

How to Grow on the Go

(Acts 9:23-31)

1/15/20; Wed PM Pine Grove

Introduction

Take your Bibles and turn to Acts 9:23...

Let's read the verses that we will examine tonight.

Acts 9:23-31.

23 When many days had elapsed, the Jews plotted together to do away with him, 24 but their plot became known to Saul. They were also watching the gates day and night so that they might put him to death; 25 but his disciples took him by night and let him down through an opening in the wall, lowering him in a large basket.

26 When he came to Jerusalem, he was trying to associate with the disciples; [j]but they were all afraid of him, not believing that he was a disciple. 27 But Barnabas took hold of him and brought him to the apostles and described to them how he had seen the Lord on the road, and that He had talked to him, and how at Damascus he had spoken out boldly in the name of Jesus. 28 And he was with them, [k]moving about freely in Jerusalem, speaking out boldly in the name of the Lord. 29 And he was talking and arguing with the

[I]Hellenistic Jews; but they were attempting to put him to death. 30 But when the brethren learned of it, they brought him down to Caesarea and sent him away to Tarsus.

31 So the church throughout all Judea and Galilee and Samaria [m]enjoyed peace, being built up; and going on in the fear of the Lord and in the comfort of the Holy Spirit, it continued to increase.

Let us pray.

One of the joys of parenting is watching your kids change physically.

The bouncing baby become to teenage who is able to look you in the eye.

Yet no two kids grow at the same rate.

Some shoot up faster than all their friends and then slow down.

Others stay smaller and then have what we call a growth spurt after all their friends.

According to pediatricians, boys tend to have growth spurts between 9 and 16, while girls start and 8 and end at 15.

And though that is a wide range of ages, most growth is confined to a 2 or 3 year period.

So what are the signs of a growth spurt in children?

One website offer these 6 signs..

#1 - High waters. In other words, pants getting shorter.

#2 - Big feet. The feet are often the first thing to grow so that they can support a taller and heavier body.

#3 - Knobby knees. Areas where bones come together like knees and and elbows and shoulders will often get larger before the body catches up.

#4 - Stinky Smell. Both boys and girls tend to have a changing smells to go along with their changing bodies.

#5 - Sleepy Head. A change in sleep patterns often accompanies growth spurts, and most of the time it is a tendency to sleep longer.

#6 - Grocery Bill. Almost all growth spurts coincide with appetite spurts. Growing teens results in growing grocery bills.

Tonight, I want us to look at the nature of spiritual growth.

It is one thing to understand how people grow physically, but it is also good to note how we grow spiritually after salvation.

You could use the excuse that your desire to eat more and sleep more are signs of spiritual growth, but that is not likely the case.

But there are some truths associated with spiritual growth that may be helpful to us.

In fact, I want to point out 4 truths about our spiritual growth that we see in the early stages of Paul's life after salvation.

If you remember, we have been in the book of Acts on Wednesday nights looking at the early church.

We have seen the founding of the church with the arrival of the Holy Spirit in Acts 2.

We have seen the growth of the church in Acts 3 and 4.

We have seen the trouble in the church in Acts 5.

We have seen the leadership of the church in Acts 6.

Then in Acts 7 and 8 we began to see the persecution in the church at the hands of the Jews.

Stephen became the first Christian martyr as he was stoned to death for preaching Christ.

And the ring leader of Jewish persecution was Pharisee named Saul.

Yet, God radically changed Saul's life as he was headed to Damascus to arrest more Christians.

And in that radical conversion, Saul the Jesus hater became Saul the Jesus lover.

And eventually, Saul would be better known as Paul the author of 13 books of the New Testament.

For the past few weeks, we have note of how Saul was saved.

First of all, we noted that the first cause of Paul's conversion was simply the grace of God.

Paul wasn't seeking the Lord when he was saved.

Paul was dead in his sins.

In fact, he was on his way to sin when God intervened.

