

Signs of Life: Struggles

Act 9:22-31

September 5, 2026

SCRIPTURE

Acts 9:22-31 (NKJV) [22] But Saul increased all the more in strength, and confounded the Jews who dwelt in Damascus, proving that this Jesus is the Christ. [23] Now after many days were past, the Jews plotted to kill him. [24] But their plot became known to Saul. And they watched the gates day and night, to kill him. [25] Then the disciples took him by night and let him down through the wall in a large basket. [26] And when Saul had come to Jerusalem, he tried to join the disciples; but they were all afraid of him, and did not believe that he was a disciple. [27] But Barnabas took him and brought him to the apostles. And he declared to them how he had seen the Lord on the road, and that He had spoken to him, and how he had preached boldly at Damascus in the name of Jesus. [28] So he was with them at Jerusalem, coming in and going out. [29] And he spoke boldly in the name of the Lord Jesus and disputed against the Hellenists, but they attempted to kill him. [30] When the brethren found out, they brought him down to Caesarea and sent him out to Tarsus. [31] Then the churches throughout all Judea, Galilee, and Samaria had peace and were edified. And walking in the fear of the Lord and in the comfort of the Holy Spirit, they were multiplied.

ILLUSTRATION

QUESTION: How many have done something and you were positive you were obeying the Lord, but it didn't turn out the way you expected it to? Were you disappointed or discouraged by the apparent outcome?

- You went out witnessing, but no one came to the Lord.
- You stepped out to pray for someone and nothing happened.
- You stepped up to lead a ministry only to get rejected.
- You stand up for Jesus, and instead of getting praised and liked, you get ridiculed and hated.

Take heart today! Believe it or not, it's all part of God's process; the process of refining our faith toward genuineness and making us holy, usable vessels in the hands of God.

SCRIPTURE

1 Peter 4:12-13, 16 (NKJV) - "Beloved, do not think it strange concerning the fiery trial which is to try you, as though some strange thing happened to you; but rejoice to the extent that you partake of Christ's sufferings, that when His glory is revealed, you may also be glad with exceeding joy... Yet if anyone suffers as a Christian, let him not be ashamed, but let him glorify God in this matter."

Well, there is probably no better scripture to accurately describe Saul's ministry. Remember last week we learned that Saul was going to "suffer many things" for the sake of Christ and taking the gospel to the known world.

It is our endurance, resolve, and courage in the midst of suffering and struggle that produces true character in us. It produces true hope in us as we fix our eyes on eternity and eagerly await the return of our Savior. It produces contentment in our lives that nothing else could produce.

SCRIPTURE

Philippians 4:11-13 (NKJV) - "Not that I speak in regard to need, for I have learned in whatever state I am, to be content: I know how to be abased, and I know how to abound. Everywhere and in all things I have learned both to be full and to be hungry, both to abound and to suffer need. I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me."

You know, many people want Paul's status, reputation, and effectiveness; but how many are willing to take along with it Paul's struggles and sufferings?

APPLICATION

And yet, as we more fully commit ourselves to Christ, we will have inevitable seasons of struggle... we must! There will also be seasons of great peace and success, but they must be tempered with struggles to keep us humble and usable.

- We must struggle with our weaknesses to find His strength.
- We must struggle against our wickedness to find His grace.
- We must struggle with our failures to find His victory.
- We must struggle with loss to recognize His sufficiency.

"God never promises to remove us from our struggles. He does promise, however, to change the way we look at them."

Background: Saul's conversion

Jew of Jews, Pharisee of Pharisees. Born in Tarsus, the influential capital of the province of Cilicia. Religiously perfect and zealous in the things of the law.

Yet all of his laborious pomp and circumstance was brought to nothing in one encounter with the risen, living Jesus Christ.

Two sections of the remainder of chapter 9:

1. **The STRUGGLES of Saul's ministry**
2. **The SUCCESSES of Peter's ministry**

Saul's official entrance into full-time ministry begins in Chapter 9:22

The Struggles of Ministry

SCRIPTURE

Acts 9:22-24 (NKJV) - "But Saul increased all the more in strength, and confounded the Jews who dwelt in Damascus, proving that this Jesus is the Christ. Now after many days (between 2-3 years of ministry in Damascus) were past, the Jews plotted to kill him. But their plot became known to Saul. And they watched the gates day and night, to kill him."

Saul begins his ministry with great power and strength. His wisdom was unmatched, and arguments uncontested. But this did not bring him the drum rolls of success, but the drum rolls of an execution march. He experiences several things right from the start of his ministry. Several things that I think everyone who embarks on a mission to serve Christ will experience. The first is:

MAIN POINT 1

Persecution

In a matter of a few years, Saul's ministry had stirred up the religious status quo. So much so, that the Jews of the city were intent on killing him.

