

SAUL'S EARLY WITNESS TO CHRIST (9:19B–30)

Regardless of the traditional division of this chapter into verses, one may start noticing Saul's integration among believers from [Acts 9:19b](#),²⁹ in which we are introduced to him spending days with Jesus' followers in Damascus. Saul might have been the focus of all in the congregation of the believers who knew or had heard about him as a persecutor. It is indeed from those questioning minds and hearts that Saul's story of encountering the Lord could not only attract the praises to God but also mark a time of relief for the church. The account of Saul witnessing among the Damascus brethren and with the disciples in Jerusalem as Luke recounts in this section emphasizes three theological issues: the divinity of Jesus, the fulfillment of Israel's eschatological expectation, and initial endorsement of Saul's apostolic mandate. The first threat toward Saul's life is sandwiched between the first two issues and the last one.³⁰ The first subject, like the second, is fundamentally christological, whereas the last lays the foundation for Saul's apostleship. The pieces of Saul's message in [9:20](#), [22](#), [27](#), pulled together in Luke's terms, would look like this: **Saul preached that Christ is the Son of God (9:20) and confounded Jews in Damascus, proving that this Jesus is the Christ (9:22). And he declared to them how he had seen the Lord on the road and how the Lord had spoken to him (9:27).**

²⁹ Barrett 1994: 463 comments that "it is reasonable to begin a new paragraph at this point."

³⁰ Saul's abrupt volte-face conversion/call would not guarantee his acceptance among the believers though. There is a possible parallel between Jesus and Saul in this aspect. Just as Jesus would address the people in the synagogues, Saul also went into Jewish communities in synagogues to witness about Jesus to them first ([Luke 4:14, 15, 40, 43–44; 6:6; 7:21; 8:1; 9:60; 13:10; 16:16; Acts 9:20; 13:15; 14:1](#)). Saul's conversion/call story and witness were as supernatural and astonishing to his audience as Jesus' anointing and message. Like Jesus who had not been accepted by the people in his hometown and the Jews who rather sought to push him over the cliff, Saul too escaped death, helped by the believers in Damascus who let him down through the wall of the city ([Acts 9:23–25](#)). And, in spite of his authority to forgive and his power over demons, Jesus' divinity was not easily welcomed by the Jews. They kept referring to him as the son of Joseph ([Luke 4:21–22](#)). Likewise, in the case of Saul, people including believers were suspicious about Saul, who had persecuted them in the past ([Acts 9:20–21](#)). See Witherington 1998: 320.

The message of Saul's preaching, as Luke tells us that **Jesus is the Son of God** (9:20),³¹ is consistent with the Lucan description of Jesus as per the genealogy in his first volume (Luke 3:38). Luke did so with the help of both extant lineages' traditional records and background testimonies of the supernatural in Jesus' earthly life and ministry. This is true as Luke refers to God's angel (Gabriel) and/or His own claims about Jesus (Luke 1:35; 3:22; cf. 1:32; 4:3, 9, 41; 22:70).³² The attribution of Jesus as the Son of God is not affirmed with only this second-generation witness. His reliability of witness is affirmed by many instances in other Gospels (Mark 1:11; 9:7; 14:61–62; 15:39; Matt 4:3–7; 11:27; 16:15–17; John 1:18, 49; 3:16; 5:25; 10:36; 11:4, 27; 20:31). As a matter of fact, some references found in the Gospels are direct or indirect assertions concerning Jesus' divinity, but they all attest to the same reality and ultimately reinforce each other. To be sure, in addition, Paul was in his letters unswervingly consistent with his first claim about Jesus being the Son of God. Scattered throughout his letters, the phrase "Son of God" and/or the title "Son" are used fifteen times and even more expressions suggestive of this doctrine concerning Jesus' divinity are found in abundance.³³

Most promising, furthermore, was Saul's comprehension that **Jesus was the Christ** (Acts 9:22).³⁴ This faces us with an eschatological argument of Saul's preaching about Jesus. To the Jews, the expectation of the coming of the anointed one was loaded with Israel's hopes for the restoration of the Davidic kingdom.³⁵ During his reign, David

³¹ This is the only place in which Luke uses the phrase *Jesus is the Son of God* in Acts. Cf. Acts 13:33.