The second note we made about Paul's conversion is that God was also active after his conversion by sending Ananias to him to restore his sight.

And the third note we made is that Saul responded to what God had done by obeying Him completely after he was saved.

He got up.

He went into Damascus as he was commanded.

He spent time fasting and praying.

He was baptized, and he began to proclaim the truth that Jesus was the Son of God to his fellow Jews.

And though we read this on the pages of Scripture, we lose sight of how extraordinary this conversion was.

Saul the Christian killer is not Saul the Christian winner.

This is a remarkable conversion and turn around in the life of a Christian terrorist, but the good news is that God is not done working in his life.

There now has to be some Christian growth and maturity.

All that Saul knows about the teaching of the OT has to be reinterpreted with spiritual eyes.

Passages that Saul thought he knew the exact meaning of have to re-examined in light of the truth that he now knows about Christ.

So this is going to take some time.

In your own life, how long does it take to get a grasp on the meaning of Scripture?

It takes time.

Look, I am sure that the Lord saved me in 1997, but it was many years later until the Bible became central in my life as a believer.

And it was only until seminary that so much more about it came into clear focus for me.

Now that doesn't mean that some believers mature faster and it also doesn't mean that you need seminary to understand Scripture.

I simply tell you that to help you understand that spiritual maturity and growth takes time.

And that was true in Paul's life as well, and I want to show you that in the first few words of verse 23..

I. Spiritual Growth Requires Time (23a)

All that the first part of Acts 9:23 says is this..

23 When many days had elapsed,

Now what is Luke referring to here?

Well last week, we were looking at the time right around Saul's conversion.

Look back up at verse 8..

Saul encountered the resurrected Jesus on the road to Damascus Syria.

In that moment, he recognized that Jesus is the Son of God by calling him Lord and then obeying him fully.

However, the light of the resurrected Christ blinded him for 3 days.

Acts 9:8..

8 Saul got up from the ground, and though his eyes were open, he [d]could see nothing; and leading him by the hand, they brought him into Damascus. 9 And he was three days without sight, and neither ate nor drank.

So the first 3 days of Saul's conversion consisted of spiritual sight but physical blindness.

But the Lord sent a Christian in Damascus named Anannias to touch Saul and restore his sight..

So on that 3rd day, Saul got his sight, was baptized by immersion, and began to regain his strength after 3 days of no food or drink.

At this point, Saul is still a spiritual baby in terms of spiritual maturity.

But then the middle of verse 19 says this..

Now for several days he was with the disciples who were at Damascus, 20 and immediately he began to proclaim Jesus in the synagogues, [h]saying, "He is the Son of God."

Now there is no reference to time here, but we can assume that Saul spends a few more days with the disciples enjoying fellowship and learning new things...

Then he heads out to the synagogue to proclaim Jesus as the Son of God.

Again, he is still probably not very mature at this point in his spiritual growth.

He knows enough to know that Jesus is the Son of God.

He knows enough to know that he should proclaim that to his fellow Jews.

But there is still much more that Paul will have to learn.

And verse 22 simply lets us know that..

Saul kept increasing in strength and confounding the Jews who lived at Damascus by proving that this Jesus is the [i]Christ.

So we have have some time already elapsed in Paul's growth as a believer, but he still lacks a lot of truth.

Now let me stop here and say this.

A lot of newly saved believer are quite zealous in their evangelism, and that should never be discouraged.

When you come to see your sin and the beauty of Jesus' sacrifice for your sin, there is an incredible excitement and eagerness to share that truth.

Paul is experiencing that.

We have all experienced it, and I don't discourage it.

Get saved and get busy telling people what the Lord has done for you.

But realize that you don't have every answer for the skeptic or the rejector or the atheist.

Understand that there is a need for patience and growth, and seek to pursue that growth.

Was Paul equipped to proclaim Jesus as the Son of God?

Sure.

Was he able to convince some people?

Sure.

Was there room for him to grow?

