Our journey through Acts continues as we pick up the story of Saul’s conversion and what took place following his encounter with Christ on the road to Damascus. Please stand and let’s read Acts 9:19b-31.

If you recall, Saul was blinded by his encounter with Jesus for three days, and during that season of darkness, Saul neither ate nor drank. Then Jesus sends Ananias to lay hands on Saul, and immediately Saul receives the Holy Spirit, the scales fall from his eyes, and his sight is restored. That is the beginning of healing and transformation for Saul. The former persecutor regains his eyesight, he begins to eat, and almost immediately Saul believes that he is ready to start preaching. We read beginning in 9:20, “And immediately he proclaimed Jesus in the synagogues, saying, “He is the Son of God.” Saul’s initial message was simple and yet passionate: Jesus is the Son of God…the Messiah of God. That was huge, and the irony of Saul the Persecutor making such a proclamation in the synagogues of Damascus causes quite a stir. Luke writes beginning in vs. 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?’”

We can imagine the shock and confusion in the synagogues of Damascus as the news of this great reversal begins to spread. Surely the Christians in Damascus were skeptical, as were the Jews, but one thing is for certain: Saul could draw an audience. No doubt the room was packed every time he stood up to speak. And every time Saul spoke, his confidence grew. Luke writes in 9:22, “But Saul increased all the more in strength and confounded the Jews who lived in Damascus by proving that Jesus was the Christ.”

Let’s stop there for a moment.

There’s nothing as compelling as a skeptic turned believer. When a staunch atheist like C.S. Lewis becomes a follower of Jesus, the results are regularly powerful and dramatic because the former atheist is familiar with all the arguments used by atheists against Christianity.

Such was the situation with Saul. He knew all the arguments against the Christian proclamation that Jesus is the Son of God. He had no doubt mastered those arguments and used those arguments to justify his persecution of the early believers. However, when Saul meets Jesus face to face...
to face on the road to Damascus, he has a new starting point: Jesus is alive! That is an
indisputable fact now for Saul, and immediately everything Saul had learned...every argument,
every thought, every shred of information, is reinterpreted through the new starting point of,
“Jesus is alive.” We must appreciate that Saul’s encounter with Jesus is more than interesting
information that will inform his life in some useful way. Far from it. Instead, Saul’s encounter
with Christ is the quintessential paradigm shift. It is the beginning of his whole life
transformation.

Why? Because if Christ lives, then...then what? Then everything must now be interpreted and
understood within that profound truth. Everything is now to be understood within this revelation
that Jesus is the Son of God, which for Saul means the prophesies have been fulfilled, God has
come to save us in a completely different and counter-intuitive way...a way that involves a
Roman cross and a resurrection. It means that God loves us; that God is a sacrificial God; that
God has provided a way for sinful people to be reconciled to God through faith in His Son. It
will take years for Saul to wrap his mind around all the implications of Christ crucified and
resurrected. For now, Saul simply makes his case, “He is the Son of God.”

Now, before we move on to verse 23, we must pause and begin the tricky work of putting a
timeline together making use of Galatians 1:13-18. In Galatians 1 Saul/Paul provides some
information that must be assimilated into Luke’s account because Luke does not include that
information. Remember: Luke is writing about the history and development of the early
church...he is not interested in writing the biography of Saul even though we learn much about
Saul’s life and ministry from Luke in the book Acts. So, here is what Saul writes in to the church
in Galatia regarding the days following his conversion:

For you have heard of my former life in Judaism, how I persecuted the church of God violently
and tried to destroy it. And I was advancing in Judaism beyond many of my own age among my
people, so extremely zealous was I for the traditions of my fathers. But when he who had set me
apart before I was born, and who called me by his grace, was pleased to reveal his Son to me, in
order that I might preach him among the Gentiles, I did not immediately consult with anyone;
nor did I go up to Jerusalem to those who were apostles before me, but I went away into Arabia,
and returned again to Damascus. Then after three years I went up to Jerusalem to visit Cephas
and remained with him fifteen days.

So, according to Saul’s testimony as recorded in Galatians 1, shortly after his conversion he went
into Arabia for up to three years, then returned to Damascus before making a trip to Jerusalem to
meet with the Apostle Peter.

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Again, Luke does not provide any information about Saul’s time in Arabia in the book of Acts, likely because it had little to do with the development of the early church. This trip to Arabia, however, most certainly had something to do with the development of Saul.

There is no more information to work with regarding Saul’s trip to Arabia. He doesn’t mention it anywhere else, but it is, nevertheless, relevant.

