

Introduction: When I first turned my life over to Jesus as Savior and Lord of all—I was still pretty rough around the edges (that's an understatement). One of my closest friends invited me to this little whole in the wall church that met in an old 7-eleven building. I went enthusiastically and sat with him on the front row.

Now, I looked like a burned-out street kid, though inwardly I had been radically changed and was enjoying life in the Spirit. Growing in my faith and eager to grow all the more.

I noticed right away that no one in that little storefront church would talk to me. They weren't friendly, they looked at me very suspiciously. After the hour-long praise and worship segment of the service, which was very lively (that's an understatement)—the pastor got up and began to preach directly to me.

The whole hour-long sermon was a frothing, sweaty hollering tirade of why sinners, “like this young man on the front row” need to repent and be saved. But I already had repented and was saved.

After the very unpleasant two-hour long service, he invited the entire church to come up and lay hands on me and cast demons out of me. I got up, left, we got into the car and I said to my pal Welford, “Man, I ain't never going back to that church.”

And if that had been my only church experience, I would never have gone back to any church.

No one can do more harm to the faith than unwelcoming, judgmental religious people.

Fortunately, I had mentors in my life who accepted that I was on a journey of sanctification, that God was not done with me, that welcomed me into the family of God.

My youth pastor, Steve Ziemke, became a key influencer in my life. Having been a troubled teen himself, becoming dramatically saved by the power of the Spirit, he understood, he “got me.” And if it were not for Steve, my other pastors at the AG church where I attended, I would not be in ministry today. Not even sure that I would be part of any church.

Transition: Undoubtedly, it was difficult for the early church to welcome the man who previously been the chief opponent of Jesus's church and mission. As we'll see today, God brought people into Saul's life to help him adjust and transition into the body of Christ. And that has made all the difference for Paul, and for the church down through the centuries.

Saul's community

Acts 9:19 "Saul was with the disciples in Damascus for some time."

How long? We don't know. But we do know that he was immediately assimilated into the church in Damascus where his new-found faith could incubate and be nourished with other believers. He's there becoming acquainted with the brothers and sisters—his new family in Christ. He's growing in the grace and knowledge of Jesus.

1 John 1:5-7 "This is the message we have heard from him and declare to you: God is light, and there is absolutely no darkness in him. ⁶ If we say, 'We have fellowship with him,' and yet we walk in darkness, we are lying and are not practicing the truth. ⁷ If we walk in the light as he himself is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus his Son cleanses us from all sin."

This is now what characterizes Saul's life—fellowship with the brothers as he is growing in the grace and knowledge of Jesus—walking in the light of Christ's truth.

Saul's urgency

²⁰ "Immediately he began proclaiming Jesus in the synagogues: 'He is the Son of God.'"

A couple of critical word choices here by Luke that we don't want to miss.

- **Proclamation:** Why is proclamation so important? A proclamation in biblical contexts is **A royal announcement or decree by a commissioned herald or messenger (2 Chronicles 36:22; Dan 4:1; 5:29; Ezra 1:1; 10:7;).** It's a message, a royal decree for everyone who lives throughout the land. **Rom 16:24-26 "Now to him who is able to strengthen you according to my gospel and the proclamation about Jesus Christ, according to the revelation of the mystery kept silent for long ages ²⁶ but now revealed and made known through the prophetic Scriptures, according to the command of the eternal God to advance the obedience of faith among all the Gentiles"**

Principle: **The proclaimed Gospel is the power of God unto salvation; It is also the most offensive message in the world.**

The Gospel is good news for those who know they are lost, and it is bad news for those who refuse to repent and receive rescue.

- **Jesus is the Son of God:** What do we mean when we say that Jesus is the Son of God?
 - **Jesus is the Creator:** Col 1:16 "For everything was created by him, in heaven and on earth, the visible and the invisible, whether **thrones** or dominions or rulers or authorities— all things have been created through him and for him" Jesus stands, by nature, in relationship to the created order as its Sovereign Lord.

- God's Royal Son who shares the Father's throne and rule.
Hebrews 1:8 (Ps 45:6-7) "but to the Son [he says]: Your throne, God, is forever and ever, and the scepter of your kingdom is a scepter of justice."
And what should be our response—the response expected from God's people?
Hebrews 12:2 "keeping our eyes on Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of our faith. For the joy that lay before him, he endured the cross, despising the shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God."

This is Paul's message. Not a few months old in Christ and boldly proclaiming the message of Christ to his people. God's one and only Son has come, died, risen, enthroned.

This doesn't mean that every conversation has to be a deal closer.

Example: I made the mistake when I was a young on fire Christian—excited about my faith in sharing it once, trying to close the deal with everyone I met, and then if they didn't immediately respond I would shake the dust off my feet and move on. I did this based on a decontextualized passage in Matthew 10 where Jesus commanded the disciples to do that.

Saul's community in Damascus has welcomed him—Saul is ministering out of strong and effective Christian community.
Saul's urgency is to immediately begin to proclaim the gospel to everyone who will listen.

Saul's effect on his audience

²¹ All who heard him were astounded and said, "Isn't this the man in Jerusalem who was causing havoc for those who called on this name and came here for the purpose of taking them as prisoners to the chief priests?"