³² Barrett 1994: 463–64.

³³ A few examples attest to this: Rom 1:3–4; 1 Cor 1:9; 2 Cor 1:19; Gal 2:20. As a matter of fact, the phrase *Son of God* mentioned in Acts 9:20 is a Pauline expression. Keener 2013: 1670–71 argues that Luke seems to be well-acquainted with knowledge of Pauline usage here.

³⁴ The Western text of Acts 9:22 adds *en tō logō* after *enedynamouto* (So, "Saul grew more and more powerful [*enedynamouto*] *en tō logō* ..."). The addition of the phrase specifies Saul's strength in preaching rather than his recovery of physical strength. See Metzger 2000 [1971]: 321.

³⁵ Whereas he cautions the reader that the phrases "Kingdom of God" and the "coming of the Messiah" would have no direct connections, Wright 1992: 307–10 recognizes that the writings that speak of the Messiah would be integrated into those concerning the divine reign. The most interesting and dearest expectation the Jews had was that the Messiah would fight the battles that would bring the Kingdom about. Wright further discusses that, in spite of the scarcity of mes-

conquered the entire promised land and subdued all the enemies of the people of God. He established peace in the land and the economy of his empire reached its peak most evidently during Solomon's reign. King David had been, moreover, assured by God through his prophet Nathan to have an everlasting kingdom (2 Sam 7:8–17) with one of his descendants reigning (cf. Rom 1:3).³⁶ In Rom 1:3–4, Paul's christological exposé provides a rich portrayal of Jesus' attributes. And his description of Jesus there is in perfect harmony with his early preaching in Damascus. The Son of God is also the anointed, Christ and son of David. Saul in Acts 9 is therefore one of the earliest Jewish believers and preachers who advocated for Jesus' messianic right with regard to his Davidic lineage. Through his earthly father Joseph, Jesus was of Davidic lineage, hence the full legal heir to the throne of David. Through his biological mother also, Jesus was born as the seed of David to fulfill what the Lord had sworn to David about giving him an endless kingdom.³⁷ Thus, Jesus has a two-pronged right added to his divine and everlasting origin from the Father, the giver of the Kingdom. Saul would probably bring these demonstrations to assert his revelation of the Lord who had confronted him on the road to Damascus.

On the other hand, Luke's interest in Saul's escape from Damascus and the omission of the Arabian exile (Acts 9:23)³⁸ indicates Luke's selective approach in constructing Saul's life and mission around this divine revelation of Jesus Christ. Saul had traveled

³⁶ Bruce 1988: 190.

³⁷ On the other hand, "Contrary to the surface impression that the New Testament attaches to Jesus' descent by adoption exclusively to the patrilinear genealogy of Joseph," Bockmuehl 2011: 476–93 argues for both Jesus' earthly parental lineages (Mary and Joseph's) linking him to the Davidic descent. He further demonstrates that Jesus' Davidic identity as purported by early Christian writings is rather overwhelmingly linked to his mother Mary.

³⁸ Luke's connotative words *hemeraí hikanai* (many days) in 9:23 might include Saul's hidden time in Arabia for three years, if Gal 1:17–18 and 2 Cor 11:32–33 are considered, although Luke says nothing of this Arabian visit. See Bruce 1988: 191–92. Peterson 2009: 312 reconstructs what had happened for these three years as follows: " 'After three years' in Galatians 1:18 could allow for an initial period of preaching in Damascus (Acts 9:19b–22), followed by a stay in Arabia (the Nabatean kingdom on the eastern frontier of Syria), and further ministry in Damascus (Acts 9:23–25), before going up to Jerusalem." See also Johnson 1992: 173–74; Keener 2013: 1674–83.

