

When Jesus Builds His Church | Acts 9:20-31

Series: *Loyal To Jesus*

Faith Manhattan Church | 5.14.23

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20 At once he began to preach in the synagogues that Jesus is the Son of God. 21 All those who heard him were astonished and asked, "Isn't he the man who raised havoc in Jerusalem among those who call on this name? And hasn't he come here to take them as prisoners to the chief priests?" 22 Yet Saul grew more and more powerful and baffled the Jews living in Damascus by proving that Jesus is the Messiah.

23 After many days had gone by, there was a conspiracy among the Jews to kill him, 24 but Saul learned of their plan. Day and night they kept close watch on the city gates in order to kill him. 25 But his followers took him by night and lowered him in a basket through an opening in the wall.

26 When he came to Jerusalem, he tried to join the disciples, but they were all afraid of him, not believing that he really was a disciple. 27 But Barnabas took him and brought him to the apostles. He told them how Saul on his journey had seen the Lord and that the Lord had spoken to him, and how in Damascus he had preached fearlessly in the name of Jesus. 28 So Saul stayed with them and moved about freely in Jerusalem, speaking boldly in the name of the Lord. 29 He talked and debated with the Hellenistic Jews, but they tried to kill him. 30 When the believers learned of this, they took him down to Caesarea and sent him off to Tarsus.

31 Then the church throughout Judea, Galilee and Samaria enjoyed a time of peace and was strengthened. Living in the fear of the Lord and encouraged by the Holy Spirit, it increased in numbers.

We're going to start off this morning with a little game. I want to show you a few photos of places around Manhattan, and I want to see if any of y'all where the picture was taken.

We'll start with one that should be pretty easy, kind of like a warmup. Where is and what is the name of this building: (Anderson Hall, KSU Campus)

- One of Manhattan's most recognizable buildings, right? Big, tall, beautiful, covered in those classic limestone bricks.

This one here I tried to make a little bit difficult, but my guess is it'll only take most of you a moment or two to get it...(The Wareham, Poyntz Ave)

- If Manhattan has a famous sign or piece of architecture, this is probably it. It's so cool looking and kind of small-town Americana that if you watch closely you even see it pop up in a TV show now and then.

We'll do one more, and this one comes with a prize, first person who gets this one, we get to be new best friends, because this is probably my favorite spot in all of Manhattan. (The Dusty Bookshelf)

- I love all the exposed brick inside this bookstore, the lighting is cool, and of course being surrounded by books is always so delightful.

Sometimes there's just something about a place that is so unique or beautiful, that stands out in such a way that it becomes a signature feature.

In this morning's passage, we are given a chance to see just a few of the signature, quintessential, and beautiful features of the early Christian church. How did they treat each other? How did they act? What did it look like for them to embrace "being the church"?

As we do this, it is important to remember that these characteristics are not accidents. The foundations of the church back then (just as they are today) were intentionally created and laid down by none other than Jesus Christ himself. Recall that Acts 1 Jesus made his plan clear – his disciples would take His gospel from Judea, to Samaria, and beyond, to the ends of the earth. Along the way they would form communities of believers that would gather to learn and worship and share the Gospel together. These communities were Jesus' own building project. And, when they are healthy and thriving, and operating in obedience to his commands, they have his signature style all over them.

This morning as we study Acts 9:20-31, we'll see some of those features, a little bit of what it looks like when Jesus builds his church. And we'll ask ourselves how we might see such features in our own lives and here at Faith Manhattan.

Last week Pastor Steve preached from Acts 9:1-19, where we read the story of a man named Saul (who through the rest of the New Testament is also known as "Paul"). We saw that while on his way to round up, arrest, and persecute Christians in a city named Damascus, Saul was confronted by none other than Jesus, whose first words to this persecutor of the church were, "*Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?*" (9:4) Saul is struck blind for a period of time. It is only after Jesus sends another Christian, Ananias, to pray over Saul that his sight is restored and his entire life turned upside down: Saul receives the Holy Spirit, and after spending several days with the disciples in Damascus, regains his strength.