Now, where exactly did Saul go? If we look at a map of the ancient near east, we can see that Saul would not have had to travel far to go into Arabia from Damascus.

Arabia in the first century was gigantic, and, of course, most of it was a desert. The northwest corner of Arabia literally bordered upon or even included the city of Damascus, so it is likely that Saul entered into what was then called the Nabataean region of Arabia which was literally all around Damascus.

Some scholars make much of Saul’s journey to Arabia, supposing that he traveled all the way down to the Sinai Peninsula and even to Mount Sinai itself. However, I think it’s more likely that Saul traveled only a short distance east of Damascus into the desert, for it is regularly the pathway for those chosen by God to first endure a season in the desert before being sent on God’s great mission. Some of you may recall a series I preached six years ago entitled, “The Fertile Dessert” where we examined the soul-shaping work that God accomplishes in His people as they journey through deserts, both literal and metaphorical. That series can be viewed on our website, but let me remind you of a few examples of those who were shaped and prepared for accomplishing God’s will through a stint in the desert. Remember how God allowed the Israelites to wander through the desert for 40 years until they learned to trust Him. Why? Because trusting God was a prerequisite to entering into the Promised Land, and you don’t learn to trust God in a land flowing with milk and honey…you learn to trust God in the desert. As we think about some of the champions of the Old Testament, Moses, Elijah, and David all had to endure times of isolation, disappointment, and great trial in the wilderness…in the desert…before they were ready to tackle their assignments from God. Remember that John the Baptist was a desert dweller, and Jesus Himself was led by the Holy Spirit into the desert for 40 days and 40 nights where he was severely tested by Satan. Why? Why did Jesus have to endure the desert? Because perfect obedience and faithfulness was required of the Messiah of God, and we all know that your obedience and faithfulness are not tested in the comfort of your swimming pool…obedience and faithfulness are tested in the desert.

Not long ago a very dear friend of mine was fired from a job he thought was a dream position.

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Turns out that was not the case, and now he is in the desert. Other friends of mine had built a great life together…they recently retired, built their dream house, and they had great plans for enjoying the last few decades of their lives with family and friends. But then cancer came a calling, and now they are on a desert road that has brought them to the end of themselves.

That’s what happens in the desert…we come to the end of ourselves and we either despair, or we learn to trust God. I suspect that is why God led Saul to Arabia…to begin the lifelong process of character formation in this former persecutor of the faith. Saul’s path will not be an easy one…there will be many hardships and great suffering…Jesus said precisely that to Ananias, and He wasn’t kidding. Saul will have to learn to trust His Lord in the direst situations, and that process begins in the desert…not in a high paying job with lots of perks. What happened during that time in Arabia was deeply personal for Saul. He will refer to that time only once, with no details. But here is the fruit of Saul’s desert experience that began in Arabia and continued on throughout Saul’s life and ministry…look at Philippians 4:11-13. Years later Saul will write, “I have learned in whatever situation I am to be content. I know how to be brought low, and I know how to abound. In any and every circumstance, I have learned the secret of facing plenty and hunger, abundance and need. I can do all things through him who strengthens me.”

We will never learn to be content in all situations…we will never learn that we can do all things through Christ who strengthens us…until all we have left is Christ. The desert is necessary to discover the sufficiency of Christ. Saul is no exception…neither am I…neither are you. Again, I encourage you to visit our website and review the series entitled “The Fertile Desert” where we unpack that theme in greater depth.

Now, as we return to our text in Acts, we learn in vs. 23 that Saul has returned from Arabia, he is preaching in Damascus, and he has become wildly popular and successful with lots of new book contracts, right? Wrong! Look at vss. 23-25, “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.”

One of my favorite commentators writes, “Every Christian goes through three stages: ‘This is easy!’—‘This is difficult!’—and ‘This is IMPOSSIBLE!’ Saul is learning quickly that proclaiming the gospel of Jesus Christ is dangerous, difficult and potentially deadly business. People are not going to simply agree with him and join the church because he is passionate about his beliefs! Instead, Saul learns very quickly that his own people…the people of his family’s heritage and decent…those people he has associated with his whole life…are trying to kill him. Saul is no longer the hunter…he is the hunted. Saul is no longer powerful and feared, he is now (c) 2016 Jim West, Colonial Presbyterian Church
powerless and in fear of being murdered…to the extent that he must be lowered over the city walls in a basket simply to survive the intense hatred and plots of people who want him dead. After experiencing what most certainly would have felt like a colossal failure in Damascus, Saul decides to make the journey back to Jerusalem to connect with the Apostles and the church there. However, we learn in vs. 26, “When he had come to Jerusalem he attempted to join the disciples, and they were afraid of him, for they did not believe that he was a disciple.” How discouraging is that? Not only was he fired from his last job and barely escaped town with his life, but now he has come to the mother ship…the church in Jerusalem, and they won’t open the door because they don’t believe that he has actually switched sides. And who can blame those first century believers? Not one person out of a thousand would have believed that the fierce persecutor named Saul would show back up into town a few years later as Saul the follower of Jesus.

