

June 23, 2024

As You Are Going: The Cost of Following Jesus

Acts 9:20-31

Vernon Advent Christian Church

Intro: Theme... Dietrich Bonhoeffer was a German pastor and theologian who was a vocal opponent of the Nazi party and the dictatorship of Adolf Hitler in the late 1930's. Because of his views, he was arrested by the Gestapo in 1943 and spent 2 years in prison before being hanged to death in 1945 because of his involvement in a conspiracy to overthrow Hitler. In his most famous work, a book entitled, "The Cost of Discipleship," Bonhoeffer identifies one of the key aspects of what it means to follow Jesus, which is the concept of "costly grace." He believed that grace was freely given, but that it is not something that is given without any sacrifice on the part of the believer. He argued that true grace comes with a cost, and that true discipleship involves following Jesus even when it is difficult or uncomfortable.

All that to say this, following Jesus is costly. Coming to Jesus is free, but following him, daily laying down our lives for him, comes with a cost. And we will see this in our text this morning where we will see Saul face the inherent difficulties in coming to faith in Jesus. Before Saul's baptism, Jesus said, "I will show him [Saul] how much he must suffer for the sake of my name" (Acts 9:16). And Saul suffered greatly for Christ. As we work our way through the book of Acts, we will see Saul stoned in the city of Lystra and left for dead, beaten and imprisoned in Philippi, at the center of a public riot in Ephesus, arrested and imprisoned in Jerusalem, shipwrecked on the island of Malta, and finally held in a prison awaiting his eventual execution in Rome. And his suffering all began the moment he came to faith, was baptized and identified himself as a follower of Jesus.

In fact, that's right where we pick up with the story in Acts 9, right after Saul's conversion and his baptism we read these words in Acts 9:20-31. If you are able, please stand with me as I read God's word this morning. [Read Passage]

Following Jesus is costly and the first point to be made this morning is that Saul faced opposition from the outside. By becoming a follower of Jesus, Saul eventually lost his status among his own people. Once he became part of the Church, he faced opposition from those outside of it. Saul initially came to Damascus, as we looked at last week, on a quest to persecute Christians. He came with letters from the high priests that gave him authority to arrest any Christians he found in the city. But that all changed when Jesus met Saul on the road to Damascus. By the grace of God, Saul encountered Jesus in all of his glory. And Saul was struck blind and for three days he waited, as the Lord had instructed him to do, and spent that time in prayer. Finally, a man named Ananias came along, prompted by the Lord, and he laid his hand on Saul and restored his sight. He was then baptized and vs. 19 tells us that he spent "some days" with the disciples in Damascus. In his letter to the Galatians, he talks about this time in his life and says that he spent 3 years there in Damascus. So even though at first glance, it seems as though this all takes place in a matter of days and actually unfolded over a period of three years.

We can only imagine the sort of fellowship that Saul and the believers in Damascus experienced together. I'm sure Saul told his story again and again. Surely, those in Damascus couldn't believe it, that Saul, the persecutor, was now their friend and fellow laborer in the gospel. They must have also rejoiced at the working of God, who saved Saul from being an enemy of the church, to now being one of them.

And we read in verse 20. [Read] Notice that synagogues is plural here and it's estimated that there were approximately 30-40k Jews living in Damascus during this time. This means that this wasn't a one time thing, in one particular synagogue, but meant that Saul made his way throughout the city, preaching in the different synagogues. It's not usually advisable for those who have just come to faith in Christ to be placed in the pulpit to preach the gospel as Paul, himself, speaks against in 1 Timothy. Yet, this is different. Why? Saul, here, wasn't speaking to Christian congregations. But he was speaking in the synagogues, where he had much credibility, as a prominent rabbi from Jerusalem.

In Judaism, it was the custom for visiting rabbi's to be given the opportunity to speak. The leaders of the synagogues knew that Saul, the mighty Pharisee had arrived. So, they gave him a platform. And Saul took it, but what he had to say, I'm sure, they were not expecting to hear. Perhaps they were expecting a message from the law or the prophets, to tell them how to live as good Jews. Or maybe he would speak against this new "way" and, in their eyes, its false messiah. But this isn't what they heard. His message was simple, the rest of vs. 20 says, "he proclaimed Jesus, saying, 'He is the Son of God.'" And as he opened up the scrolls of the Old Testament, scriptures that he had memorized since he was a child, his eyes were opened now to see that it all pointed to Jesus!

Now, this isn't some obscure, theological point. This is "the" issue of Jesus, even up to today. Is he the Son of God? Or is he not? Is Jesus the one sent from heaven? The Messiah? Or was he simply an ordinary man, a good teacher, who gained a deluded following, that has continued to this day? C.S. Lewis once famously said,

"A man who was merely a man and said the sort of things Jesus said wouldn't be a great moral teacher. He'd be either a lunatic on a level with a man who says he's a poached egg or else he'd be the devil of hell. You must make your choice. Either this man was, and is, the Son of God, or else a madman or something worse. You can shut him up for a fool, you can spit at him and kill him as a demon; or you can fall at his feet and call him Lord and God. But let us not come with any patronizing nonsense about his being a great human teacher. He has not left that open to us. He did not intend to."

