

Traction Gains Momentum Week 8: How does this happen?

We are moving through a part of the Bible called Acts. It is the story of the Jesus movement after he rose from the dead and then ascended into heaven.

Last week there was a **plot twist**. The biggest threat to this new Jesus movement was a man named Saul. He was there at the murder of one of Jesus' followers, named Stephen, supporting and approving. From that point, he became the leader of those who **wanted to crush this movement** before it spread any further. He has received letters from the **Jewish high priest** giving him authority to arrest those following Jesus in the synagogue in Damascus.

It was on this trip to Damascus that everything changed. The biggest plot twist in the story thus far. To this point, the people joining this movement have been **Jewish people** who were in **Jerusalem**, who accepted Jesus as their promised Messiah. **Sure, the plan or the Great commission has stated** that this "making disciples, baptizing, and teaching them to obey "Jesus' Movement" was to **go to all people** around the world. But it has stayed in Jerusalem, where it started, until recently **because of Saul's persecution it has spread** to outside of Jerusalem into the area around called Judea and into neighboring Samaria. It was on that trip to Damascus that the movement's biggest enemy and threat, Saul, met the risen **Jesus who spoke to him, blinded him** and told him to **go to a specific house** where he would be told what to do.

Yes, the biggest threat becomes one of them. And not only that, we will see as the story unfolds that **he will be their biggest champion** being the one God will use to take the movement all the way to Rome. **Here's what happens next, his first steps after he regains his sight.**

Saul stayed with the believers in Damascus for a few days. ²⁰ And immediately he began preaching about Jesus in the synagogues, saying, "He is indeed the **Son of God!**"

²¹ All who heard him were amazed. "Isn't this the same man who caused such devastation among Jesus' followers in Jerusalem?" they asked. "And didn't he come here to arrest them and take them in chains to the leading priests?"

²² Saul's preaching became more and more powerful, and the Jews in Damascus couldn't refute his proofs that Jesus was indeed the Messiah. ²³ After a while some of the Jews plotted together to kill him. ²⁴ They were watching for him day and night at the city gate so they could murder him, but Saul was told about their plot. ²⁵ So during the night,

some of the other believers lowered him in a large basket through an opening in the city wall.

Let's pause right here. Saul starts preaching that Jesus is "the son of God" and proving to the Jews that he is their messiah. But did you notice that once Saul switched teams, his **new team is suspicious** of him and his **old team wants to kill him**. Which is the rock and which is the hard place? Not, "their mad at him" they want to kill him. **Now he's going to go back home to Jerusalem** where he was a **star for that team**, back to the people who sent him letters to arrest Christ followers. **How will his new team and old team respond to this homecoming?**

²⁶ When Saul arrived in Jerusalem, he tried to meet with the believers, but they were all afraid of him. They did not believe he had truly become a believer! So how do you remedy this situation? Enter Barnabas. ²⁷ Then Barnabas brought him to the apostles and told them how Saul had seen the Lord on the way to Damascus and how the Lord had spoken to Saul. He also told them that Saul had preached boldly in the name of Jesus in Damascus. Did it work? ²⁸ So Saul stayed with the apostles and went all around Jerusalem with them, preaching boldly in the name of the Lord. ²⁹ He debated with some Greek-speaking Jews, but they tried to murder him. ³⁰ When the believers heard about this, they took him down to Caesarea and sent him away to Tarsus, his hometown. **So now his new team is warming** to the idea that he is for real, while again those on his old team are trying to murder him. Maybe the people in his hometown won't try to kill him, or at least immediately.

³¹ The church then had peace throughout Judea, Galilee, and Samaria, and it became stronger as the believers lived in the fear of the Lord. And with the encouragement of the Holy Spirit, it also grew in numbers. Acts 9:19b-31

It's hard for us to relate to a situation where you give up your old relationships in order to follow Jesus. It's happening in some parts of the world.

This is one of the most amazing and unexpected turn of events. **A man leaves his old way of living in order to follow this Jesus.**

What does someone who leaves their old way of living need from those who have been following Jesus? How does this kind of thing happen? Someone like Paul going from wanting to arrest Christ followers to not only joining them, but helping them spread. **What do they need in order to become the people who God will use in powerful ways?**

Life transformation can only happen through God's power. If it's not real it will not last. He is the one who can change a person so that they want to repent. It is the Holy Spirit that empowers what a person does for God.

