# Saul's Early Trials

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[0:00] Acts chapter 9, and we left off last time at verse 18, and so we're going to pick it back up at verse 18 If you remember, we are talking about here in Acts chapter 9, it records the conversion of Saul.

The conversion of Saul, who was to become the Apostle Paul, and who was a mighty weapon in the hands of God. This man was used by the Lord in powerful, powerful ways.
And so here we have his first beginnings as a Christian, as a follower of Jesus. Obviously he was a persecutor of the church, he hated Christians, and then he was met by Christ on his way to Damascus to persecute the church there, and he was saved, and he was called to be an Apostle to the Gentiles.
And so we're going to pick up here in verse 19 and go through some of the events that immediately happened after his conversion, and then Paul will kind of go to the background for a while in the book of Acts, and then he'll come back, and he'll be the predominant figure throughout the rest of it.
So let's begin reading first Acts chapter 9, beginning in verse 19, and read through verse 31. And immediately something like scales fell from his eyes, and he regained his sight.
[1:44] Then he rose and was baptized, and taking food he was strengthened. For some days he was with the disciples at Damascus, and immediately he proclaimed Jesus in the synagogue, saying, He is the Son of God. 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? But Saul increased all the more in strength, and confounded the Jews who lived in Damascus by proving that Jesus was the Christ.
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, but his disciples took him by night and let him down through an opening in the wall, lowering him in a basket.
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. 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.
So he went in and out among them at Jerusalem, preaching boldly in the name of the Lord. And he spoke and disputed against the Hellenists, but they were seeking to kill him. And when the brothers learned this, they brought him down to Caesarea and sent him off to Tarsus.
[3:03] So the church throughout 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.

Many of you have probably heard the name Dietrich Bonhoeffer. He was a pastor in Germany during the Nazi occupation. He left for a time, came back to continue to preach the gospel, and eventually he was martyred for his faith in Christ by the Nazis.
And I think it was only a couple days after that that the war ended. Am I correct in that? Yeah. So this man gave his life for the Lord, and he said this.
He said, When God calls a man, he bids him to come and die. When God calls a man, he bids him to come and die. What does he mean by that? Well, we know from Scripture that converting to Christianity means that you become a follower of Jesus by faith.
In John 10, verses 26 through 30, we see that Jesus clearly states that. There are the crowds, if you remember, where they were flocking to see him. They were impressed by his miracles.
[4:15] They were impressed by his healings of all kinds of diseases, his ability to cast out demons. They were filled up with the bread and the fish that he multiplied in a miraculous way.

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And they were entertained very much by him. But Jesus warned them that following him, to follow him, was very costly.
And so in Mark 8, verses 34 through 38, the Lord says, And calling the crowd to him with his disciples, he said to them, If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross, which is an instrument of death, and follow me.
For whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake in the Gospels will save it. For what does it profit a man to gain the whole world and forfeit his soul?
For what can a man give in return for his soul? For whoever is ashamed of me and my words in this adulterous and sinful generation, of him will the Son of Man also be ashamed when he comes in the glory of his Father with the holy angels.
[5:20] And so that is not a text that you will hear Joel Osteen or Kenneth Copeland preach. That is not a text that is in line with what the prosperity gospel preaches, teaches, because they avoid persecution.

If you're being persecuted, they think it's because you don't have enough faith or you haven't sown enough seed money or whatever. But if you read the Bible, you know that the prosperity gospel is actually the one that is incompatible with what God's word actually says.
And we see there that being a follower of Christ means that we don't deny ourselves and follow him. It means that we place higher value on our eternal life than our earthly life.
It does mean. I messed that up. Let me say that again. Being a follower of Christ means that we deny ourselves and follow him.
That sounds much better. It means that we place higher value on our eternal life than we do on our earthly life. It means that we store up treasure in heaven instead of doing all that we can here on earth to store up treasures on earth.
[6:36] And primarily, it means also that we fear God more than we fear man. Jesus spoke many times about what it would cost a person to follow him.

Following Jesus costs you your life. There's your first fill-in. Luke 14, 27. Whoever does not bear his own cross and come after me, Jesus says, cannot, cannot be my disciple.
The only reason, again, that one would take up a cross was for the purpose of dying upon it. So following Jesus costs you your life.
Secondly, following Jesus may cost the loss of family and friends. Following him may mean that you lose family and friends.
Again, Matthew 10, 34-39. The Lord says, Do not think that I have come to bring peace to the earth. I have not come to bring peace but a sword.
[7:38] For I have come to set a man against his father and a daughter against her mother and a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law. And a person's enemies will be those of his own household. Whoever loves father or mother more than me is not worthy of me.