Saul was saying that Jesus was no ordinary man, but indeed, he was the Son of God, sent as Savior to the people of Israel.

Let's look at vs. 21. [Read] The word "amazed" here is the same word that is used in Acts 2:12 when we read that the people who are heard the commotion surrounding the events of Pentecost were "all amazed and perplexed, saying to one another, 'What does this mean?'" Back in Damascus, they were amazed and perplexed at what they were hearing. Isn't this the same man who came to arrest those who followed this Jesus? And now he's proclaiming him as the Son of God?

The simply answer to this question is, yes, but... Yes, this is the same Saul who was ravaging the church in Jerusalem. Yes, this is the same Saul who came to Damascus with the intent of entering house after house to drag off men and women and to bring back to Jerusalem. Yes, this "was" Saul. But...this no longer "is" Saul. By the grace of God, Saul had been changed!

This is what God does by his grace. He changes people. Yes, Saul was the one who did all of those terrible things. But the Lord changed him. Now, he, the one preaching in the synagogues of Damascus, was a new creation. One of my favorite passages in all of scripture is 2 Corinthians 5:17, written by the Apostle Paul himself. "Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold, the new has come." The old Saul passed away. Now the new

Saul has been raised up in the newness of life. Another great passage of scripture that speaks to this is, again, written by Paul in Gal. 2:20, "I have been crucified with Christ. It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me."

This is the reality of God's salvation. It changes us. The question I ask you this morning, Have you accepted God's free gift of grace by placing your complete faith and trust in Jesus? Have you been changed by the grace of God? Or, maybe I should ask it this way, "Have others in your life noticed a change, enough so that you have begun to feel opposition because of your faith in Jesus?" I challenge you to think through those questions this morning.

As Saul spoke, the Jews were "confounded" by his wisdom (verse 22). Meaning they were confused and asked questions and challenged him. But even with all of his intellect, and all of his insight, he was unable to persuade the Jews. And at some point, the people had heard enough of Saul talking about Jesus and they were ready to kill Saul in vs. 23. And at that moment Saul began to fully understand the cost of following Jesus. Saul the persecutor was now the persecuted.

This ought to be hugely comforting for all of us in the sense that we don't have to win every theological argument. You can talk with those around you about Jesus, and make the logical case as to why Christianity is true. But all of the intellect in the world won't persuade them. They will only be persuaded when the Lord opens their hearts by his grace, as he did with Saul on the road to Damascus. Unless the Lord breaks through their heart of stone, those who you are talking with about Christ will be hardened to the gospel. So pray for God to open their eyes to see and the hears to hear.

Now, back to the text, Saul's life was now in danger. For us, the cost of following Jesus may mean other things. Damaged or lost relationships. Loss of business opportunities. Rejection from friends. Ridicule from our unbelieving family members. Still for some, it means (and has meant throughout history death for those who put their faith in Jesus). And that's a real possibility for Saul at this moment.

But the Lord intervened as we read in vs. 24-25 [Read] With the help of his friends, his disciples he escaped. Another indication that Saul spent a considerable amount of time in Damascus is that it said he had disciples. He was living out the mission God had given the church and he was making disciples by teaching them all that Jesus had commanded. And they help him escape by lowering him in a basket through in opening in the city wall.

But the point being made here is that following Jesus comes with a cost. We see this with Saul in Damascus, but it didn't stop there. It continued as he made his way back to Jerusalem where he faced opposition from within the Church itself as we read in vs. 26-30.

The initial reaction of those in Jerusalem is a totally understandable. Where the disciples in Damascus marveled at the working of God and welcomed Saul in, what he had done to the disciples in Jerusalem, and their loved ones, was all still too fresh in their minds even though it had been three years. The last time Saul was around these parts he was arresting them and casting his vote against them in court so that they were thrown in prison and some put to death. Now, Saul says he is also a believer in Jesus and he wants to work with the disciples to preach the good news.

The text tells us the disciples were afraid of Saul and would not let him join with them. They had a hard time believing he was truly a disciple. Possibly they were afraid this was all a ruse, or fake news, and that Saul would suddenly turn on them and arrest them all. The Greek word that is used when we read that Saul "attempted to join the disciples" doesn't mean a one-

time act. Saul was repeatedly trying to join with the disciples there in Jerusalem. But the disciples were afraid, and, I dare say, none of us would have been any different.

I can only imagine how discouraged Saul would have been with his repeated failures to join the disciples. But then Barnabas enters the picture in vs. 27. The last time we saw Barnabas was at the end of Acts 4 when he sold his possessions and laid the proceeds at the feet of the apostles. His given name was actually Joseph, but the disciples had changed his name to Barnabas, which means "son of encouragement" because, evidently, that's who he was, an encourager.