We pick up the story again this morning, turning our attention to what Saul will do, now that he believes that Jesus is really is the Savior of the World:

20 At once he began to preach in the synagogues that Jesus is the Son of God. 21 All those who heard him were astonished and asked, "Isn't he the man who raised havoc in Jerusalem among those who call on this name? And hasn't he come here to take them as prisoners to the chief priests?" 22 Yet Saul grew more and more powerful and baffled the Jews living in Damascus by proving that Jesus is the Messiah.

Saul's life has been through a profound transformation. In Acts 9:1, a mere 19 verses before this, Saul was described as "*breathing out murderous threats against the Lord's disciples*" – and now, after meeting Jesus, being prayed for by followers of Jesus, and receiving the Holy Spirit from Jesus, Saul's life is forever changed. He will spend the rest of his days passionately pursuing his God-given purpose of proving that Jesus is the Messiah.

It's a story as common in the Bible as limestone walls are all around Manhattan. **When Jesus builds his church, lives are changed forever.**

Sinners become saved. Enemies become allies. Persecutors of God's people become proclaimers of God's truth. This is how Jesus operates. These amazing stories of redemption, transformation, and reconciliation are the hallmarks of his work. When Jesus builds his church, lives are radically changed forever...and this includes your life, too.

Now, inevitably, many who hear this news will cast doubt on it being true for them. Those who believe in Jesus already and those who do not yet believe both often end up concluding the same thing: "You may think Jesus can change lives, but he couldn't possibly change mine. I'm too far gone. The stuff I've done, the things I'm addicted to, the hurt I've caused, the hurt that has been done to me...it's all too much for God to want to deal with. My life can't change for the better."

If you find yourself thinking this way, look again at the story of Saul. This was a man who, for a time, made it his life's work to round up, imprison, and even execute people for what they believed. Saul was vicious, cruel, vindictive, and dangerous. Saul has an ugly, angry, and brutal past.

But after meeting Jesus, Saul's life became characterized by grace, wisdom, and understanding. He wrote letter after letter imploring the people to trust that Jesus could do for them what He'd done for Saul. That no matter what their past had been, their future could bear the signature style of Jesus' rebuilding of lives: they could be characterized by love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, gentleness, and faithfulness, and self control.

This week, if you are already a follower of Jesus Christ and believe that Jesus has changed your life, I would encourage you to reflect, specifically, on what He had done for you and spend some time celebrating it. Praise Jesus for how he has shown up for you, how he has changed you, and how he has formed you into a member of his people and family. I'm being serious. Make a list. Express your thankfulness each day this week.

You are not yet a follower of Jesus, or if you are a Christian but you are struggling with your faith, and what is holding you back is the belief that God cannot forgive what you've done, cannot change you for the better...I want you to hear me say that I praise God for you being here, at Faith Manhattan. That you are welcome at our church. Because I believe that in this community, in this church that Jesus is building, you will have a chance to discover that you are wrong. You're not too far gone. You belong here. And that if you would trust us to come alongside you as you seek God, we will walk with you and pray with you and seek with you the day you are changed forever by confessing that Jesus really is the Lord of your life, and believing in your heart that he saved you.

The next signature feature of Jesus' building his church we see in this passage is that *when Jesus builds his church...his people are all about sharing all they know about Jesus.*

I think it is important to note that throughout this passage, as Saul gets his preaching ministry underway, he's focused on telling people about what he believes matters the most:

- In v20 it says: "*At once he began to preach in the synagogues that **Jesus is the Son of God***"
- In v22 it says that as his preaching grew in power, he began "*proving that **Jesus is the Messiah***"
- In 27 Barnabas describes Saul's ministry as one in which *he "preached fearlessly in the **name of Jesus**"*
- In v28 Saul is said to have gone all over Jerusalem "*speaking boldly in the **name of the Lord***"

Saul was laser-focused on using his time and his talents to tell people that Jesus is the Son of God, the Messiah, and the Savior of the world.