And whoever loves son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me. And whoever does not take up his cross and follow me is not worthy of me. Whoever finds his life will lose it.
And whoever loses his life for my sake will find it. Very clearly stated. So the main idea for our study today is this. The ultimate end of the gospel is peace with God.
The immediate result of the gospel is frequently conflict. The ultimate end of the gospel is peace with God. But the immediate result of the gospel is frequently conflict.
Following Jesus may cost the loss of earthly treasures. So following him may mean that we lose earthly treasures here that maybe you valued before you knew Christ as your Lord and Savior.
[8:46] And thinking about this, it brings to mind the rich young man, if you remember, who encountered Jesus and asked him what he must do to have eternal life. And in Matthew 19.21, Jesus said to him, If you wish to be complete, go and sell your possessions and give to the poor and you will have treasure in heaven.

And come and follow me. Follow me. And obviously, if you remember that story, the man was unwilling to do that because he loved his earthly treasures more than he loved Jesus. And he wasn't willing to part with those things.
And so sadly, that man, like many today, still forsake Jesus because they're not willing to lose those earthly treasures. Following Jesus will cost our comfort.
It will cost our comfort. Christians should expect suffering as a normal part of belonging to Jesus. So if you're being persecuted as a Christian, it means you're doing something right.

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It does not mean that you're doing something wrong. Matthew 5.10-12 says, Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are you when others revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. [10:03] Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven. For so they persecuted the prophets who were before you. And so if you read the Bible, a student of Scripture will see clearly that God's people have always faced persecution.

God's people have always faced persecution. The prophets were reviled, they were tortured, they were killed. History records that ten of Jesus' disciples were executed for preaching the gospel. Tradition states that Peter insisted on being crucified upside down because he counted himself unworthy to die in the same manner as his Lord. Yet he wrote in 1 Peter 4.14, Following Jesus doesn't necessarily mean you'll lose your possessions.
It doesn't necessarily mean you'll lose your family or your friends or your physical life. But the question is this, Are you willing, in following Christ, are you willing to lose those things if that is what he calls you to do?
If that's what your association with him means, are you willing even to lose your life for him? While the cost of discipleship seems high, persecution brings earthly and heavenly rewards.
[11:29] The Lord is with believers when they face persecution. Matthew 28.20, we're promised from the Lord that he will be with us when we're persecuted. Hebrews 13.5 says the same. Also, we have this promise from God in 1 Corinthians 10.13 and 2 Corinthians 12.9 that he knows our limits and gives us grace to endure whatever we face for him.

Matthew 5.10-12 is another promise that he will reward us with heavenly treasures when we are persecuted. Romans 8.28 says that he works persecution for good, shaping the believer's character and glorifying himself in the process.
The rewards far outweigh the cost of following Jesus. Jesus suffered and died on the cross to take believer's punishment for sin.
Although a Christian's enduring persecution does not add any saving merit to the perfect work of Christ, a true believer will faithfully follow Jesus through suffering, and good will come and result from it.
1 Peter 2.21-25 says this, For this you have been called, because Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example, so that you might follow in his steps.
[12:50] He committed no sin, neither was deceit found in his mouth. When he was reviled, he did not revile in return. When he suffered, he did not threaten, but continued entrusting himself to him who judges justly.

He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree, that we might die to sin and live to righteousness. By his wounds you have been healed, for you were straying like sheep, but have now returned to the shepherd, an overseer of your souls.
And so here we see, as we've read, that Paul becomes well acquainted with suffering for Christ immediately after he is saved. And we know that this is a man who knew the cost well of what it meant to be a disciple and follower of Jesus Christ.
Beginning here, we see that Paul's life soon followed this pattern. This was the pattern that his life became. He would go to a place, there he would preach Christ boldly, he would become the object of murderous plots and threats, then he would escape, and then he would go to the next place and repeat the same process.
And in that process, people would hear the gospel, and many were saved as a result. So welcome to the ministry of Paul. Go to a place, preach the gospel, be threatened for doing so, be kicked out of town, establish a church, go on to the next place, do the same.
[14:17] So here we see first in Damascus, proclamation, astonishment, conspiracy, and escape.

