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Acts 9:19b-31

Outward Church: Three Life-Lessons for New Believers

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For me one of the most exciting things in life is to see someone new come to faith in Christ, or someone who has been kind of surface-level about Jesus, really commit and dive deep. I love the passion, the excitement, the willingness to share about Christ. It's a special time.

If you're a **new Christian**, this sermon is for you. How can we keep a **good thing going**? I want to talk about how we can **plug you in** and **keep you growing** in your **walk with Jesus**.

If you're a **longtime Christian**, this sermon is also for you. How can we help new believers **flourish** and in the process be **renewed** and **reenergized** ourselves? How can we **help disciple** new believers?

Where are you in your **walk with God**? Which **category** are you in? New believer, longtime follower, in need of renewal? I want to look at the **new-convert Saul**. He's a brand new Christian. He's energized. He's excited. And things go poorly for him. I see **three life-lessons** we can take **from this time of his life**.

Life-Lesson #1: Share the excitement for Jesus. (v19b-22)

As a new believer, one of the best things you can do is share Christ (Rom 10:9-15). The great part is, right now, at this stage, maybe it feels **natural**. You're like, "I'm a Christian! Why isn't everyone a Christian!" I think Saul was a little like this. After Jesus appears to Saul on the road to Damascus, he tells everyone.

Acts 9:19b-22 (ESV)

For some days he was with the disciples at Damascus. 20 And immediately he proclaimed Jesus in the synagogues, saying, "He is the Son of God." 21 And all who heard him were amazed and said, "Is not this the man who made havoc in Jerusalem of those who called upon this name? And has he not come here for this purpose, to bring them bound before the chief priests?" 22 But Saul increased all the more in strength, and confounded the Jews who lived in Damascus by proving that Jesus was the Christ.

The **Jews in Damascus** are **so confused**. "Isn't this the guy who came here to persecute the believers? To drag them away and throw them in prison? Now he's teaching that Jesus is the **Son of God** and **Messiah!**" For Saul to identify Jesus as the "Son of God" and the "Christ" (Hebrew "Messiah") is especially significant (Psalm 2:7). **God promised David**, the most famous king of Israel, that one day one of his **descendants** would rule as **God's specially chosen king**, which is what "Messiah" means (**anointed king**). See how God identifies one of **king David's descendants** as "**son**" and also "**king**?"

2 Samuel 7:12-14a (ESV)

12 When your days are fulfilled and you lie down with your fathers, I will raise up your offspring after you, who shall come from your body, and I will establish his kingdom. 13 He shall build a house for my name, and I will establish the throne of his kingdom forever. 14 I will be to him a father, and he shall be to me a son...

It doesn't just matter **what Saul is saying** about Jesus. It also **matters where he's saying it**, in the **synagogue**, the place where the Jewish people studied the law, the prophets, and yearned for the Messiah to

come. It would be like walking into a **Graceland, Elvis Presley's home**, and telling everyone, "**Guys, Elvis is alive!**" And then proceeding to make a **logical** and **reasonable case Elvis is alive**. The people wouldn't know what to do with you. That's how the Jews respond to Saul. They're **baffled** and **confused**.

Have you ever seen someone come to Christ who starts **posting** all about Jesus on **Facebook** or telling everyone how **great their church is**? Sometimes it really **weirds** other people out. You know what, I think that's okay. Let's **embrace the weird**. When I really got serious about Jesus in my teen years, I viewed it as **my mission** to tell others about him. At the time I would **write devotionals** and **email** them out. If I got your email, I'd add you to the list (without asking!). Some people liked it and others told me to take them off my list. **Spamming** for Jesus! Now I **don't** think I was **super effective**. I could have used a **mentor guiding** me. But I also think that **new-convert enthusiasm** is something to be **celebrated**. Sure there will be **mistakes**, but nothing we **can't work through** (John 8:32, 1 Pet 3:15).

If you're a **new Christian**, **be all in**. Tell everyone! For **longtime believers**, let's **encourage that enthusiasm**. It can be incredibly **refreshing** to hear how excited someone is about their newfound faith in Christ Jesus, like a **shot of adrenaline**. *Life lesson #1 is: share the excitement for Jesus.*

Life-Lesson #2: God works in failure. (v23-25, 29-31)

It's okay to fail because God is still using that to build his kingdom.

Acts 9:23-24 (ESV)

23 When many days had passed, the Jews plotted to kill him, 24 but their plot became known to Saul. They were watching the gates day and night in order to kill him, 25 but his disciples took him by night and let him down through an opening in the wall, lowering him in a basket.

