

Sunday, September 19, 2025 | Martyrs

Week 6 | Acts 9:19b-31 | "Friends Turned Foes"

READ: Acts 19:19b-31 (ESV)

^{19b} For some days, he [Saul] 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.

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.

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**. 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**.

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**.

Weight loss testimonials are inspiring. In 2013, a 22-year-old Saudi Arabian man, Khalid Shaari, was declared to be "the heaviest living person, and the second-heaviest person in recorded history at 610kg (1,340lb; 96st), behind Jon Brower Minnoch. As a result of medical treatment, he lost a total of 320 kg (710lb; 50st)—more than half his body weight—in six months."¹ Whether due to diet, exercise, or medical treatments, it is good to see people getting

¹ Wikipedia contributors, "Khalid bin Mohsen Shaari," *Wikipedia, The Free Encyclopedia*, https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Khalid_bin_Mohsen_Shaari&oldid=1311360433 (accessed September 20, 2025).

themselves in shape. Anyone who's lost a lot of weight feels like they've become a totally new person and, inevitably, others can't help but notice the change.

Likewise, sometimes when a person becomes a Christian, the change is evident to all. Perhaps someone might've cussed like a sailor, but now their language honors the Lord. Or maybe they were known for wild parties and unbridled drinking, but now, they're self-controlled and sober. Whatever the case may be, and whoever this person may have been before Christ, they are now a new creature, and everyone, even those without a spiritual bone in their body, can tell the difference.

In today's passage, Saul, the former persecutor, comes face-to-face with his old acquaintances and friends. These people will be, in the words of Luke, "amazed" at Saul's conversion. Even they will admit that something happened to him on the road to Damascus. But much to their chagrin, the man who was once the enemy of Christians everywhere has now become an advocate for Christianity. And sadly, unlike with weight loss testimonials, this miraculous transformation won't be met with approval from Saul's former colleagues but hostility; so much so, longtime supporters will *twice* try to assassinate him! Old friends became new enemies.

I want you to notice **two** things:

i. Vs. 19b-25 – Paul confounds his former associates.

Vs. 19b – After his baptism, Luke says Saul joined himself to the disciples at Damascus "for some days." How surreal. He identified himself with the very group he came to imprison. Truly, the gospel community is remarkable. In no other place will you find former enemies fellowshiping with one another.

Vs. 20-21 – But Saul didn't just want fellowship; he also "proclaimed Jesus in the synagogues, saying, 'He is the Son of God.'" Notice the plural of "synagogues." As mentioned last week, there was a sizable population of Jewish people in Damascus at this time, somewhere between 10 and 20 thousand people. It stands to reason that there were multiple synagogues to accommodate so many Jews. Saul sought to proclaim that Jesus is "the Son of God" **in all of them**. And this, Luke tells us, Saul did "immediately." He didn't waste any time sharing the gospel, and neither should anyone else.

Admittedly, given his upbringing and calling, Saul was uniquely qualified to be a preacher. But do not think that new converts are ill-equipped to share the gospel. After Jesus met with the woman at the well in Samaria, she went into the city and proclaimed that Jesus was the Messiah. And John says, because of her testimony, "Many Samaritans from that town believed in [Jesus] because of the woman's testimony, 'He told me all that I ever did'" (Jn. 4:39). **A**

testimony of a new believer is often far more effective at sharing the gospel than a sermon from a seasoned preacher. Luke says, everyone who heard Saul was "amazed [emphasis added]." The Greek word is *existēmi*, and it means "to cause to be in a state in which things seem to make little or no sense, 'confuse,' 'amaze,' 'astound.'"² The people simply couldn't believe their eyes because they recognized this was the very "man who made havoc in Jerusalem of those who called upon this name," and they knew Saul had come to Damascus "to bring them bound before the chief priests." They knew, intuitively, something had happened to Saul on the road from Jerusalem to Damascus. The greatest pulpit is made up of the remains of an old life, whereupon a new believer proclaims the truths of the gospel.