The **persecutor** has now become the **persecuted**; the **hunter** is now the **hunted**.

I wonder if Saul imagined things starting this way? Jesus miraculously saved and called him to a great work. He got off to a good start, immediately winning converts and confounding the Jews. He spent time in Arabia directly receiving instruction and fellowship with Christ himself. He comes off the mountaintop pumped up and ready to change the world and... everyone is hunting him down wanting to kill him!

Paul gives us a little commentary on the event a little later when he writes his second letter to the Corinthians:

SCRIPTURE

2 Corinthians 11:32-33 - "In Damascus the governor, under Aretas the king, was guarding the city of the Damascenes with a garrison, desiring to arrest me; but I was let down in a basket through a window in the wall, and escaped from his hands."

The Jews got the government involved. Now, I know it's difficult for us to imagine a government that would be involved in attempts to eradicate the Christian message, but this is what was happening. The Jewish lobbyists had influence with the governor, and both official soldiers as well as undercover Jews were daily waiting at the entrance of the city to spot Saul.

This was his first taste of the rest of his life and ministry... constantly imprisoned and pursued, always expectantly awaiting God's miraculous deliverance.

It's no surprise to me that Paul later wrote (based upon his experience):

SCRIPTURE

2 Timothy 3:12 (NKJV) - "Yes, and all who desire to live godly in Christ Jesus will suffer persecution."

This is not what Paul would want for any Christian, but it is a reality in a world that is "anti-Christ."

With this kind of attitude pervading the world, there's no doubt that those who hold to the exclusivity of Christ will be more and more persecuted.

We are blessed in one sense that we live in a nation where Christianity is widespread, and there are many around us who know and serve Jesus, but this might not always be the case.

ILLUSTRATION

EXAMPLE: On Facebook, churches can have pages and business profiles on Google. These can be helpful to spread the message of the gospel and keep people informed about what's going on at the church.

On a page, you have the ability to give a rating. Grace has a rating of 4.5 stars out of 5. Not bad. I'm glad that Christians love this place and that we have a good reputation among our community.

At some point in time, if we stay true to Scripture and follow Jesus, that rating might go down. As our lives and beliefs start infiltrating society and shaking up the status quo, that rating might go down. We are bound to make someone, or a group of someones, pretty upset.

But, just as Paul experienced Christ's divine peace and divine protection in the midst of this opposition, I trust that God can and will give us all we need to endure persecution to the end.

SCRIPTURE

Revelation 2:10 (NKJV) - "Do not fear any of those things which you are about to suffer. Indeed, the devil is about to throw some of you into prison, that you may be tested, and you will have tribulation ten days. Be faithful until death, and I will give you the crown of life."

Persecution is not to be feared. We should not long for it as though it makes us more spiritual, but we should be fully prepared for it and ready to receive it with joy if and when it comes.

MAIN POINT 2

Humiliation

SCRIPTURE

Acts 9:25 - "Then the disciples took him by night and let him down through the wall in a large basket."

While some pastors are driving out of the church in their new Lamborghinis, Saul was sporting the latest Greco-Roman basket.

In 2 Corinthians, Paul refers back to this moment as a **"moment of his human weakness."**

There are moments when service for Christ is displayed on the glorious peaks of human visibility, but for the most part, service for Christ is wrought in the unseen valleys of humiliation and weakness.

ILLUSTRATION

EXAMPLE: About a year after I started pastoring, someone asked me what it was like going from being a worship leader to being a senior pastor. The only answer I could think of was, "It's a whole new level of joy and a whole new level of humiliation."

ILLUSTRATION

STORY: Chuck Smith's invitation letter to lead worship at the conference.

QUOTE

— Kent Hughes

"Our humiliating failures can become marvelous preparation for greater service, if we let God use them in that way."

MAIN POINT 3

Rejection

SCRIPTURE

Acts 9:26 - "And when Saul had come to Jerusalem, he tried to join the disciples; but they were all afraid of him, and did not believe that he was a disciple."

Not only was Saul rejected by the countrymen who once worshipped the ground he walked on, but he was also initially rejected by the rest of the apostles in Jerusalem. And his rejection goes deep: it is rooted in fear and lack of trust.

Even though it had been several years, Saul's former reputation preceded him. They still knew of this man's reputation as a Christian killer.