Saul is so hard core and preaching Christ so much that the Jewish authorities in Damascus **plot to kill him**. Looking back later in life Saul describes **his weakness** but **God's strength**.

2 Corinthians 11:30-33 (ESV)

30 If I must boast, I will boast of the things that show my weakness. 31 The God and Father of the Lord Jesus, he who is blessed forever, knows that I am not lying. 32 At Damascus, the governor under King Aretas was guarding the city of Damascus in order to seize me, 33 but I was let down in a basket through a window in the wall and escaped his hands.

Saul was in **such danger** that he had to step into a basket and be lowered on a rope out the window to escape. Here Paul is, freshly commissioned by Ananias, filled with the Holy Spirit, and preaching the gospel, but his preaching is so **inflammatory** that he get's **chased out** of the city. And it happens not once, but **twice**. After Saul goes down to Jerusalem, the Greek-speaking Jews try to kill him just like they killed Steven. But this time **his fellow believers** actually send him away.

Acts 9:29-31 (ESV)

29 And he spoke and disputed against the Hellenists. But they were seeking to kill him. 30 And when the brothers learned this, they brought him down to Caesarea and sent him off to Tarsus.

And you know what happens once Saul goes home to Tarsus? Things actually **get better** for the believers in Jerusalem, not exactly a **glowing reflection** on Saul.

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.

You know when you're at a **family gathering** and **that one family member** who **always causes problems** finally **leaves**? You let out a **sigh of relief**, "Whew! I'm so glad they're gone." That's kind of how the early Christians seemed to **feel** about Saul.

But here's the thing. God was still at work in Saul. Remember what God told Ananias when he went to heal Saul and bring him into Damascus?

Acts 9:15-16 (ESV)

15 But the Lord said to him, "Go, for he is a chosen instrument of mine to carry my name before the Gentiles and kings and the children of Israel. 16 For I will show him how much he must suffer for the sake of my name."

God's mission was never really for Saul to just preach to the Jews. Already God was preparing Saul for a lifetime of ministry to the **Gentiles**, the non-Jews. Although he looks **kind of like a failure here** he would go on to become the **greatest missionary of all time**.

It sure **seemed like failure** when Jim Elliott and four friends were **martyred** in **Ecuador** trying to reach an **unreached tribe with Jesus**. But the Lord has used that **story** to **inspire millions** and reach the tribe that killed them with the gospel message. More recently it sure **seems like failure** when Joyce Lin, a fellow Gordon-Conwell alumni, worked through years of training and education so she could join Mission Aviation Fellowship (MAF) and fly to support missionary efforts, crashed her plane and died "transporting rapid test kits and school supplies to a village in Papua" Indonesia, just two years after graduating seminary (M.Div. '17). But in **God's kingdom** her moment of **greatest loss** was actually her **greatest victory** as she gave her life for her king. Now maybe you're not going to be a global missionary, but we've all failed.

Where have you **failed for Jesus**? Where have you blown it? Maybe in your **exuberance** for Christ you've **alienated** family members and friends. Well, God can still use you. Maybe he'll give you **another chance** with them or maybe you won't alienate the next. God knows and we can trust him.

For several years when **I was a teenager** my friends and I just kind of **did whatever we wanted**. We'd stay up late **watching movies** and **drinking** and then I'd get up and **go to church the next day**. I was **not** a very **consistent Christian**, and neither were they. There came a point when I decided to **confess** and **start over**. It was really **nice for me**, a **clean start**, but it also really **alienated them**. You know, "Jonathan got to clean up his act but look how bad it makes us look." And yet, despite the failure of my **alienation**, God used that time to help me grow deep in my faith, and really know Christ. It was when I felt absolutely **broken** that **Jesus seemed so good**. That change helped me **commit to following Christ**. That's when I started **spamming everyone!** Since then God has **graciously given** me **small moments of restoration** with each of those friends. It will never be like it was, but I know God is still working on them too.

Maybe as a new believer your failure has nothing to do with sharing the gospel. Maybe you've fallen back into **sin** or are finding it **difficult** to **break** some **engrained habits**. Or maybe you're really **wrestling** with **doubt** and are afraid of falling back into **unbelief**. Maybe you're experiencing **problems** in your **workplace** or **family**, in your **marriage**. You're on a **journey**. Invite **Christ to walk it with you**, not just to give you success, but to **work in your brokenness**. *Life-Lesson #2: God works in failure.*

Maybe you're a **mature Christian** who **should have helped a new Christian grow in their faith**, but you **didn't**, and they **walked away from Jesus**. God can still use you. **Look around**, who might that **next new believer** or **young believer** be?

