



Leaders Note

Acts 9:19-31 – A Life Turned Upside Down

Thought

“How did you start your great missionary career, Paul?”

“I was let down through the wall in a basket and ran away!”

Actually, this is more or less what Paul himself wrote, at the end of 2 Corinthians 11, quite deliberately showing the proud Corinthians that the God he was proclaiming is the one who takes delight in standing everything on its head. All human boasting, all human pride, has to be up-ended, so that God’s glory can shine through. So we shouldn’t be surprised that the first chapters in what was, indeed, a great missionary career are full of plots and running away. You can almost feel the sigh of relief in verse 30, as the Jerusalem apostles and the rest finally pack Saul off by boat from Caesarea to Tarsus. Phew! That’s one bit of trouble out of the way. Perhaps there was a shade of irony then, in verse 31: once he was gone, Jesus’ followers could have a bit of peace.

Actually, of course, Luke means a lot more than that. There was a new energy about the place, a new spring in the step. The fact that someone like Saul of Tarsus, with the reputation he had, had been confronted by Jesus himself, stopped in his tracks and turned around, and was now using his very considerable biblical skill and way with words to demonstrate to all that Jesus really was the Messiah — well this was bound to encourage all the Jesus-followers who heard about it.

And not just encourage them: inform them, show them more clearly how to read the scriptures. How to understand the vast sweep of God’s promises on the one hand and the fascinating but telling details on the other. And, in particular, this is the first time in Acts that we find Jesus being referred to with the title which became standard right across early Christianity: he is the Son of God (Acts 9:20).

To have him (Saul) of all people announcing it, demonstrating it, arguing it from scripture — it was intolerable. And so there began the sequence of plots and persecutions from which Saul was never again to be free. He runs away from Damascus. In Jerusalem he begins under heavy suspicion from the Christians and ends with a Jewish plot against his life. What is one to do with someone like that? The answer is significant. He must go back home. He needs to start where they know him. There will be pain there...but there will be missionary opportunities of the sort he must grasp. And so, not for the last time, Saul takes a ship to go preaching. The pattern of the rest of his life has been established. NT Wright, Acts for Everyone

Context

He began to preach that Jesus is the Son of God: Just a side note — this is the only time in the entire book of Acts that this title for Jesus occurs. In Acts Jesus is normally called “Lord” or “Saviour” or “Ruler” or “Judge” or (of course) “Christ” or Messiah. “Son of God” would have been a much more inflammatory title for Paul’s Jewish audience, but it’s what Paul leads with as he begins preaching in Damascus. The encounter on the Damascus road left no doubt in Paul’s mind as to who Jesus is — as Paul would put it later to the Colossians: “All the fullness of Deity lived in Jesus in bodily form.”

They lowered him in a basket: The persecutor becomes the persecuted but eludes his opponent’s designs rather ingeniously (if ingloriously). Perhaps someone in the church had a house adjoining the wall (cf. Rahab in the Old Testament) and they lowered him in a very large basket through a window there. This basket is a spuris — a basket large enough for a person to crouch down into (it’s the size the disciples used to gather up fragments of bread after Jesus fed the four thousand — see Matthew 15:37).

They watched the city gates...2 Corinthians 11:32-33 Aretas IV, the father-in-law of Herod Antipas, ruled over the kingdom of the Nabataean Arabs from c. 9 B.C. to A.D. 40. Why did he or the governor in Damascus want to arrest Paul? Probably because Aretas had been offended by Paul’s evangelistic activity in his kingdom (Gal 1:17). Luke’s account of Paul’s escape (Ac 9:23-25) reveals that the Jews were watching the gates in order to kill Paul; yet here we are told that the governor under King Aretas was guarding the city in order to arrest Paul. What was the relation between the Jews and the governor? Since it seems likely that Damascus was still under Roman rule, the governor was probably the head of a semi-autonomous colony of Nabataeans in Damascus. According to this view, a coalition of Jews and Nabataeans, acting through the governor, was trying to arrest and kill Paul.

An early chronology of Saul’s life: Luke’s references here to what Saul did immediately after his conversion is difficult to fit in with Paul’s own account of his conversion and the immediately subsequent events (see Gal 1:15-24). Mainly because he does not mention the details, but just the direction. This confusion, however, does help to substantiate Lukan authorship of Acts. Certainly no later admirer of Paul would have disregarded Paul’s most important autobiographical statement in Galatians about his conversion and commission and given a portrayal that can be taken as ambiguous. But if, as seems likely, the letter to the Galatians was written before Luke himself joined Paul’s missionary team, then it may very well have been the case that Luke was unfamiliar with the specific contents of Paul’s earlier Galatian letter and thus decided to brush over the specifics of this part of Paul’s story.

Of more importance, however, is the fact that the purposes of Paul in Gal 1:15-24 and Luke here are different, with these purposes affecting both the selection and shaping of each writer’s presentation. Thus in his desire to assert the revelational nature of his Gentile ministry, Paul emphasized in Galatians that he was not dependent upon “any man” (Gal 1:16) for his distinctive gospel, and particularly not upon the Jerusalem apostles. Luke, however, while also interested in depicting the heaven-ordained nature of Paul’s conversion and commission, is concerned here to stress the genuineness of Saul’s conversion and call. This he does by speaking of the new convert’s distinctly Christian proclamation in the synagogues of Damascus and his persecution by the Jews of the city because of his preaching (neither of these are ruled out by Gal 1:15-24).

A likely historical reconstruction is as follows: (1) Saul's conversion and commission (9:1-19a); (2) his preaching in the synagogues of Damascus for a time immediately following his conversion (9:19b-22); (3) his prolonged residence in Arabia (Gal 1:17); (4) his return to Damascus (9:23-25); and (5) his first visit to Jerusalem as a Christian some three years after his conversion, with his subsequent travel to Caesarea, Syria, and Cilicia (9:26-30; Gal 1:18-24). Zondervan NIV Bible Commentary





Learning Session

Read the above passage and then share about a time when you have come across opposition, share how you got through it. Then split up into smaller groups to discuss the following questions.

- Why do you think Paul jumps with both feet into preaching Jesus so quickly?
- What changes did people notice in you once you began to follow Jesus? How did they react to you?
- With whom have you had a hard time being accepted? Has anyone been a Barnabas for you — befriending you when no one else would, or when you were struggling?

Gather together for some feedback and sharing. Note that everyone is different, some start their new faith with a bang because they have knowledge that has all just clicked into the right place. Others, although passionate and able to share their story so far, need to take baby steps because they know and understand very little beyond their experience. Either way, the place where we want to be is moving forward, regardless of hardship or resistance. Paul doesn't let anything deter him, he has found Jesus and no matter what people do to him he will follow Jesus to the grave.

Discussion Questions

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