- What if this was some cunningly devised plan to infiltrate and destroy the church?
- At this point Saul probably thought that he had proved himself. He's been preaching the gospel and has gone through true persecution for the sake of Christ. Surely they would welcome him with open arms, right? Wrong.

APPLICATION

And Christian, this is why it is so important to live for the approval of God, not the acceptance of man. Men will reject you. Whether rightly or wrongly, you will experience people who don't see the calling that you see. But in my experience, I've learned a very important lesson:

QUOTE

"Rejection from men is often preparation from God."

Some rejection is self-imposed, and I'm not suggesting we play the victim if we are rejected because of a character flaw, failure, or sin. But sometimes it takes time to build reputation and trust rather than expecting that we should receive it by default.

APPLICATION

Rejection hurts. Period. Mostly it hurts because it drives a fatal blow into our pride. Sometimes rejection tells us that we thought more of ourselves than others thought of us. Sometimes rejection tells us that we were pursuing something different than what God really had for us. Sometimes rejection reminds us of our not-so-pretty past and how it is still remembered.

But really, rejection is an opportunity to rejoice that we have been accepted by God in Christ. We must fix our eyes on Him and the plan that He has for us. We must learn the lessons that God is trying to teach us, then continue to move forward with grace and forgiveness in our hearts, not wrath and bitterness toward those who rejected us.

Rejection is not God's way of saying we are not good enough, but rather His way of keeping us on the path towards His perfect will.

ILLUSTRATION

Joseph's hidden years, Moses in Midian (rejected by his people and the Egyptians), David fleeing Saul, John Mark's restoration, or Peter's restoration after failure.

The apostles were very skeptical about Saul.

NOTICE: Saul did not demand acceptance and recognition. He humbly recognized that they were rightly afraid of him because of his past and just purposed to continue to serve the Lord. He did what we all must learn to do with rejection: Take our eyes off men and keep following Jesus.

QUOTE

— A.W. Tozer

"What then are we to do about our problems? We must learn to live with them until such time as God delivers us from them. We must pray for grace to endure them without murmuring. Problems patiently endured will work for our spiritual perfecting. They harm us only when we resist them or endure them unwillingly."

So what is the answer to rejection? Encouragement.

SCRIPTURE

Acts 9:27-28 - "But Barnabas took him and brought him to the apostles. And he declared to them how he had seen the Lord on the road, and that He had spoken to him, and how he had preached boldly at Damascus in the name of Jesus. So he was with them at Jerusalem, coming in and going out."

Thank God for people like Barnabas and Ananias. Men who can come alongside and encourage. You might remember that Barnabas was actually the nickname that the apostles gave to this guy.

Barnabas - son of encouragement

Barnabas was a man who showed great concern for people. He sought out those whom he might assist and support. Later, he would take it upon himself to personally mentor the young and fearful John Mark when Paul didn't want to have anything to do with him.

- He went out of his way to seek Saul out, befriend him, and stand with him as an advocate.
- Later, he sought Saul again to assist in the ministry for a full year with the church in Antioch.
- Barnabas's support of Saul broke down the walls that divided, so that Saul was now free to fellowship with the church in Jerusalem. In Galatians, he tells us that he spent 15 days with Peter (Galatians 1:18).

MAIN POINT 4

Obscurity

SCRIPTURE

Acts 9:29-30 - "And he spoke boldly in the name of the Lord Jesus and disputed against the Hellenists, but they attempted to kill him. When the brethren found out, they brought him down to Caesarea and sent him out to Tarsus."

Saul once again experiences people trying to kill him... it seems to follow the guy everywhere. You get the sense that Saul didn't really hold back punches when it came to sharing the truth of Christ... he was bold, and his name was becoming known.

Yet, just as his ministry was getting out there, the disciples sent him back to Tarsus.

It will be around 12 years until the next time we see Saul in the book of Acts. 12 years until Barnabas seeks him out. 12 years of invisible ministry, preparation, persecution, and difficulty. 12 years of joyfully serving Christ without recognition or applause. 12 years of building the skills, integrity, and faithfulness needed to carry the rest of his ministry. 12 years of the focus being on Peter's ministry and not his.

During those 12 years, the man learned humility. His zeal was balanced with love and grace. And the next time we see him we read:

SCRIPTURE

Acts 11:25-26 (NKJV) - "Then Barnabas departed for Tarsus to seek Saul. And when he had found him, he brought him to Antioch. So it was that for a whole year they assembled with the church and taught a great many people. And the disciples were first called Christians in Antioch."

People were no longer trying to kill the guy, but rather, after watching him, they became those who were known as Christians or "Little Christs." The same man who initiated him into the fold was the same encourager who came and found him, recognizing it was time to bring him back into the ministry.