from Jerusalem with the intention of bringing prisoners from Damascus, but instead, as a blind man, he was led into the city by others. Finally, fearing for his own life, he escapes the city as a fugitive by the help of **his disciples**³⁹ **while being confident that he has heard from Jesus** (9:24–25). Later, when defending his apostolic authority, Paul would use this incident of escaping in a basket, a humbling action, to state that his ministry began not with human pride, as opposed to the Corinthians who boasted in human strength, but with a divine design in which God was orchestrating His own plan through such a humiliating experience (2 Cor 11:30–33). Luke would go on recording how Saul was not only chased out of Damascus but how the Jerusalem church even had difficulty in accepting him in their community (9:26).

Having heard and been instructed directly from and by the Lord is the next bit of the witness for which Saul would be accepted among the brethren. Luke reports that although Saul was trying⁴⁰ to join the disciples in Jerusalem, doubt and suspicion got hold of all those who knew Saul (Acts 9:26). Then Barnabas, who appears for a second time in Acts, had to introduce him anew: **Barnabas told them** (the apostles) **how he** (Saul) **had seen the Lord on the road and that the Lord had spoken to him** (9:27). To this, Barnabas added assurances of **how in Damascus Saul had been preaching boldly in the name of Jesus** (*en tō onomati*).⁴¹ Although Luke does not tell of the original relationship between Barnabas and Saul until now, there is no doubt that these two persons

³⁹ A textual issue here is whether Luke composed *hoi mathētai autou* (his disciples, so **ESV**, **TNIV**, **NRSV**) or *auton hoi mathētai* (the disciples [took] him, **NKJV**, **NJB**). The external evidence prefers the genitive (**B P74** **ⲛ** **A C**) which is more difficult than the accusative (**E H L P Ψ**). Rius-Camps and Read-Heimerdinger 2006: 192 argue that it is anachronistic to think that Saul already had his disciples in Damascus. However, Peterson 2009: 314n68 contends that “we must surely allow Luke some flexibility in the use of *mathētai* (cf. 19:1) and view these as Paul’s converts in the context (an indication of the success of his ministry in Damascus.”

⁴⁰ Here the imperfect tense of *peirazō* (*epeirazen*: he was trying) indicates Saul’s consistent effort to associate with the disciples.

⁴¹ Culy and Parsons 2003: 183 argue that the phrase *en tō onomati* does not necessarily mean to speak with Jesus’ authority but indicates that “Paul was now speaking positively about Jesus ... the person who once sought to destroy Jesus’ followers was now speaking *in favor* of Jesus.” Italics are original.

may have been previously acquainted with each other.⁴² With only these few words of testimony, Saul was immediately reconciled with the apostles and the rest of the believers he previously persecuted harshly (9:28). Noteworthy is the fact that Luke does not report this moment as an instance of Saul regretting what he did to the church and repenting. Whether he did it or not, it does not seem to be of much interest for Luke. One thing, instead, was critical: Saul's personal encounter with the Lord.⁴³ By and large, Barnabas's testimony in 9:27 encompasses three important elements.⁴⁴ The first is that the transformation of this former persecutor can be trusted because the Lord himself dealt with him in the presence of many witnesses (**how Saul on his journey had seen the Lord**). Second, the change in Saul's life happened to be so radical that, speaking with him, the Lord rehabilitated even the purpose of his life by commissioning him as his witness to the Gentiles (**how the Lord had spoken to him**).⁴⁵ The third element is that Saul has not allowed the past to get the best of himself; but boldly, he has started preaching in the name of Jesus (**how in Damascus he had preached boldly in the name of Jesus**). It is not an exaggeration to state here that by these words Barnabas was beseeching the brethren to consider Saul. Put differently, having personally encountered the risen Son of God, having received a direct command for apostolate from him, and having been filled with the Holy Spirit from the time Ananias prayed for him to speak with the same boldness as Peter, John, and the rest of other disciples in witnessing to Christ were enough qualifications for the apostles to regard Saul as one of them (cf. Acts 14:4, 14).⁴⁶

Now, these three components of testimony did not only serve to make Barnabas speak favorably for Saul, they also earned him the trust of the rest of the believers in

⁴² However, Easton's assumption that they had been companions as students in the school of Gamaliel is not warranted. *EBD* § 453.