Sure.

And God is going to provide that time for growth in verse 23..

23 When many days had elapsed,

Now the original Greek here is a little vague.

The word for many could actually be translated sufficient or adequate..

In other words, this could be translated.

When a sufficient number of days has passed..

And the question is... “sufficient for what?”

And the answer seems to be sufficient enough for Paul to grow in his spiritual maturity...

In other words, God provided a time in the days of Paul’s early life as a believer for him to mature.

Now the good thing is that Paul writes about this time in Galatians 1..

I put it up her on the screen for us to consider..

13 For you have heard of my former manner of life in Judaism, how I used to persecute the church of God beyond measure and tried to destroy it; 14 and I was advancing in Judaism beyond many of my contemporaries among my [h]countrymen, being more extremely zealous for my ancestral traditions. 15 But when God, who had set me apart even from my mother’s womb and called me through His grace, was pleased 16 to reveal His Son in me so that I might preach

Him among the Gentiles, I did not immediately consult with [i]flesh and blood, 17 nor did I go up to Jerusalem to those who were apostles before me; but I went away to Arabia, and returned once more to Damascus.

18 Then three years later I went up to Jerusalem to [j]become acquainted with Cephas, and stayed with him fifteen days.

In end of verse 15, Paul speaks of his conversion.

God called him to salvation through his grace.

But Paul was not instructed about Christianity immediately by flesh and blood in Damascus or in Jerusalem.

Instead, he says that he went away to Arabia for 3 years and returned once more to Damascus.

If you look at this chart on the screen, Saul's conversion happened in the area of Damascus.

He was blinded and healed in Damascus.

He was baptized in Damascus.

He even did a short stint going to proclaim the truth of Jesus as the Son of God in Damascus, but after those first few days or weeks, God apparently led him away from Damascus into Arabia.

Here is a map of Arabia in Saul's day.

It is simply a desert region east of Damascus and Israel that runs south the Dead Sea.

Today it would include portions of Syria, Jordan, and Saudi Arabia.

In Paul's day it was wilderness, but this evidently provided time for Paul to be taught directly by the Lord Himself.

And the reason I say that is because Paul says that his early growth didn't come from flesh and blood.

So there seems to some direct spiritual instruction from the Lord.

After that time of instruction, Paul went back to Damascus, according to the end of verse 17, and then he went to Jerusalem.

Now if we go back to Acts 9, all we see is that many days had elapsed, and this is simply a reference to the time that Paul had spent in Arabia.

So he gets saved in Damascus.

He preaches a little bit there, goes to the desert to be taught by the Lord and then returns back to Damascus.

He goes back to preaching and then the end of verse 23 says that the Jews there plotted to do away with him.

Now we will get to that, but what I want you to see is simply this.

Even Paul was given time to grow spiritually.

I want to remind us to handle new believers with grace and mercy.

Give people room to grow and mature in the Lord.

No one gets everything they need to know about the faith at the moment of salvation.

You didn't.

I didn't.

As as great as Paul was, he didn't get it all at once either.

It takes time for the Spirit to teach and convict and change and inform.

Now Paul was unique in that the Lord most likely him directly in the desert, but even still, it was 3 years before Paul was ready to go to Jerusalem and take on the world with the gospel.

So exercise patience with new converts.

Show them grace and teach them patiently because spiritual growth takes time.

A second truth about spiritual growth is this..

II. Spiritual Growth Requires Assistance **(23b-27)**

Back to verse 23..

23 When many days had elapsed, the Jews plotted together to do away with him, 24 but their plot became known to Saul. They were also watching the gates day and night so that they might put him to death; 25 but his disciples took him by night and let him down through an opening in the wall, lowering him in a large basket.

When Paul returns a second time to Damascus having been taught by the Lord in the desert, I cannot imagine how powerful his preaching was.

Not only is preaching Jesus as the Son of God, he is equipped to prove it to the Jewish their own Old Testament.