Vs. 22 – Understandably, Saul was met with resistance. But Luke says, "Saul increased all the more in strength." In other words, he got **better** at proclaiming Christ as the Son of God. Even Saul had to develop as a preacher and teacher of the gospel. Yet, despite his inexperience, we're told he successfully "confounded the Jews who lived in Damascus by proving that Jesus was the Christ." Saul had a rebuttal for every argument the Jews could throw at him. Though they knew the playbook, Saul was the one who wrote it.

Vs. 23-24a – Saul proclaimed that Jesus is "the Son of God" for "many days." And eventually, "the Jews plotted to kill him." Luke says, "Their plot became known to Saul," but he doesn't tell us how this came about. In 2 Cor. 11:32, Saul says the Jews utilized the governor of Damascus in their plot to murder him. Perhaps Saul had a friend who was in the governor's employ and thus became aware of Saul's endangerment. Regardless, it is remarkable how quickly the Jews turn to violence. If you can't beat or suppress the truth, agents of the dark will try to kill it. They did it to Jesus, and now they're doing it to Saul.

Vs. 24b – These Jews were so determined to kill Saul that "they were watching the gates day and night." 24-hour surveillance was a small price to pay if they could get rid of Saul. But the fact that they could not readily find Saul meant he was in hiding in Damascus. This would be the first of many instances where Saul would have to lie low.

Vs. 25 – But while the Jews were on a seek and destroy mission, Luke says, Saul was looking for a way to escape. And three things stand out about this:

- (1) Saul already had "disciples." Perhaps these were people he had personally led to the Lord. Or, given his training as a Pharisee of Pharisees (cf. Phil. 3:5) and his commission by Christ on the Damascus Road, Saul would've been more than capable

² DBAG (2000), 350.

of leading others even though he was a new Christian. After all, he had already distinguished himself as a leader within the Jewish community; why not in the church?

- (2) Saul's disciples were committed to his safety. They found an "opening in the wall," put Saul "in a basket," and then they lowered him down outside the city walls. Admittedly, for many, this implies that Saul was of small stature. Perhaps he was like Zacchaeus, a wee little man (cf. Lu. 19:3). But it is impossible to know. According to Biblical scholars, "There is no way of determining from the Greek text precisely the size or type of baskets involved."³ Regardless of how big Saul was, lowering in a basket through an opening in a wall so that he can escape is, quite literally, thinking outside the box. But where there's a will, there's a way. The fact that this plan worked is a testament to God's providence working through man's ingenuity.
- (3) But don't miss the irony here. Not too long ago, the church was helping Christians escape from Saul, and now the church was helping Saul escape! And not only that, but the very people he had initially come to imprison had now become his "disciples."

So, what's the takeaway?

Power **infinite** is God's wisdom **inscripturated**.

Though Saul was the mouthpiece, it was the Holy Spirit who actually did the confounding, proving, and convicting (cf. Jn. 16:8). This is why Saul will tell the church in Corinth,

READ: 1 Corinthians 2:1-5 (ESV)

And I, when I came to you, brothers, did **not** come proclaiming to you the testimony of God with lofty speech or wisdom. For I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ and him crucified. And I was with you in **weakness** and in **fear** and **much trembling**, and my speech and my message were **not** in plausible words of wisdom, but in **demonstration** of the Spirit and of power, so that your faith might **not** rest in the **wisdom** of men but in the **power** of God.

The greatest weapons at our disposal are those which come from God—i.e., the Word and Spirit of God. Power infinite is God's wisdom inscripturated.

ii. Vs. 26-31 – Paul **confronts his former accomplices**.

³ Louw-Nida (1996), 71.

Vs. 26 – Luke says, “**When [Saul] had come to Jerusalem...**” Interestingly, there’s a three-year gap between vs. 25 and vs. 26 (cf. Gal. 1:17). According to Saul, it was during this time that he confirmed his calling to preach Christ “among the Gentiles” (Gal. 1:16). But by the end of it, Jesus sent Saul back to Jerusalem. I imagine that must’ve been difficult. Last time he had been there, he had received extradition papers to root out and imprison Christians in Damascus. And now he was headed there to join the church.