⁴³ Thurston 2003: 227–40 contends that the example of Saul's conversion/call provides the irrevocable value of the Christian spiritual experience. "Any study of the New Testament which does not take into account the experience of Jesus that generated it is inadequate" (228).

⁴⁴ Cf. Schnabel 2012: 456–57.

⁴⁵ Cf. For a possible parallelism between Jeremiah and Saul who are called as the workers of God (a prophet / an apostle) for nations (*Jer 1:4–5; Acts 9:15*), see Hultgren 2010: 362–63.

⁴⁶ Cho 2016: 27–37.

Jerusalem. Later, Paul himself would write in his letter to the Romans, to the Corinthians, and to the Galatians nearly the same words as Luke. [First Corinthians 9](#) is viewed by many as Paul's defense of his apostolate, while in [Gal 1](#) Paul defends the gospel he preached. In both instances he echoes the experience on the road to Damascus where he was faced by the Lord and received his commissioning then. His premature departure from Jerusalem toward Tarsus ([Acts 9:30](#); cf. [Gal 1:21](#) "the regions of Syria and Cilicia") was not because of any deficiencies in Saul's character or call; it has to do with the fear of persecution on the part of the rest of the Jewish community ([9:29](#)). Luke is entirely silent concerning what happened next in Saul's activities in Tarsus until [11:25–26](#), so that a caution is required in presuming them excessively.⁴⁷ Nonetheless, what we can possibly assume is that, in Saul's position, he would need a safe place in which his hometown people could care for him after facing severe persecution. God would need to train a figure of such future historical importance with patience.⁴⁸ In any event, Saul would be forgotten for an extended period of time by the Jerusalem church, compelling Saul to depend for his spiritual existence on his experience of the encounter with [Jesus](#) on the road to Damascus. In short, the experience on the Damascus road, as presented either by Luke or referred to by Paul, has caused the latter to become dramatically aware of his life purpose, receive his apostolic qualifications (cf. [Rom 11:13](#)), and have an understanding of the apostolic message and the apostolic authority.⁴⁹

Fusing the Horizons: The Influence of Unsung Heroes behind a Hero

The history of Christianity reverberates with Paul's influence. Regarding the strength behind Paul's achievement, his extensive Pharisaic knowledge did not make him the most outspoken apostle of the first century. Similarly, his identity as a Roman Jew of Tarsus did not render him one of the most successful church planters of the early church era. Looking into Paul's life from two perspectives engenders an effective analysis with regards to the two-sided personal relationships that stimulated this early church leader. The first of the relationships is represented by Ananias and the second is Barnabas's concern and ministry toward Paul.

1. Ananias of Damascus

The narrative in [Acts 9](#) describes Ananias of Damascus as someone who maintained an intimate relationship

⁴⁷ For a study of Saul's hidden time for around ten years in Tarsus, see Hengel 1997; Riesner 1998; Reymond 2000.

⁴⁸ Rackham 1925: 139–40.

⁴⁹ Hultgren 2010: 362–63.

with [Jesus](#). He knew how to honestly speak out his fears to [Jesus](#) and take heed of [Jesus](#)' counsel. Thus, not only was Ananias obedient to [Jesus](#)' commands, but he was also very familiar with [Jesus](#)' guidance through vision. He was especially open to [Jesus](#)' new direction that concerned people he did not even know and was gifted to pray unto people's deliverance. In fact, Luke's presentation of Ananias clearly demonstrates his leadership and effectiveness in God's Kingdom. In [Acts 22:12](#), for example, Paul describes Ananias as **a devout man according to the law, having a good report from all the Jews that dwelled in Damascus.**