He would likely be destroying their religion of good works to get to heaven.

He would be identifying and exposing their self righteousness.

Paul would be a preaching machine at this point.

So what happens?

The Jews plot to kill him.

Understand.

This is their pattern.

Jesus came proclaiming a gospel of faith in Him,
and they crucified him.

Stephen preached a gospel of faith in Christ and
they stoned him to death.

Paul is preaching a gospel of faith alone in Christ
alone and they are ready to do kill him.

Let me add this.

Spiritual growth is often met with spiritual persecu-
tion.

To commit to following Christ is to invite trouble
for the enemy.

Paul is taking his faith seriously, so the devil is tak-
ing him seriously.

But the Lord provides help in the form of Saul's
friends.

Since the Jews were guarding the gates to the city,
Saul was lowered out of a window.

Must have been a pretty covert operation to get him out, but the Lord provided the means and the men to do it.

But that God-sent assistance is also going to be needed when he reaches Jerusalem.

Look at verse 26.

26 When he came to Jerusalem, he was trying to associate with the disciples; [j]but they were all afraid of him, not believing that he was a disciple.

Once Saul gets out of Damascus, he heads south to Jerusalem.

The apostles had remained in Jerusalem despite the persecution there, and Saul seeks to associate with them.

He can fellowship with them.

He can learn from them.

He can minister with them.

But the apostles are quite unsure about Saul.

They knew his connection to Stephen's death.

They knew his background as a Pharisee, so they want no part of his company.

But the Lord sends help this time in the form of a man named Barnabas.

Verse 27.

27 But Barnabas took hold of him and brought him to the apostles and described to them how he had seen the Lord on the road, and that He had talked to him, and how at Damascus he had spoken out boldly in the name of Jesus.

We first met Barnabas back into Acts 4 when he sold some property and laid the proceeds of that sale at the apostles feet.

So he is respected among the apostles.

He is also known as the Son of Encouragement suggesting a warm and trusting personality.

And this time Barnabas encourages Saul by standing and believing Saul's testimony of salvation and preaching in Jesus' name.

We aren't sure if Barnabas knew Saul previously or if this was nothing more than a believer coming to the aid of another believer in faith and trust.

But whatever motivated Barnabas' endorsement of Saul worked as the apostles welcomed him into fellowship with them..

Look, there is always skepticism when someone claims to be saved.

Some of that discernment is helpful and some hurtful.

But love calls us to believe and hope all things, and Barnabas is practicing that hope and belief in the life of Saul.

And that is a good thing.

Spiritual growth requires assistance.

We understand that God is active in our sanctification and spiritual but he uses people to accomplish his purposes.

Sometimes, they lower us over a wall in a basket, sometimes they rise to touch for our testimony, sometimes they simply study to teach us Bible truths.

Thank you Lord for those friends that you sent to help us grow in our faith in You.

A third truth about spiritual growth is found in verses 28-29..

We will call this..

III. Spiritual Growth Requires Testing (28-29)

28 And he was with them, [k]moving about freely in Jerusalem, speaking out boldly in the name of the Lord. 29 And he was talking and arguing with the [l]Hellenistic Jews; but they were attempting to put him to death.

Once Paul is accepted by the apostles in Jerusalem, he gets to work in ministry.

And notice that his primary audience is his people.

Paul was a Hellenistic Jew, which simply means that he was a Jew that was born and raised outside of Israel.

Paul was from Tarsus, so he knew the ways of Jews who grew up in areas outside of Israel.

The irony is that Stephen was the first Hellenistic Jew to preach to other Hellenistic Jews, but Saul made sure that he was killed.

And now here is Saul back in Jerusalem picking up the ministry of Stephen.

What kind of irony is that.

Better yet, what sort of God can completely change the murderer into someone who picks up the ministry of the one he murdered.

Only God can do that.

But note that spiritual growth also occurs in the fire of spiritual warfare.