So these are the things that characterizes his time in Damascus. Proclamation, astonishment, conspiracy, and escape. In verses 19 through 25.
So Saul has undergone a total transformation. He is telling everyone about Jesus, the one who changed him, who was the one whom he was persecuting just days before.
In verse 20 it says, And immediately he proclaimed Jesus in the synagogue, saying, He is the Son of God. So Saul became a new person, and he became a new person with a new message.
He went from persecuting those who proclaimed Jesus as Christ, to himself proclaiming that Jesus was the Christ. And then from that to being the one who was persecuted, for proclaiming that Jesus

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was the Christ.
[15:18] So here we see the persecutor, the once former persecutor, now becomes the persecuted. In verse 21 it says, 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? So here's the reactions to Saul. They're astonished. Everyone can't believe what they're seeing.
This man has completely flipped. He's been transformed. He's had some kind of amazing interaction. They're seeing that, you know, something has happened in this man's life.
He's no longer who he was. He's not doing the same things he used to do. He's got a completely new message. And he is saying something totally different about Christians and Christ than he did before.
And so that's what would have been completely astonishing to them. And so you try to think, Well, how could we compare? What would be an illustration that would help us to see how astonishing this might be?
[16:22] And so I know we talked about this before. And somebody brought up this illustration. I think it was Tom. And I kind of elaborated on it. How astonishing would it be? Well, it would be like this. Osama bin Laden, when he was alive, dressed up as Uncle Sam, pledging allegiance to the flag, and then sitting down right afterward and eating an apple pie.

That would be pretty astonishing, right? And so that image, those two images don't seem to fit. And so that's the same way. When people saw Paul, Saul acting like a Christian, those things didn't match in their minds.
And then in verse 22 it says, But Saul increased all the more in strength and confounded the Jews who lived in Damascus by proving that Jesus was the Christ. And so it seems when it says that he increased in strength that this is referring to his spiritual strength.
God continued to empower Saul to testify to the good news of the gospel. Soon the man's ministry began to frustrate the Jews who were in Damascus because they couldn't counter his claims about Jesus being the Christ.
If you remember, this was the same case with Stephen as well. No one could withstand his wisdom with which he spoke. And so they sought to put him to death.
[17:41] And likewise, now Saul faces the same kind of murderous scheme. But the Lord, this time, according to his sovereignty and his will, doesn't allow Saul to be martyred at this point in his life.

In verses 24 through 25, they detail Saul's Indiana Jones-like escape from his would-be assassins. They put him in a basket and they lower him over the walls of the city and lower him down to safety. So we see here again that following Jesus isn't easy, but he is with us and whatever we face for him, we understand that his grace is sufficient as we go through that, as we endure that.
In 2 Corinthians, Paul rattles off a host of trials that he endured as a follower of Christ. Chapter 11 of that book culminates in his escape from Damascus.
This is what he said. With far greater labors, far more imprisonments, talking about his ministry, with countless beatings and often near death. Five times I received at the hands of the Jews the forty lashes less one.
[18:50] Three times I was beaten with rods. Once I was stoned. Three times I was shipwrecked, a night and a day adrift at sea, on frequent journeys, in danger from my own people, danger from Gentiles, danger in the city, danger in the wilderness, danger at sea, danger from false brothers, in toil and hardship, through many a sleepless night, in hunger and thirst, often without food, in cold and exposure.

And apart from other things, there is the daily pressure on me of my anxiety for all the churches. Who is weak, and I am not weak? Who is made to fall, and I am not indignant?
If I must boast, I will boast of the things that show my weakness. The God and Father of the Lord Jesus Christ, He who is blessed forever, knows that I am not lying. At Damascus, the governor under King Aretas, was guarding the city of Damascus in order to seize me, but I was let down in a basket through a window in the wall, and escaped his hands.
So Paul's words, give us a much needed dose of reality. Living in a fallen world is difficult, and following Jesus in a fallen world, means that we will suffer.

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So don't be surprised when you yourself face trials and opposition when you proclaim Jesus as Lord.
[20:15] But Paul's words again remind us that the Lord is with us in the midst of our trials, and we can still rejoice in Him as we go through those things. Paul's words remind us that God is sovereign.