I find it interesting, and even a little convicting, that in the foundational days of Saul's ministry he made it his chief ambition to get really good about talking about Jesus. "Proving Jesus was the Messiah" was the content of his message. Using his story, his testimony, as a way to get people to come to the table to talk about Jesus the Messiah was how he operated.

We know from his letters that as the years went by he continued to develop his understanding of God, his theology, and he helped Christians at this time articulate what obedience to the details looked like. But before he became a brilliant Christian theologian, before he wrote the words that would forever help believers form doctrine and systematic ways of thinking about God, Paul's message was simple: Jesus is the Son of God.

My question for you who are believers is this: *can you clearly share with others why you believe Jesus is the Son of God?*

Before you tell them about your favorite bit of theology, before you tell them what the Bible says about this or that issue facing our society, before you recommend your favorite Christian author or Bible study to them...can you tell them who Jesus is, and share the story of what He has done for you?

When Jesus builds his church, you find people committed to sharing all they know and all they can about Jesus and his Gospel. If we want to be his followers, if we want to be loyal to Jesus, we've got to be like Saul and be willing to get better at and grow in this crucial, foundational calling. *We've got to be all about sharing all we know about Jesus.*

Please don't get me wrong. I think theology is important. I think speaking biblically and truthfully about "the issues" of our day is critically necessary. But today, as we look at this passage, I want to be sure you all know how absolutely non-negotiable it is for a Christian to be able to tell another person why they think Jesus is the Son of God and the Savior of the world.

That doesn't mean you have to be the best evangelist that ever walked the earth. It doesn't mean you're a bad Christian if you're anxious about or even intimidated by the opportunities you may have to talk to others about Jesus. I serve as the Outreach Pastor for this church, and I regularly have to go to God with my anxiety and fear about sharing the Gospel with others.

Nevertheless, it is something I work on. It is something I seek to get better at. Because what I have to share is the very best, most wonderful thing I could ever tell someone. And I want to get better at it telling others about Jesus and his love and forgiveness. Hopefully, you do too. Here are a few things you might try:

- Sign up from the Rooted Experience this fall. If you've been around Faith for a while you may have heard us talk about Rooted. It's a great way to engage the church community and learn more about your faith. One of the things we do in Rooted is work on what it means to share our story with others. If you've never given Rooted a try, that section alone is worth it!
- Practice with other believers: If you feel nervous about sharing your testimony with people who are not yet Christians, a great way to work through some of those jitters and butterflies is to share it a few times

with folks that ARE already Christians. Ask them to listen, and then give them permission to comment on how you did, both strengths and ways to grow and get better.

- And most important of all, whenever possible, before you jump in to telling someone about Jesus... first, pray. Pray for peace in your heart and clarity in your witness. Pray for a willing audience and for spiritual hunger to be stirred up in the one with whom you share. Pray that the Holy Spirit takes over the whole time, and your story is simply a catalyst for the Spirit's action.

When Jesus builds his church...his people are all about sharing all they know about Jesus.

If you are a follower of Jesus Christ, I hope you want to tell others about Jesus, and want to get better at doing so. It's the best story you know. Go out and tell it, as often as you can.

As we move further into the passage, we also see that **when Jesus builds his church His people prioritize relationships.**

After spending some time preaching in Damascus, Saul is forced to flee the city after learning about a plot to kill him. His next stop ends up being Jerusalem, where he finally tries to go and meet the core group of disciples that are leading the early Christian church.

When he first arrives, he's not exactly given a warm welcome. The disciples there are, understandably, not ready to simply accept that this man who had previously been terrorizing every Christian he could hunt down now wants to be a disciple of Jesus. Saul is kept at arm's length until someone steps up to stand beside him and vouch for his new life in Christ...