But, when he arrived in Jerusalem, Luke doesn’t say he joined the Christians in Jerusalem; instead, he said, “**he attempted [emphasis added] to join the disciples.**” An attempt was made, but Saul failed. Why? Luke says, “**They were all afraid of him, for they did not believe that he was a disciple.**” Those in Jerusalem were, understandably, scared and skeptical. After all, no one knew Saul the Persecutor better than Christians living in Jerusalem. Perhaps they thought this was a ploy to learn the names and locations of the members of the church.

Vs. 27 – To be accepted into the church, Saul needed a sponsor. Luke tells us, “**But Barnabas took him and brought him to the apostles.**” If you’ll recall, “Barnabas” wasn’t his birth name; that was “Joseph;” he was given the name “Barnabas,” which means “encouragement,” by the apostles (cf. Ac. 4:36). His first entrance into Church history is as a Levite coming to faith and then selling a piece of property and donating the entire sum to the church (cf. Ac. 4:37). Interestingly, Saul and Barnabas will become quite the pair as they’ll be mentioned together another 20x’s (11:30; 12:25; 13:1, 2, 7, 43, 46, 50; 14:12, 14, 20; 15:2 (2x’s), 12, 22, 25, 35, 36, 37, 39).

Luke tells us Barnabas “**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.**” We’re not told how Barnabas knew of Saul’s conversion. Saul may have been able to meet with Barnabas and tell him his story. Or perhaps, Barnabas was among those who fled to Damascus during Saul’s persecution of the church, and so he was in the city to hear Saul preach “boldly in the name of Jesus” firsthand. Either way, the point is, a prominent leader in the church vouched for Saul. Rather than shunning Saul for his past, he welcomed him and even spoke on his behalf.

Vs. 28 – When someone of such high character and esteem vouches on your behalf, people listen. Thanks to Barnabas’s testimony, the church welcomed Saul into the fold. Luke says, “**So he went in and out among them at Jerusalem.**” And, just as he did in Damascus, so he did in Jerusalem: Saul preached “**boldly in the name of the Lord.**”

Vs. 29-30 – Even more remarkable is that Saul “**spoke and disputed against the Hellenists.**” Remember, the “**Hellenists**” were the same group of Jews who, after laying their coats at the

feet of Saul, stoned Stephen (cf. Ac. 6:9). So, rather than supporting them, Saul was opposing the very group he had once led!

You'd think that if one of Jerusalem's star players, someone who had vehemently opposed Christianity and even persecuted Christians, suddenly switched sides, that such a thing would give the Jews pause. But as was the case in Damascus, the Jews in Jerusalem also "[were seeking to kill](#)" Saul. Not even the poster child of Judaism converting to Christianity was enough to convince the Jews that, perhaps, they were in the wrong. Rather than confront the truth, they'd rather do away with Saul. Such a prominent Jewish voice, speaking on behalf of Christians, would be a significant setback for the religious leaders' war on Christianity.

But their plot to kill Saul would ultimately fail. Luke says, "[When the brothers learned this, they brought him down to Caesarea and sent him off to Tarsus.](#)" Interestingly, Saul was from Tarsus (cf. Ac. 22:3); he's headed back to his hometown, where he will minister, including in the surrounding areas of Cilicia and Syria, **for the next eight years** (cf. Acts 11:25).⁴

This is the **second time** in the same passage where Saul is whisked away for his own safety. **Notice, in both instances, Saul isn't the one organizing his escape; each time, it is someone else.** In Damascus, it was "[his disciples](#)" (Ac. 9:25), and here, in Jerusalem, it was "[the brothers.](#)" Doubtless, Saul wanted to avoid death. Nowhere do we see Saul seeking a fight, looking for persecution, or enduring suffering. But, interestingly, the church took ownership of Saul's well-being. **I've said this before, and I'll repeat it, Christians take care of their own (cf. Ac. 2:44-45).**

