were astonished and asked, "Isn't he the man who raised havoc in Jerusalem among those who call on this name? And hasn't he come here to take them as prisoners to the chief priests?"

We see here the reaction from the locals. I take from this that these were Jewish locals. They had heard of this Saul of Tarsus, and perhaps viewed him as their hero, their defender. They knew he was in Damascus on a mission to wipe

out this sect of Jesus of Nazareth. But now, he was speaking to them as one who actually believed all this stuff. What gives? I can't believe it! I suspect they were all completely confused by what was happening before them.

Notice the wording here, "those who call on this name." I actually think there is great significance in the wording. Call on for what? For salvation, of course. They were calling on the name of Jesus to save them. I think this is abundantly clear. The crucial step in hearing and receiving the gospel is to call upon the name of the Lord. "Lord Jesus, save me!" We see it in Romans 10, it is the pivotal point in the salvation process, calling on Jesus to save, always has been, always will be.

22 Yet Saul grew more and more powerful and baffled the Jews living in Damascus by proving that Jesus is the Christ.

Yet, as the days went by, Saul became increasingly adept in the subject. He spoke with increased power and authority. He became more and more convincing. He became less and less easily defeated in argument. I'm sure he went back after each encounter and studied more, prayed more, pondered more, based on the objections raised by his opponents. Wouldn't you love to have been in on those first encounters and Saul's study in between? I know how exciting it is to discover a new truth in God's word, but what it must have been like to have it ALL come alive for you. Such must have been Saul's life during those early days.

Let me put it to you this way, when a deep thinker has a dramatic encounter with the risen Christ, who turns his life around, get out of his way!

23 After many days had gone by, the Jews conspired to kill him, 24 but Saul learned of their plan. Day and night they kept close watch on the city gates in order to kill him. 25 But his followers took him by night and lowered him in a basket through an opening in the wall.

As I've already suggested, it makes sense to me that the "three-year" period in Arabia mentioned in Galatians 1:17 happens right here. For Paul's purposes in Galatians I, that detail was important. But for Luke's purposes, he just mentions it as "after many days." But it seems that Saul then came back and resumed preaching and quickly came under an even increased scrutiny from the Jews. Now, they were the ones who wanted to kill him. They were no longer simply "astonished" or "baffled." They were set on killing him just as he had been set on killing others. The oppressor had officially become the oppressed.

Just as was the case with Jesus, there was a plot to kill Saul. And, at the risk of inserting us into the day's biggest drama, when your city is encased by walls, the place to plot your killing is at the hole in the wall, or the city gate. Since you enter through the gate, you wait by the gate for your chance to take action. But, for Saul, his newfound friends protected him and helped him escape their plot by going through a window in the wall at night. So, Saul escaped this plot by the Jews to kill him. The killer escaped being killed by the same group he was a part of.

So, what is the point so far? Saul has had a radical transformation, which led him to be bold for the very cause he had previously tried to stamp out. Perhaps you are aware of such people in our day as well, men who have stood adamantly against the gospel of Jesus, only to find truth in it, and later become leading spokesmen for the group they hated. I think of Josh McDowell and Lee Strobel, if I remember correctly. I had a friend in my first church who went through transformation himself. He was an atheist, but thought he should read the Bible to better understand what he was against. But then God saved him and those same Scriptures came alive to him. He became a leader in our church. Yes, God is still doing the same transformation among us. The truth of the gospel, the work of God in man's hearts can radically change lives. And when it does, get out of the way. You will not be able to stop them from speaking!

II. It is sad, but true that many of the hardest to convince of a new life are the believers. vv. 26-31

This is the sad part, the learning part. The truth is that not everyone will be equally accepting of lives God changes. And depending on how close you were to the old person, you might have the most difficult time of all. This is where our faith is put to the test. Could it really be that God has radically changed this life? Can I accept as a brother or sister someone I viewed as my enemy?

26 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.

Finally, Saul makes it to Jerusalem. For three years, he has been away. He left as the hunter, he returns as the hunted. Who would accept him? Certainly not the Jews. Surely, they had by now heard the reports that this Saul had deserted his mission to stamp out the Christians and had in fact become one of them, harassing the Jews of Damascus, trying to convince even more Jews to “abandon” Judaism.

But what about the Christians in Jerusalem? How long was their memory? How badly had they been hurt by Saul’s actions before? How convinced had they become of these same reports of Saul’s conversion and outspoken defending of Jesus as the Christ, the Son of God? We see here that their skepticism was dominant. They were not yet ready to accept Saul as their brother. They were afraid and protective, wanting nothing to do with him. They were not yet convinced.