Gratefully, however, God provides a friend when Saul most desperately needs one, and that friend is named Barnabas. We originally met Barnabas back in Acts 4:36 where we learned he was a Levite, a native from the island of Cyprus, who sold his property and laid the proceeds at the feet of the disciples. Barnabas was a man of great faith, and at just the right moment, God calls Barnabas to befriend and validate the former persecutor named Saul. We read in vs. 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.” We don’t know how Barnabas obtained such accurate information about Saul, but the testimony of this faithful disciple is just what the doctor ordered. Saul is welcomed into the fellowship of believers, and Luke writes in vs. “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.” If you remember, Stephen was the last guy who spoke and disputed with the Hellenists, and that got him stoned. Does Saul have any better luck? No! In vs. 29 we read, “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.”

Saul was a work in progress…he was being transformed by the renewing of his mind. He was being transformed through the desert experiences that the Holy Spirit led him to endure. He was being transformed by enduring hardship and persecution. He was being transformed through the humiliation of hiding in a basket. He was being transformed by making new friends and finding his place in Christian community. But notice…that work of being transformed did not happen overnight…it took a lifetime. It took several years for Saul to become the great Apostle Paul.

Truth be told, it was young Saul’s volatility and brashness that purchased him a one-way boat ticket to Tarsus. Saul had a lot to learn before he could begin his missionary journeys around the

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world. So, Saul will serve the Lord in general obscurity for close to eight years in his home town of Tarsus before Barnabas tracks him down and recruits him to help pastor the church in Antioch. All together it will take somewhere between 14 to 17 years before Saul matures to the point that God will entrust him with the mission to travel the ancient world as an ambassador of the Gospel.

Listen: here’s the point—when we encounter Christ, and He shows us our sin…when we are crushed and led by the Holy Spirit to repent and call upon the name of Jesus in faith…that is the beginning of our metamorphosis into new creatures. But no one…no one is completely transformed in a day. No one is ready to tackle Christian ministry as a result of one powerful encounter with Christ. No one has maturity in Christian character and faith simply because they have zeal and good theology. The journey towards Christian maturity, contentment, and effectiveness in Christian ministry is simply a journey of following Jesus wherever He leads you. When Jesus leads you into the desert, it’s likely because you need some time in the desert! When Jesus leads you into a time of rest and general peace…that’s where you need to be for a time.

The journey of faith is not so much where you are going, it’s about WHO you are following. It is learning to follow and trust Jesus everywhere the road leads that finally develops spiritual maturity, and that takes time and life experience. That was true for Saul…that will be true for all of us as well.

I know as we close our service this morning that many of you are struggling because your lives have not turned out the way you had hoped, or perhaps life has thrown you a curve you didn’t see coming. Some of you are in the desert, and some of you have been in the desert for a while. Wherever you might find yourselves this morning, take heart: even those we consider saints and the greatest Christian leaders in history were those who walked on similar roads to those on which we find ourselves this morning. Hard roads…difficult roads…roads with such hairpin turns that we cannot see what lies around the bend…roads of such difficult and daunting terrain that we are tempted to simply stop and do nothing. Friends…keep on walking. If Christ is in you, rest assured that you are BEING TRANSFORMED, and our Lord will use every step you take, on any given road, to grow your faith, your character, your influence, and your heart for Him and for his people.

Keep walking.

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I will close with my favorite psalm that helps find our place in the narrative and brings hope for all who know WHO they are following.

The LORD is my shepherd; I shall not want.
He makes me lie down in green pastures.
He leads me beside still waters.
He restores my soul.
He leads me in paths of righteousness
for his name’s sake.
Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death,
I will fear no evil,
for you are with me;
your rod and your staff,
they comfort me.
You prepare a table before me
in the presence of my enemies;
you anoint my head with oil;
my cup overflows.
Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me
all the days of my life,
and I shall dwell in the house of the LORD forever.

Let’s pray together.

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