An important point to consider here is the role of Ananias in representing the divine eternal counsel concerning Paul's calling—this was essential since Paul's conversion/call experience was so strong and overwhelming that he needed more of [Jesus](#). The authoritative voice of [Jesus](#) and the blinding light he heard and saw had crushed him down so low that he needed a human figure to represent to him the tenderness and compassion of [Jesus](#). This encounter with [Jesus](#) through Ananias became the starting point for Paul's position as a leading figure of the early church. Conclusively, while Paul had heard [Jesus](#) telling him about the new calling he would have to pursue, God's confirmation of the calling through a series of heavenly visitations, healings, filling with the [Holy Spirit](#), and a prophetic word from a refined man of God, was indispensable. An individual's inner voice and the heavenly mandated voice work in tandem to establish a faith and conviction that would relentlessly pursue heaven's plan toward the individual.

2. *Barnabas*

Barnabas is the other leader that contributed to the success of Paul's ministry. While Luke did not exactly present a flattering view regarding Barnabas's role and personality, his legacy robustly stands the test of time:

2.1. Barnabas's Faith and Concern

Luke depicts Barnabas's Spirit-filled life and his unwavering faith in God that filled his life ([Acts 11:24](#)). Around this time, Paul, who had just turned to Christ, was hated by conservative Jews and feared by [Jesus](#)' disciples. The conservative Jews in Damascus and Jerusalem could not accept or tolerate Paul's argument that [Jesus](#) was the Messiah. [Acts 9:26](#) explicitly shows how the disciples in Jerusalem were all afraid of Paul since they did not believe that he was a disciple. During this critical and challenging period for Paul, Barnabas assumed the task of advocating in favor of Paul to the disciples in Jerusalem. Barnabas demonstrated his unwavering faith, leadership, and tenacity in this tricky situation in which not only Paul's bold message but also his past image toward the public posed a threat to those who sided with him.

2.2. Barnabas's Active Social Presence

[Acts 11:23–26](#) is an exposition of another aspect expected from a church leader. After the church had been planted in Antioch, the mother church in Jerusalem chose Barnabas as the person for the pastoral task. A newly launched church ministry is in need of one who can lead, advise, and encourage. In this context, Barnabas's gift of providing motivation and stimulating the hearts of the novices in the Antioch church was essential. [Acts 11:25](#) reveals that not only were the believers in the Antioch church encouraged by Barnabas's ministry but also that the numerical growth of the church congregation resulted from his motivational pastoral care. Now, this was a golden opportunity for Barnabas to erect his monument at the Antioch church as

the one who organized and led the congregation to a remarkable stage of growth (11:24). Instead, Barnabas decided to go to Tarsus in order to find Paul and convince him to join the Antioch church; he was more interested in the glory of the church. The combined leadership of Barnabas and Paul produced such a transformation in the Antioch community that the believers began to be noticed as followers of Christ and were finally called Christians (11:26).

2.3. Barnabas's [Tolerance](#)

We learn by Luke's record that the argument over John Mark became so hot that they decided to separate ([Acts 15:36-41](#)). Paul did not want to take John Mark with them since he had left them in Perga. Barnabas, on the other hand, did not see John Mark's mistake to be grave enough to abandon him although the narrative does not clearly state his reasons. With Barnabas's tolerance, John Mark became mature and eventually greatly contributed to the apostle Paul who later would confess that Mark was a "great comfort" to him during his imprisonment in Rome ([2 Tim 4:11](#)).

Like [Jesus](#), who displayed a self-effacing sacrifice and made himself vulnerable while displaying tenacity, loyalty, and tenderness, the church of God needs leaders that are filled with the [Holy Spirit](#) and are committed to improving themselves as Christ-exalting and Christ-like leaders. Barnabas and Ananias exemplify this essential leadership and mentorship that is indispensable in the growth of the church, and thus cast light on the type of leadership that is seen or needed in the churches of today. Because of these two leaders' mentoring influence in Paul's life during his formative years as an apostle to the Gentiles, Christianity continues to reverberate with Paul's influence.