But this didn't happen just between God and Saul. It didn't happen in a vacuum. It didn't happen in a lab. It happened in the context of a movement of people. So what is it that the people around Saul are doing that is contributing to this crazy life change and ministry in his life?

We are going to look at this passage immediately after his dramatic conversion to see **what the community around him did. But we can't stop there.** We need to ask the next logical question. **How does this kind of thing happen here?**

Is it possible here? Not in theory. **Could we start seeing people who were not interested in Jesus, not thinking God is real, even anti-Christian, have Jesus reveal himself and see radical change. Their life was going on very successfully in one direction and they meet Jesus through miraculous means or simply through someone like you and everything changes.**

In a post-Christian culture it's not going to be like the old days **when someone with a Christian understanding joins a church and commits to Jesus.** That day is over.

How do we make sure we are nurturing the life transformation that God is doing when people leave one life and join with Jesus? We don't tell them to wait on the bench.

Saul stayed with the believers in Damascus for a few days. ²⁰ And immediately he began preaching about Jesus in the synagogues, saying, "He is indeed the Son of God!" Acts 9:19b-20

"Paul, don't start telling people about Jesus. **You might get something wrong.** Just get comfortable in church for a few years. Listen to a bunch of sermons and take a few classes, get into a small group and then we'll let you set up chairs."

No, it said, "for a few days" and then "immediately he began preaching that Jesus was the Son of God." When we hear that word "**preaching**" we assume it was something like I'm doing right now. **That word means to proclaim.** Although Saul would have been able to do this, it doesn't mean just a sermon.

How did Jesus do it with his 12 and the others who were following him around? Did he wait until they were ready? What's ready mean

anyway? He sent them out in two's before checking their attendance records, baptism records, and tithing. Make disciples while you're learning

People who have radically changed direction are perfectly positioned to proclaim that Jesus is God. They are a physical sign of the Kingdom of God.

These are the most passionate and effective people. They haven't drunk the kool aid yet. They haven't become church consumers yet.

But what if they fall away? Like that never happens to kids who have grown up going to Sunday school. Like pastors and other "grown ups" don't have moral failures or, just wake up one day and admit that they really don't want to follow Jesus. They have better plans.

There's a point where Jesus sends out 72 people in pairs to teach about the kingdom of God and heal people in his name. (Luke 10) This was early in the game. They all didn't have everything right as far as their belief. They didn't totally understand who Jesus was. We don't even know if they were converted. But he sent them to tell what they knew and what they had obeyed.

- Charlotte Reynolds letting me teach the class.
- Matt has students leading their groups.
- It's never too early to start obeying Jesus.

Saul needed to get into the game immediately and the Christ followers that he found himself in community with needed to encourage this. This is how a thing like this happens, where the biggest enemy is transformed into the biggest advocate for. And that's the same for us today. We need to get people into the game as soon as they begin to follow Jesus. But there's more to the story of "How does this kind of thing happen?"

You haven't forgotten about Barnabas have you? ²⁷ Then Barnabas brought him to the apostles and told them how Saul had seen the Lord on the way to Damascus and how the Lord had spoken to Saul. He also told them that Saul had preached boldly in the name of Jesus in Damascus. Acts 9:27

That's what Barnabas did for Saul. But how was he able to do that for Saul? He had to...Get to know their story by listening and observing.

Barnabas had to get close enough to Saul to hear his story. Do you think that might have been uncomfortable for Barnabas? Remember the skepticism the believers rightfully had about Saul? That is about a relationship. You learn his story and observe his preaching by being close to

him. In essence, Barnabas is giving a character reference for Saul. You can't see character from a distance. It looks different up close.

Barnabas had to get close enough and see enough of The Kingdom and Jesus' presence in Saul's life to trust that what he was doing was right. He came with confidence. He didn't say, "Well, I think this guys ok. We can give it a try and keep a close eye on him." No, he gave his first hand stamp of approval. "I am seeing evidence that Saul has met and has been radically transformed by Jesus."

Haley Weber's recommendation for Warner..."Do you feel comfortable with this person being responsible for your kids?" Yes, I do because I have left my kids in her care.