As I **transition** to the third life lesson I want to briefly mention that it's around this time that Saul takes a trip to **Arabia**. **Galatians 1:17-18** tell us that Saul was based in Damascus for **three years** (after only planning to go there to round up the Christians). **During this time** he made a trip to **Arabia**, but we don't know why

or for how long. Some think it's because he had to **rework his theology** and understanding of **Scripture**. When he was **sent off to Tarsus**, he stayed there for about **ten years**. We really **don't know much** about Saul's three years in Damascus/Arabia or ten years in Tarsus. That was a **long time, 13 years**. Saul **didn't conquer Rome** in a day. It was a **long slow start** before he even went on his **three missionary journeys** or **wrote most of the New Testament**. *Maybe failure isn't really failure but preparation.*

Life-Lesson #3: Find a friend for the journey. (v26-28)

After Saul leaves Damascus and Arabia, he travels back down south to **Jerusalem** before heading to Tarsus, his **hometown**. But when he gets back the believers there are **still afraid of him**. He must have **been really bad** for them to worry so much.

Acts 9:26-28 (ESV)

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. 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. 28 So he went in and out among them at Jerusalem, preaching boldly in the name of the Lord.

Saul needs a friend. He needs someone who **loves** and **supports** him. But **not everyone has what he needs**, but **Barnabas is uniquely gifted** and **called** by God to **be an encourager**. Back in **Acts 4** he **sold a field** and gave it to the church; and the apostles were so encouraged they gave him the **nickname**, "Barnabas (which means **son of encouragement**"). Barnabas had such a **good reputation** in the church he could **advocate for Saul** and people would **believe him**, and that's what he did. He told them Saul really did **believe in Christ** and **put his life on the line to tell others**.

Paul and Barnabas **form a friendship**. The next time we hear of Saul is when **Barnabas goes to Tarsus** to look for Saul in **Acts 11:25**. Barnabas has a **special gifting to see what others don't**. He sees it in Saul, and later when he and Saul (then called Paul) get in an **argument over Mark**, **Barnabas sticks with Mark** even though he **doesn't** seem to **deserve it**.

How can you be a Christian friend to someone in our church? If you're a **new Christian**, could you find someone like Barnabas who can **encourage** you, **affirm** you, **disciple** you? Or for us **longtime followers of Jesus**, could you act like Barnabas and **be a friend, find someone to encourage**? Maybe it will only last for a **season** like it did for Saul and Barnabas or maybe for a **lifetime**. **Who** do you think the Lord might **have for you**, both to help you on your way or who you can help? *Life Lesson #3: Find a friend for the journey.*

What makes this possible is that **Jesus calls us his friends**. Jesus tells his disciples in **John 15** that he **isn't** going to call them "servants" but "**friends**." The **greatest joy of Christianity**, the greatest **discovery**, is that **Jesus has found us for the journey**. He **calls us friend**. He **picks us up** when we **stumble**. He **forgives us** when we **sin**. He shares our **enthusiasm** for what **God is doing** in our lives. But he's not just any type of friend. He's the type of friend who **lays down his life for you**.

John 15:13 (ESV)

Greater love has no one than this, that someone lay down his life for his friends.

Jesus loves us. His love and friendship makes **friendship with God possible** (Isaiah 41:8; James 2:23). So **what** are the **three life-lessons for new believers**?

Life-Lesson #1: Share your excitement for Jesus.

Life-Lesson #2: God works in failure.

Life-Lesson #3: Find a friend for the journey.

Let's pray.

Pastor [Jonathan Romig](#) preached this message to Cornerstone Congregational Church. You can download a PDF copy of this sermon above, which includes endnotes and references, or share it through [Apple podcasts](#) or [Google Play Music](#). Read the [story of our church here](#).

Discussion Questions

1. Where are you in your walk with God? Do you believe? If so, for how long?
2. How do you feel about Jesus? Why do you think you feel that way?
3. How have you failed in your Christian walk?
4. What makes a good friend?
5. What difference might a friendship strengthened by Christian brotherhood or sisterhood make?
6. How can you be a Christian friend to someone in your church?
7. How is Jesus our friend? What type of friendship does he offer us?