APPLICATION

Sometimes before God can really use us on the front lines, He keeps us behind the scenes to learn necessary lessons of humility, grace, compassion, forgiveness and the like.

Well, I learned several things from Saul's early ministry experiences about how God prepares His servants for ministry.

The servant of Christ:

#1 - Must be ready to sacrifice themselves for the greater cause of Christ.

#2 - Must not be motivated by the praises and affirmation of men.

#3 - Must be fully prepared to do things that make themselves less and Christ more.

While Saul lived in obscurity, the church prospered. Saul undoubtedly served Christ and the church during this season, but it was not in the spotlight. In this we learn something valuable:

QUOTE

— Pastor Josh

The success of the church and the ministry does not depend on the personality or gifts of any one person, but comes through the faithful obedience of every member.

SCRIPTURE

Acts 9:31 - "Then the churches throughout all Judea, Galilee, and Samaria had peace and were edified. And walking in the fear of the Lord and in the comfort of the Holy Spirit, they were multiplied."

I would like to spend some of our remaining time talking about this verse, because if there was one thing I really pray for and dream of here, in this area and of course in this nation, it is this verse. To me, this is the ideal picture of revival... the church functioning as it was designed to. Notice several characteristics with me:

The church had peace and were edified. This could mean several things:

- 1. They had a season of external peace, free from persecution.**
- 2. More importantly, they had the inner peace of God despite the external persecution of the church.**
- 3. They had peace and harmony with each other... unity.**

When I think about the churches today in America, I think we have external peace (at the moment anyway, compared to the rest of the world). We have the peace of God ruling in our hearts. But boy, we struggle having peace with each other. One true sign of revival will be when true Christians can be

at peace with each other.

The church was edified

Literally, they were built up. To build up from a firm foundation. It can also mean to rebuild or repair or to fortify.

- The question this causes me to ask is, ***"Are people here in Saint Joe and Savannah being built up in their faith?"*** When something is being built, evident progress follows.

The church was multiplied

CHURCH GROWTH: I want to make something clear. I believe church growth is important to God. I think Jesus loves to see the church multiply, grow, expand, plant other churches, and so on and forth. And what is really neat is this verse tells us how the church grew!

- ***How? Church growth programs? New promotional materials? NOPE. In fact, the way the church grew was that the church was not focused on church growth at all. They had two great priorities:***

APPLICATION

They walked in the **FEAR OF THE LORD**

They walked in the **COMFORT OF THE HOLY SPIRIT**

This represents a balanced, simple faith of those who believed. Their lives were committed to Christ in every way because they feared (revered, respected) the Lord. At the same time, they had joy, peace, and freedom because they daily walked in the power and the comfort of the Holy Spirit. When the church gets unbalanced in one or the other, they become ineffective. We need both in our lives.

QUOTE

— Guzik

"Often, God wants the comfortable to be afflicted (gaining the fear of the Lord) and the afflicted to be comforted (by the comfort of the Holy Spirit)."

CLOSING

We are at a tipping point in this nation; if the church, including yours truly, gets really serious about walking in the fear of the Lord and the comfort of the Holy Spirit, there is tremendous hope for our future. I believe that the church of Jesus Christ is the best and only hope for this nation, because we have the message of truth and freedom from God.

What are we waiting for? NOW is the time! The Holy Spirit is moving here and now! I say let's go in His power, with all boldness and encouragement, and serve Jesus as though our lives depended on it! I'm not suggesting that we attempt it on our own power or strength, or force a work of God... I'm saying God is at work! The train has left the station, and I want to be on board!

Now is the time! Give as you've never given before, serve as you've never served before, love and forgive like you never have before, obey like you've never obeyed before, take risks for Jesus, step out in faith, lay it all on the line and watch Jesus change you as He changes the world.

"Josh, I don't know how! Where do I start?" Start in the small things. The daily things with your kids, your spouse, your coworkers, your church family. As you become faithful in the small things, you will find greater and greater opportunities to glorify Jesus!

Let's see these four walls come down and new ones built because they can't contain the church being multiplied.

- Let's plant churches in every city!
- Let's disciple new believers!
- Let's meet at each other's homes throughout the week just to worship and pray and grow!
- Let's get out on the streets and preach the gospel!
- Let's send missionaries and support our brothers and sisters all throughout the world!
- Let's infiltrate our communities and neighborhoods with love, service and works that preach the gospel.

Church, it's your time! This world needs JESUS! Will we have struggles? You bet! But we will overcome them by the power of God because He has called us for this time and this place to glorify Him.