But there's more to what Saul's new team or family does for him. Let's read one more verse. ²⁸ So Saul stayed with the apostles and went all around Jerusalem with them, preaching boldly in the name of the Lord. Acts 9:28

He stayed with the apostles, which included Peter, James, and John. They welcomed him into their fellowship and walked with him while he preached about Jesus in the city where he had persecuted Christ followers.

I can imagine that it wasn't just watching him preach. It says he stayed with them. There's no way that they didn't sit around and talk about how the apostles had followed Jesus before Saul would have been around. Saul had all of the Old Testament stuff down. He was trained under one of the great teachers, Gamaliel, in Jerusalem. He could bring things to the table to help the Apostles. But the apostles could tell Saul about the things they saw Jesus do and heard Jesus teach that Saul didn't know. They would have filled in the story for him. It's obvious that Jesus is the passion for all of these men. They aren't going to hang together and talk about farming or fishing or who to mend tents. They are going to talk about the thing that matters, Jesus.

Gal. 1:17-18 describes Saul meeting with Peter and James. Spending 15 days with Peter. What might have Peter filled in for Saul concerning Jesus?

Bob Coleman's story...He returned to Jesus. God brought him back here. Pete Deal walked along with him. They got to know one another's stories. Now Bob is on the team getting ready to lead a group through Via De Cristo.

How does this kind of thing happen? It's when people like Saul are not put on the bench but into the game. They have brothers and sisters who listen to their story and observe their life who come alongside them.

And when that happens they...**Help them find support and encouragement to keep going.**

Saul is going to need the support of these people. He's going to need their prayers. He's going to need these relationships, even though he's going to be all around the world. He's not going to be a lone wolf. He is being sent by these apostles. If you don't know the story of Saul, who becomes Paul, and what he will have to go through because of following Christ then let me tell you he's going to be supported and encouraged. But particularly now, at the beginning, he needs what he is getting from Barnabas and the apostles.

What they didn't do is create a lot of unnecessary red tape for Saul to do what God was calling him to do.

They don't need to behave or believe the right way before they start obeying the great commission. Let them learn and grow. Behave right, believe the right things and then you can belong is the way it's done sometimes. No, they saw signs of the Holy Spirit and they encouraged and supported his desire to tell others.

Support and encouragement aren't one size fits all. Saul, because of his personality and background and the miraculous way he met Jesus, didn't need as much as some people. There are some, because of their age, brokenness in their life, because of what has been done to them, that need more support and even more encouragement.

How does this kind of thing happen? When God's people don't keep them on the bench, when they take the time to get close enough to hear their story and see the Holy Spirit working in and through them, when those same people provide the support and encouragement they will need to keep going. They also have to...Be willing to risk for them.****

We have to keep coming back to this very important reality in this story. They were taking a risk. **²¹All who heard him were amazed. "Isn't this the same man who caused such devastation among Jesus' followers in Jerusalem?" they asked. "And didn't he come here to arrest them and take them in chains to the leading priests?" Acts 9:21**

Yes, it is a risk to do all these things that led to one of the most amazing "turn-arounds" in history. But not every Saul becomes a Paul.

- **Aaron from my cohort...one is marrying my daughter and the other isn't even following Jesus.**

It's going to take people like Saul in the post-Christian culture we live in. It won't be people like me, born and raised in the church. Yes, we will always have a role, but we can't do what the next Saul can do. Here's what I believe. **There are people here in the process of walking away from God** who will take another path, but sometime somewhere along that path they will hear that voice again and Jesus will meet them on the way to do something that is not what he wants and then they will return. **Their time living in a different culture will make them powerful.**

There could be someone in this youth ministry that is a real pain in the butt, who didn't grow up here, that we are tempted to get frustrated with, who will become a Saul/Paul. **If we don't do for them what Barnabas did for Saul, then it is my fear that we will become Pharisees, not disciples who make disciples.**

Let's be honest. The bigger risk is to not take a risk on Saul. That risk is what leads us to be **moat diggers, not bridge builders.** Let's circle the wagons and not take any risks and protect what we have, our kids.

Saul did for others what Barnabas did for him

- Titus and Timothy 2 Cor. 8:16-24 & Phil. 2:19-24

Right here right now:

I will encourage _____ today before I leave and once during the week.

I will take the time to hear someone's story this week

Maybe it's the person you filled in the blank for. Maybe it's someone you see potential in.