

Message #22

“CONFUSION, CONSPIRACY, CONFRONTATION”

Acts 9:19-31

The conversion of Saul was so sudden, dramatic and totally unexpected that both the Jews and the Christians had trouble believing and accepting it! And he didn't give people time to become accustomed to this major change in attitude before they had to grapple with the dramatic change in his actions. He quickly went from persecutor to preacher! In fact, it was only a matter of days after his conversion, subsequent welcoming into the family of faith by Ananias, and spending time with the local (Damascus) disciples, that he was out preaching and proclaiming that Jesus was the Messiah.

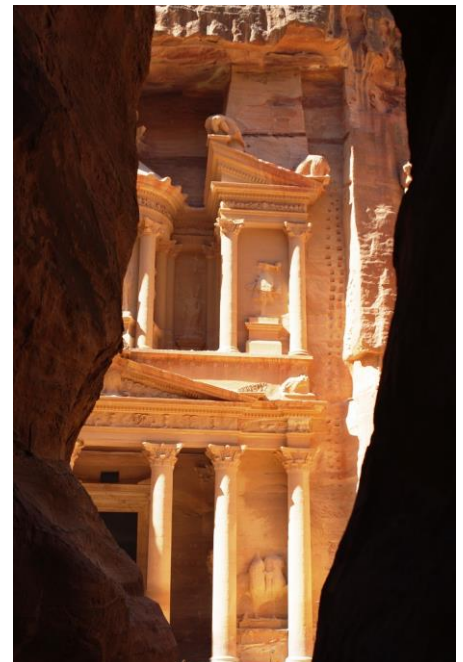
Whilst Luke is fairly specific in giving us that short time-frame of activity, the rest of our passage is rather lacking in that same degree of detail.

Indeed, the passage that we are looking at here covers a considerable period of time, though Luke only refers to the period in general terms “after many days” (9:23) etc. He doesn't tell us anything about Saul going to Nabatean Arabia (modern day Jordan) and then back to Damascus.

But Paul, as Saul became known, later wrote in Galatians 1:17-18 of this period and helped to fill in some of the biographical and chronological gaps.

So, there is a gap between 9:22 and 9:23 of about three years. During this time, Saul was active in preaching about Jesus and, it seems, to such an extent that he wore out his welcome. Consequently, both Jews and Arabs conspired to kill him (see also, 2 Corinthians 11:32).

If you were reading this story for the first time, or watching a movie of it, how would you know that Saul would escape those who plotted his death?



Acts 9:25 is a rather insightful verse. Not only does it tell of Saul's interesting escape, but it also indicates something else, too.

How does 9:25 describe Saul's extraordinary growth in godliness and maturity in the faith?

After escaping from Damascus, Saul set off for Jerusalem (remember, this is some three years after his conversion). He hoped to connect with the disciples there, but verse 26 tells us that this did not happen.

Why do you think Saul was not well received by the church in Jerusalem?

In verse 27 we again meet Barnabas (the Son of Encouragement). Previously, in Acts 4, we had seen that Barnabas had been very sensitive to the needs of those in the church family. Now, he shows himself to be sensitive to Saul and his loneliness and lack of acceptance by the Jerusalem church.

Barnabas became Saul's advocate, championing him with the disciples and even taking him to the apostles where he defended him as a genuine brother in Christ. After the support of Barnabas, the apostles accepted Saul and he enjoyed the embrace and fellowship of the church. He then proceeded to preach the gospel in Jerusalem, further demonstrating the authenticity of his faith (vs 28).

Have you ever had a “Barnabas” in your life...Someone who was a big encourager and supporter?

How do you need to be more like Ananias and Barnabas in your church/Christian community?

How important is it for the church to be accepting of “new believers”? Explain.

Barnabas brought the two sides together. Why is the message of reconciliation so important? How can we apply it in our own circumstances and church context?

Saul's intrepid and fearless preaching once again stirred up trouble and “put a price on his head”. This time, the opposition came from the Hellenistic Jews, his former colleagues (at the time of the stoning of Stephen). With these threats against Saul's life and with the general unrest and tension that seemed to surround him, the church leaders took him to the port of Caesarea and then on to Tarsus, his town of birth.

Luke wraps up this section of Acts 9 by highlighting several things about the church at that time.

- The church was at peace and was strengthened.
- The church was living with a reverential “fear” (awe) of the Lord.
- The church was being encouraged by the Holy Spirit.
- The church was growing in numbers.

Each of these four qualities is important. Unfortunately, in today's church it seems like only one of them gets much focus....numerical growth. Why do you think that is? Is it good, or bad?

So, Acts 9:1-31 tells the story of Saul's conversion. It begins with him leaving Jerusalem with an official mandate from the high priest to arrest fugitive Christians and ends with him leaving Jerusalem as a persecuted Christian himself.

It is not an accident that the Greek word for witness (*martys*) came to be associated with martyrdom.

How would you like to grow as a person who communicates the gospel to those who are antagonistic to it?

Do you expect the unexpected from God? What difference does that make (or would it make) to your life?

How should God's sovereign power in converting people encourage us in our own prayers & witness?

Begin praying and continue to pray faithfully for someone that you consider an unlikely convert. Ask God to grow your faith and to do a work of redemption in this person. Ask Him to prepare you for being involved in this person's life.