Neither the city's governor nor those who had gathered against Him could take Him captive. In the midst of your trials, remember that there's only one sovereign Lord, and so because we know that, we can live in confident trust in Him.
The next location is Jerusalem. And in Jerusalem, three words that characterize his time there is suspicion, conspiracy, and escape. Verses 26 through 30.
In verse 26, it says, when He came 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.
So in Jerusalem, the Christians who had received reports about His conversion were full of suspicion. Because you think, if you were going to try to put an end to the church, you would try to infiltrate it, maybe, and maybe they're trying to get us to believe that this guy is actually a Christian.
[21:26] Can we believe that the reports are true? Are we going to open up our doors and let Him in? And then He's going to put an end to our church here. And so there was a great deal of suspicion surrounding the Apostle Paul.

And so you have this, you read in the text here that the Christians see him and they think, well, not so fast, buddy, right? We've got to check your references. We're not quite sure that we believe that this amazing conversion is actually true.
But Barnabas, it says in verse 27, took him and brought him to the apostles and he declared to them how on the road he had seen the Lord who spoke to him, how at Damascus he had preached boldly in the name of Jesus.
And so thankfully for Saul, he had someone like Barnabas who came alongside him, who was able to be his advocate, and who was able to verify to the rest of the church that this man's testimony was true.
And as a result of Barnabas' intervention, the disciples received Saul then as their brother because they trusted Barnabas in what he said.
[22:35] In verse 28, it says, so he went in and out among them at Jerusalem preaching boldly in the name of the Lord. He was a bold man and so all Christians should be bold.

We have reason to be bold. And so if you're not bold, you should pray for boldness and you should probably read your Bible more and that will make you be more bold. In verse 29, Saul is disputing with the Hellenists.
That was a group that again was back in chapter 6, verse 9, and they were there at Stephen's trial. And Saul was likely at one point in time a leader in the Greek-speaking synagogue.
So these were once his people, likely. And so now he's disputing with them about Jesus with the men who maybe had once trusted him, viewed him as a leader of their group.
As a result of Saul's bold preaching, he faces the same problem that he faced in Damascus. He becomes a target of murderous plots. So we see the pattern continues to, well, it's established.
[23:41] He already had it once in Damascus, now it's beginning to be the case for him in Jerusalem. His Christian brothers then send him away to Tarsus in verse 30. And then he, that basically is Saul's departure as he's en route to his hometown.

And he exits the book of Acts at this point until Barnabas goes and retrieves him several years later. And that happens in Acts chapter 11. So again, this passage underscores the nature of being a witness and is a reminder of the importance of being an encourager to other believers.
Paul provides us with an example of a faithful witness. First of all, we see from his example that faithful witnesses are Christ-centered.
Faithful witnesses are Christ-centered. Saul goes about preaching Christ, not talking about himself or giving any kind of how to live a better life sermons or write a book about how you can live your best life now.
He's a Christ-centered man. He's a Christ-centered faithful witness. Secondly, we see from his example that faithful witnesses is empowered or are empowered, I should say.
[24:55] Faithful witnesses are empowered. Again, the Bible says that Saul was strengthened, strengthened by his new relationship with the Lord and as a result of his conversion, the indwelling of the Holy Spirit.

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Thirdly, we see as we've talked about faithful witnesses are bold. Faithful witnesses are bold. These early Christians were very bold in their witness and as a result of that, the gospel spread far and wide.
Number four, faithful witnesses will suffer. Faithful witnesses will suffer. And so, our prayer should not be, Lord, keep me from suffering, but our prayer should be, Lord, empower me to give bold proclamation for you, even if that means that I suffer as a result.
Barnabas then provides us with an example of Christ-like love that we need to imitate. First of all, we can follow from Barnabas' example that he took Paul.
He took him. He spent time with this man who was once an enemy of the church. Barnabas may have known people who Paul arrested and threw in the jail, but he took this man, he spent time with this man, he listened to this man, and he was used by God to help train this man.
[26:25] So that's the second one, he listened to him. He took him and he listened to him. Thirdly, he encouraged him.

Barnabas, the son of encouragement, right? This was a man whose spiritual gift was encouraging, and he took Paul, he listened to Paul, and then he encouraged him.
Fourthly, then he advocated for him. They were suspicious of him, they didn't want to trust him, but because Barnabas had taken him, because Barnabas had listened to him, because Barnabas had encouraged him, he was able to then advocate for him.
Then fifthly, he befriended him. He became a close friend of the Apostle Paul, and God used that friendship to spread the gospel again, far and wide.
And then sixthly, as I just said, he ministered alongside of him. He took him, he listened to him, he encouraged him, he advocated for him, he befriended him, and he ministered alongside of him.
[27:33] And then we see that the end of this passage is marked by peace in the midst of trials. Peace in the midst of trials. The church has been through a lot.