26 When he came to Jerusalem, he tried to join the disciples, but they were all afraid of him, not believing that he really was a disciple. 27 But Barnabas took him and brought him to the apostles. He told them how Saul on his journey had seen the Lord and that the Lord had spoken to him, and how in Damascus he had preached fearlessly in the name of Jesus. 28 So Saul stayed with them and moved about freely in Jerusalem, speaking boldly in the name of the Lord

I want to be like Barnabas. He steps up to acknowledge and defend the life change that Jesus has caused in Saul's life, trusting that the transformation is true, and helping others to do the same. Barnabas is creating connections, bonds, and relationships. He is aware of Saul's past, but he's **willing to let what Jesus says about Saul be what defines his future.** And so Barnabas goes out of his way to bring Saul into the church and to help the church accept Saul. Barnabas facilitates the creation of new relationships. And because of his example, we can see this is what we must do as Christians, too.

The Church is supposed to be filled with people who have a past. The church is a collection of sinners brought together and bonded through the power of Christ's grace, love, and forgiveness. Because of this, the church cannot be a place where we prioritize those things that make you worthy according to the world's standards: status, prestige, ability, class, a clean record, a carefully tailored and polished presentation of your best self.

The church must be a place where we look at one another, meet with one another, hear the honest and vulnerable and terrible parts of our sinful stories...and then celebrate how Jesus has redeemed every bit of it, and invited us to be part of his family.

So I challenge you to consider this: *who do you know that might need help being welcomed into our church?* It's intimidating to walk in those doors, to make your way through our foyer, to sit in a room of a couple hundred people and wonder if anyone notices you, or cares, or even worse knows about your past and might look down on you for it.

So if you've been here a while, if you consider Faith Manhattan your "home church", I want you to think about how you take on the role of Barnabas. Who can you welcome? Who can you vouch for? Who can you help us get to know, connect with, and build a relationship with?

As followers of Jesus, we're a people who need to prioritize relationships. Let's look at the best parts of what God is doing in the lives of others, and celebrate how He is building his church, person by person, redeemed life by redeemed life.

The last observation I want to make from this passage is that **when Jesus builds his church, persecution does not stop progress.**

Saul's time in Damascus ends because people are so upset by his preaching of the Gospel that they try to kill him, so he flees to Jerusalem.

Saul's time in Jerusalem ends because people are, once again, so upset by his preaching of the Gospel that they try to kill him, so he flees to his hometown of Tarsus.

There is clearly a growing hostility toward Christians throughout the book of Acts. As we continue our study we'll see more and more threats, violence, and ultimately we'll read about more Christians losing their lives because of what they believe. Such stories are sobering, reminding us that following Jesus is not at all risk-free. There are very real costs.

And yet, over and over again, in the midst of hardship, we're giving reminders like that of 9:31:

31 Then the church throughout Judea, Galilee and Samaria enjoyed a time of peace and was strengthened. Living in the fear of the Lord and encouraged by the Holy Spirit, it increased in numbers.

When Saul was persecuting the church, it did not stop growing. When Saul became a Christian and himself became persecuted, the church did not fall apart. Biblically and historically, when Christians receive death threats, when church buildings are burned down, when believers lose their lives for sharing the Gospel in hostile places all over the world...the result is not the collapse of Jesus' Church. Something that Jesus, Lord of all Creation, is personally building is not so flimsy as to fall apart due to the mere pressure of human persecution.

And so, even in the midst of hardship, we are encouraged by the power of the Holy Spirit. We endure persecution, and await the times of peace that follow. Our numbers increase, faith in Christ grows, and the Gospel reaches out from Judea, Galilee, Samaria, and to the ends of the earth. So yes, if you stick with Jesus you'll very likely go through times of hardship, of being hated, of being misunderstood, and even of being persecuted. But it's okay. Such things do not hinder the plan of Jesus whatsoever. In fact, they may very well be a part of how he is refining you to be an even better example of His love and patience and grace to the world. So, follow His path of progress. Trust that because you walk with Christ, it'll be alright in the end.

Today I encourage you to be both amazed and a part of the church Jesus is building – full of radically changed lives, sharing all you know about Jesus, building amazing relationships, and fearing no persecution. The progress and growth and movement of the Church is in the hands of the Son of God, the Lord over Creation, and the Savior of the World.