Paul has been equipped to preach the gospel, so the doesn't sit at home with his feet up counting his blessings.

He jumps right into the lion's den and takes the gospel to people who were just like him before he was saved.

The lesson is simple.

#1 - You grow best when you are challenged in your faith.

#2 - You evangelize best when you go to people who were just like you before you were saved.

So grow in your faith but then put that faith to the test in the world.

A final truth to see is found in verses 30-31..

IV. Spiritual Growth Requires Protection (30-31)

30 But when the brethren learned of it, they brought him down to Caesarea and sent him away to Tarsus.

31 So the church throughout all Judea and Galilee and Samaria [m]enjoyed peace, being built up; and going on in the fear of the Lord and in the comfort of the Holy Spirit, it continued to increase.

In a span of 7 verses, Paul receives two death threats.

The Jews in Damascus wanted him killed, and now the Jews in Jerusalem want him dead.

So in the span of 7 verses, the Lord sends protection in the form of other believers.

This time, they don't lower him out of the city in a basket, they send him out of the country on a boat.

In fact, they send Paul back to his hometown to preach and mature there.

Here is our map of the region.

The believers in Jerusalem take him to Caesarea and send him to Tarsus in the north.

The primary thing to note is that God is providing protection for Paul once again.

And it needs to be said that sometimes, it is better to leave and fight another day.

I am sure that Paul was ready to preach until they killed him in Jerusalem, but his friends simply sent him away to his hometown.

And it won't be for rest because Paul is going to preach and teach there.

But the principle is this.

Sometimes, it is best to leave instead of standing your ground..

And note that this was the right move because it lead to a time of peace and growth in the nation of Israel.

The text says that that believers in Judea, Samaria, and Galilee enjoyed peace and were built up in the faith.

And that allowed the church to grow spiritually and numerically.

Look, part of that peace is a result of Paul's conversion.

Part of that peace is because the pot stirrer has left.

And part of that peace is because is united in doctrine and practice.

Ultimately, this peace was God directed and used so that the gospel could spread into the ears of the unconverted and the church could expand.

Thank God for times of peace in the church.

Conclusion

So what do we take home from this tonight?

#1 - Seek to help the new believer.

Even Paul needed the help of fellow believers as a new Christian.

So often, we are hesitant to ask people if they need help for fear of offending them.

But I have never met a believer who doesn't need help spiritually.

We all crave encouragement and fellowship in this struggle to live as a believer in the world.

Find someone who needs your help and pour your life into them.

The issue is not how many can you help, the issue is how well do you help those that God sends.

Don't worry about quantity.

Focus on quality discipleship.

#2 - Seek the help of the mature believer.

Discipleship is a two way street.

As we offer help to those who need to learn, we also should seek out the maturity of those who know more than us.

Look, Saul was taught by the Lord, but he still went to Jerusalem to seek fellowship with the apostles.

Don't be so prideful that you don't ask questions of mature believers around you.

Instead, seek their help and continue to grow in your faith.

#3 - Seek wisdom as you contend for the faith.

World famous philosopher Kenny Rogers once said that "you go to know when to hold em and know when to fold em."

And though I am kidding about him being a great philosopher, there is wisdom as we mature in the Lord.

There are times to stand your ground and there are time to give up that ground for greater purposes.

Often times, we are blinded by a righteous zeal.

Look, if Paul has stayed and fought with the Jews in Jerusalem, he may have never made it never out.

But the Lord sent wisdom to him in the form of his friends who sent him away.

Now that doesn't mean that Paul was in sin and needed to repent.

The text never says that.

It just means that our desire to please the Lord cannot cloud our judgment to the point of acting foolishly.

God puts believers around you to help you think biblically and make the wise decision.

So please don't ignore that grace of God.

Paul was passionate enough to put his life on the line for the gospel but he was wise enough to put his life in the hands of his friends to accomplish far more for the Lord.

May we find that same balance.

Let us pray.