Barnabas took Saul, brought him before the apostles, and explained to the apostles how Saul had seen the Lord on the road to Damascus. Barnabas also explained how Saul had been proclaiming boldly the name of Jesus there for the past three years. How he knew this, we don't know, but the text seems to suggest he was speaking with some authority on the subject and with the help of Barnabas, Saul is welcomed into the circle of disciples in Jerusalem as we see in vs. 28 [Read].

However, this is short-lived as, again, Paul's own words in that same passage of Galatians says he was only in Jerusalem for 15 days. The reason for his short stay being that in vs.29 we read that Saul once again faced opposition from the outside when, in his preaching, he disputes with the Hellenists. Remember these were the Greek speaking Jews and he angers them to the point that they, too, were seeking to kill him.

Once again, we see the cost of following Jesus. For the safety of Saul, and the church, the believers put him on a boat and sent him back to his hometown, the city of Tarsus. There is something to be said here about God's timing. God has already let it be known that Saul is his "chosen instrument to the Gentiles." Saul spent 3 years preaching in the synagogues of Damascus and here we see Saul trying to force himself among the disciples in Jerusalem and they weren't ready to hear it for the various valid reasons we've discussed. And even after he's welcomed to preach among them, it's that preaching that leads to more threats on his life, so much so, that he has to move back home.

His return home must have caused so much confusion and disappointment for Saul. We don't know exactly how long he lived there in Tarsus. In Galatians 2:1, he notes that "after fourteen years I went up again to Jerusalem," but there is some confusion as to when the fourteen years started and whether or not it included his first missionary journey when we see him again in Acts 13. At the very least it appears that Paul lived in Tarsus for upwards of ten years after his conversion.

During that time, Paul likely used Tarsus as his home base, preaching and teaching at synagogues and the churches that began to spring up in the regions of Cilicia and Syria, in what today is southeast Turkey. Paul certainly must have continued to contemplate the meaning of the gospel. He undoubtedly grew in wisdom, which included knowledge gained through lived experience. Often the greatest wisdom-building experiences are those that come in the midst of disappointment, adversity, and waiting. Saul must have been wondering what God was doing during this time. But, our faith often grows deeper, though we may not recognize it at the time. Have you ever experienced one of these "in-between" times? Perhaps you are experiencing one now. We can trust that God is at work.

Now, the final point of our passage today is that in spite of all of this opposition and persecution, we are meant to see that the Church continues to multiply [Read vs. 31] This is another transitional statement that we find in the Book of Acts that works as an "intermission" as we move the next scene of Luke's description of the rapid growth of the Church. With Saul now

sent off to Tarsus, the narrative continues, “So the church throughout all Judea, Galilee, and Samaria...” Notice the English word Church appears to be singular, but then it mentions a multitude of places. That’s because the word, “ekklesia,” is not describing a building in a particular place, but a people, called out by God from every nation, people and tongue. The Church is not a place but a “called out people.”

And this “called out people” “had peace and were being built up,” which means these things were continually happening, and the time of being “built up” was the result of the peace they were experiencing. Evidently, when Saul left Jerusalem the persecution had calmed down, the dust had settled so to speak, and there was a period of peace.

Along with that, it says the church was also, “walking in the fear of the Lord.” Rather than being a new sentence, these words are a continued part of what brought the state of peace. Along with being built up upon the foundation of peace, the Church was walking in the fear of the Lord. This speaks of a sense of reverent fear of the Lord, not a sense of terror or trembling fear. The church is built up in the knowledge of the Lord, growing in a sense of respect and humility before Him.

And next says, “and [also] in the comfort of the Holy Spirit.” The word translated as “comfort” signifies “close beside.” It’s the same word Jesus uses when telling his disciples that he will send them the “comforter,” the “paraclete” when describing the Holy Spirit in John 14:26. Helps Word Studies says it “is used of the Lord directly motivating and inspiring believers to carry out His plan, delivering His particular message to someone else.” Meaning the words of the apostles to the church was building them up into a fuller knowledge of Christ.

With all this being the case, the natural conclusion is the multiplication of the church. The text reads, “it (the Church) multiplied.” These words certainly mean the number of believers, they were, indeed, still growing numerically. But it also goes beyond that to mean that the believers were also growing spiritually into mature followers of Jesus. May God grant that to be said of us, that we are both growing numerically, people coming to faith in the Lord Jesus and that we are all growing spiritually into mature followers of Jesus.

There is a cost to following Jesus. Grace is the free gift of God, but there is a cost to follow him. We will face opposition from those outside the Church, as well as at times, from those inside the Church. We will possibly lose our status, our friends, and even our lives. Jesus said, “What does it profit a man to gain the whole world but lose his soul?” But through it all, God is still at work, still on mission building his Church. As we are going, let’s join him, and be the church on mission. Let’s pray.