They had experienced a widespread persecution after Stephen's martyrdom. Now Saul was also breathing threats against them, now he's been converted.
There was a lot of turmoil, there was a lot of trials, but we see here in the midst of all of that, in verse 31, there is peace. Luke moves the Acts narrative along with this summary.
He says, So the church throughout all Judea, Galilee, and Samaria had peace and was strengthened. Living in fear of the Lord and encouraged by the Holy Spirit, it increased in numbers.
So as it's enduring these trials, as it's experiencing these sufferings, they're continuing to increase in numbers. The gospel is continuing to spread.
[28:32] People are continuing to hear it, and God is bringing people into his church. Though the church faced many threats and trials externally, it experienced great peace inwardly.

We experience peace through a right relationship with God through Jesus Christ. When we walk humbly, prayerfully, and dependently with the Lord, we will find peace even as we are in the midst of trials.
You ever been in one of those situations before where life was real hard and you were probably praying that the Lord would return at that moment? You ever been that way before? You know, go out and you try to start the car and it doesn't start and you're downtown Kansas City far away from home?
I'm using a personal example. Lord, just come back and I don't even have to get the car towed or anything and we don't have to worry about getting it fixed. I'm ready to go. But you've probably been in that situation before or something similar.
And things that are much harder than that. You lose somebody you love dearly and even in a tragic way, but yet you have peace during that time. Why is that? Well, because you know Jesus Christ and you know that there is a hope to come for everybody who is a follower of Jesus Christ.
[29:45] I just read in a book that I'm reading, it's called The Gospel by J.D. Greer, and he says in there, and I'm paraphrasing, but he talks about how the time to be, the greatest time to be a witness for Christ is in the midst of suffering.

You know, because you hear he was talking about a prosperity teacher who was talking about, hey, if you just give me $1,500, I think was the amount, or if you have whatever you have left on your credit card, just go ahead and max it out and give it to us.
And won't your neighbors be impressed when you drive home in your new BMW and that big smile? And his point was nobody's going to believe the gospel in that picture, you know? Oh, look at him.

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They're not going to believe that. What they're going to be impacted by, what they're going to believe is when your body is riddled with cancer and you're about to die, and yet you still show that your hope is in Jesus Christ.
And when they see that, they say, that's different. Because most people don't have that kind of hope. I don't have that kind of hope. I don't have that kind of joy. But when you do that, man, it's an opportunity to give bold witness for the Lord Jesus and people take notice of that.
[30:48] Saul's life wasn't changed by karma or looking within to find his true self or by finding some kind of self-help plan. Jesus is what changed Saul.

Jesus changed him forever. He is the life changer. In him there is hope for both the self-righteous moralist and the unrighteous hedonist. He can make all things new.
Amen. Let's pray. Lord God, we thank you for this time that we've had together. We thank you, Lord, for your goodness and your sovereign plan and your grace.
Father, if we were you, we would look at someone like Saul from Tarsus and we would think, got to get rid of this guy. He's an enemy. He's no good. But yet, Lord, you and your sovereignty called this man and you used him in incredible ways to spread the gospel.
And so, God, we know that you've called us to salvation in Jesus Christ. And for those of us whom you've called, you've also commissioned us to go and to share this good news, to make disciples, and to take the gospel to the ends of the earth.
[31:59] And so, God, we pray that we would do that boldly and that we would do that compassionately and that whatever we might face suffering or persecution as a result of that, that we wouldn't be, that we wouldn't, that we wouldn't stop because of that, but that that would, that that would embolden us even further.

And that other people would see, Lord, when we're suffering, that our hope is still in Christ, that our faith is unshaken, Lord. And when you, when you have us go through those times in life, may we be found faithful to you that other people would see us and know that there's something different.
And that something different isn't because we've, again, looked into ourself and we've found or discovered something in and of ourselves, but the difference is that we have heard the gospel.
You have enabled us to believe it. We have received your spirit and we are changed forever as a result of that. So, God, we pray that people would see you in us and that they would hear about you from us.
And we ask these things in Jesus' name. Amen. Amen.

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