Vs. 31 – The first great persecution was over. And though persecution would soon begin again with the martyrdom of the Apostle James (cf. Ac. 12:1-2), for the time being, Luke says, "[The church throughout all Judea and Galilee and Samaria had peace and was being built up.](#)" Seasons of extreme persecution come and go, but through it all, believers are at peace and the church continues its construction (cf. Lu. 6:46-49; 1 Pet. 2:5). But how? Luke gives us two clues:

- (1) Luke says the believers were "[walking in the fear of the Lord.](#)" These Christians feared the Lord more than they feared man. They had an everlasting peace, even in the face of death, because, on the one hand, they knew that the worst anyone can do to them was kill their body (cf. Matt. 10:28), while, on the other hand, they knew that the Lord kept watch over their souls (cf. Psa. 12:8). And no one can pluck anyone out of Jesus' hand (cf. Jn. 10:28).
- (2) Luke says the believers were "[walking...in the comfort of the Holy Spirit.](#)" The Greek word translated as "[comfort](#)" is *paraklēsis*, and it's used throughout the Farewell

⁴ Vickers, Brian J., *Acts*, in the ESV Expository Commentary, Vol. IX, John-Acts (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2019), 423.

Discourse to describe the Holy Spirit (cf. Jn. 14:15-17, 26; 15:26; 16:7-15). When believers keep the commandments of God, demonstrating their loving devotion to Jesus Christ, they get divine assistance from the divine Helper. There is such encouragement from the Holy Spirit, even amid bouts of sadness and depression, a believer can rest secure. The ministry of the Spirit comforts us in our miseries.

So, what's the takeaway?

In a world of fear and disbelief, be a Barnabas.

This is not to say that the world isn't a scary place; it most certainly is. Jesus told the apostles, "Behold, I am sending you out as sheep in the midst of wolves, so be wise as serpents and innocent as doves" (Matt. 10:16). A sheep destined for the dinner plate is the sort of sheep that's not watching for wolves. Only a fool denies the dark. True courage acknowledges that there are fearful things in this world, but it does not run from them.

Nor is this to say that skepticism is evil; it most certainly isn't. Proverbs 14:15 says, "The simple believes everything, but the prudent gives thought to his steps." A healthy skepticism is one of the marks of wisdom. Truth faith is discerning, knowing the difference between right and wrong, truths and half-truths.

But this is to say that a Barnabas isn't governed by fear or skepticism but by the hope of the gospel. A full grasp of the gospel gives a heart the courage to face terrifying realities; it makes us optimistic when all seems lost. In Saul, Barnabas saw the potency and power of the gospel. If Saul, the persecutor, could be saved, then anything was possible! When people only saw fear and doubt, Barnabas saw an opportunity to encourage his fellow Christians.

Encouraging one another is a core principle in the church. Interestingly, Saul wanted to meet with the Christians in Rome, not only for their benefit, but for his own!

READ: Romans 1:8-12 (ESV)

⁸ First, I thank my God through Jesus Christ for all of you, because your faith is proclaimed in all the world. ⁹ For God is my witness, whom I serve with my spirit in the gospel of his Son, that without ceasing I mention you ¹⁰ always in my prayers, asking that somehow by God's will I may now at last succeed in coming to you. ¹¹ For I long to see you, that I may impart to you some spiritual gift to strengthen you— ¹² that is, that we may be **mutually encouraged** by each other's faith, both **yours** and **mine**.

The writer of Hebrews insists that the church isn't merely an obligation; it is the means of exhortation.

READ: Hebrews 10:24-25 (ESV)

²⁴ And let us consider how to stir up one another to love and good works, ²⁵ not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day drawing near.

We come to church to be an encouragement to others and to be encouraged by others. The closer we get to "the Day," that is, Jesus' return, the worse it is going to get. We need each other. Bad company corrupts good morals. This is true. But it is just as true that good company cultivates good morals.

Video Description:

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[1] Wikipedia contributors, "Khalid bin Mohsen Shaari," *Wikipedia, The Free Encyclopedia*, https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Khalid_bin_Mohsen_Shaari&oldid=1311360433 (accessed September 20, 2025).

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