27 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.

Into that situation, the Lord of the Church inserts Barnabas. Do you remember him? Back in ch.4, we were introduced to this man, whose name

means “son of encouragement” (I wonder why!). There, he was the good example of believers who did not consider anything they owned as being theirs. He sold land, and took the proceeds and laid them at the apostles’ feet. He was “all in.” Now, here in ch.9 we are reintroduced to him. Here, he intervenes on Saul’s behalf. He reminds the disciples of Saul’s story, how he was stopped and struck down by Jesus on the road to Damascus, and how he had proven himself by fearlessly, boldly preaching the truth about Jesus to the Jews of Damascus.

28 So Saul stayed with them and moved about freely in Jerusalem, speaking boldly in the name of the Lord.

This is truly good news. They may not have believed the previous reports. They may have been skeptical when they heard he had arrived or saw him. But they believed Barnabas. They trusted Barnabas’ assessment of his character. Saul now had an advocate with the brothers, someone they respected and trusted. Now, instead of being all by himself, hated by all sides, he had a family, a church, a support structure. I’m pretty sure this made a lasting impact on Saul. You might say we will see Barnabas’ name in the text again!

Now, with the blessing of the established church, Saul begins speaking boldly in Jerusalem, just as he had done in Damascus.

29 He talked and debated with the Grecian Jews, but they tried to kill him. 30 When the brothers learned of this, they took him down to Caesarea and sent him off to Tarsus.

Saul had a particular bent toward those who were Greek rather than Hebrew in their orientation. If you remember back, there has been an ongoing struggle between native Hebrews and Greek implants. It showed up in the church over the daily distribution of food to the widows. There has always been

an “insider/outsider” mentality, and the Church is not exempt. And Saul tended toward the outsiders. Here in v.20, he finds himself debating Jews who were of Greek culture. He took them on, preaching to them that Jesus was the Christ. And, just as it happened in Damascus, not everyone was happy with him. He was hunted here in Jerusalem. They tried to kill him.

And, just as in Damascus, his newfound brothers, his previous enemies, came to his rescue. They got him out of town and sent him off to his hometown. The body accepted, and then assisted their brother. And I think we are far enough into the book to have a hunch how this is going to turn out. Will Saul shrink back in fear? Or, has the gospel just made its powerful entrance into Tarsus? What do you think? Was it a good thing or a bad thing that Saul had to flee Jerusalem?

31 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.

Again, we have seen the sentiments of this verse before. At each stage of this unfolding drama that is the infancy of the early church, we have this summary statement. In spite of the hardship, the persecution, the strife, the suffering, the Church went forward. In spite of what happened, they were at peace. In spite of (or perhaps through) the internal struggles, the group was actually strengthened, encouraged, growing, living out their faith. None of what happened was bad. It was all working out for their good! We must note these summary verses when we come across them. They ought to be encouraging to us as well. It is easy to get bogged down, discouraged by life as it unfolds around us, less hopeful about the future, left wondering how everything will turn out. But the truth is that we have a Lord Jesus on the throne. He is still leading His Church. He will use whatever hardship we are asked to endure for His honor and glory. His work WILL go forward. And along the way, we will learn

valuable lessons, here that the gospel is very powerful, powerful enough to radically change lives. And if that takes place in the life of someone around us, we must be ready to embrace the person as our brother.

The Church of Jesus Christ is not some club, some closed group where we get to be in charge of who gets in. I guarantee you that no one in that early church would have chosen Saul. But God did, and when He does we have to be ready to embrace as did Ananias. Yes, I'm sure there was a huge dose of forgiveness that had to be asked for and granted. Can you imagine having to face the relatives of Stephen, knowing the role Saul had in his murder? Would you embrace your relative's murderer as a brother? And yet, such reconciliation surely took place, the gospel went forward, the Church was bigger, stronger, healthier. God had turned this oppressor #1 into the Church's defender #1.

If we believe this passage is the Word of God, then what should be different about our lives?

- 1) We will hold fast to the transformational power of gospel.
- 2) We will embrace the changes that God makes in peoples' lives.
- 3) We will defend our brothers and sisters.
- 4) We will work together to assist those under persecution.
- 5) We will be encouraged as the work of God moves forward.
- 6) We will allow Jesus to be the Lord of His Church.