Now, remember, he was supposed to be presenting letters of recommendation to synagogue rulers in order to round up and extradite followers of Jesus's Way. Instead, he begins proclaiming the very Jesus he was there to shut down.

To their shock and horror, this man who was the infamous, chief adversary of the church now becomes its principal advocate—proclaiming and declaring Jesus—he is the Son of God and God the Son—God's royal king who has been exalted above the clouds and shares God the Father's throne.

Illus. When I first came to Christ and my friends, acquaintances and family found out—the initial and unanimous reaction was "What? No way!—YOU?"

- They are immediately astonished! Flabbergasted. How can this be?
- Some are shocked positively—astonishing change in Paul is undeniable.
- Some are shocked negatively—appalled at his embracing of Christ the crucified king.

But no one, absolutely no one is neutral about Paul. They may be dazed and confused, they may be cautiously optimistic—or they may be angry in their opposition—but no one is neutral about it.

²² But **Saul grew stronger and kept confounding the Jews** who lived in Damascus by proving that Jesus is the Messiah.

²³ After many days had passed, the Jews conspired to kill him, ²⁴ but Saul learned of their plot. So they were watching the gates day and night intending to kill him, ²⁵ but his disciples took him by night and lowered him in a large basket through an opening in the wall.

- **They are astonished and frustrated at his irrefutable case for Christ.** Saul is growing stronger in his faith, his boldness, his ties to Christian community—and his fellow Jews in the Damascus synagogues cannot refute his arguments.
- **Their frustration morphs into murderous impulse.** They are going to do to him what they did to Stephen, and what they did to Jesus from Nazareth. They can't refute his case, people are turning to faith in their Messiah due to his preaching—and so they choose the nuclear option—to silence their former ally.

Saul's losses become the Church's gains

²⁶ When he arrived in Jerusalem, he tried to join the disciples, but **they were all afraid of him, since they did not believe he was a disciple.** ²⁷ Barnabas, however, took him and brought him to the apostles and explained to them how Saul had seen the Lord on the road and that the Lord had talked to him, and how in Damascus he had spoken boldly in the name of Jesus. ²⁸ Saul was coming and going with them in Jerusalem, **speaking boldly in the name of the Lord.** ²⁹ **He conversed and debated with the Hellenistic Jews, but they tried to kill him.** ³⁰ When the brothers found out, they took him down to Caesarea and sent him off to Tarsus.

Let's talk about what Saul lost when he converted and became a disciple of Jesus, proclaiming the Good News of God's Kingdom to his people.

1. Saul lost his **community** and for a time is temporarily ostracized from the Jerusalem church. He is a sojourner without a country. A man without a home for now.

God remedies this situation through a man name Barnabas who's name means "Son of consolation/encouragement" in Aramaic Bar Navia means "Son of the prophet." Sometimes when we feel displaced, like we don't fit or we are just caught in the land in between. That space between where you feel like a man or woman with no country; where do I belong? To whom shall I go? You know you can't go back to what you had—that much is sure. But how do go forward? Where can you find a family, a church home.

And I want to tell you today, if you have recently moved here and began to attend CCC—and you're not sure where you fit—Welcome, our name is Barnabas. We want to encourage you and do everything we can to help you connect with other believers.

But know this, it takes time.

Paul lost his old community, he isn't automatically trusted by his new community, and he's alone. He needed Barnabas to come alongside him to help him. And some of you may need to become a Barnabas to help others to plug into the life of Christ Community Church.

2. Saul lost his place of prominence in a very well-respected profession. The ordinary Jew held the Pharisaic order in very high esteem. Ancient Jewish historian who wrote in the first century noted that the Pharisees are so well respected that if they say anything the people will believe it.

Paul said he was an up-and-coming Pharisee and now he has lost the social advantages of being a member of this highly esteemed order.

3. Saul lost seniority that he was gaining due to his persecution of the church.

Within that Pharisaic brotherhood was a pecking order. Theirs was a hierarchical world. Elders, Seniors, those who've been at it a while—those folks are prominent and you show deference to them. They also hold great sway within the group.

Paul's persecution of the church was a gift of Corban. Meaning, It was considered a sacrificial gift to the Lord that was pleasing to God. To eradicate and destroy this Jewish cult called "The Way." So he, says, I was advancing well beyond my peers. Climbing the social ladder. Ready to take his place as Pharisee, to gather disciples around him that he may teach and instruct them in Sauline Theology.

And in an instant, a flash of light from heaven and the voice of Jesus took all of that away from him.

4. Saul lost his family as He is declared anathema—meaning that if he had taken a wife by this time, which every Pharisee would be required to do, his wife, his parents, his siblings—unbelieving Jews would declare him cut off—and dead to the family.

Relational Death in the Jewish culture

Jesus talked about this phenomenon of social death in the parable of the **Prodigal Son**. After the younger Son receives his share of the estate, storms off in a huff, blazing a trail moral carnage and bankruptcy and poverty—he decides to repent and return to the Father's home. The Father who seems the familiar silhouette of his beloved Son coming over the horizon, and he runs out to meet his Son! **The Older son who was supposed to receive the inheritance complained to the Father. This wretched disgrace of a son of yours returns and you put the family robe and ring on his finger? The Father replies, "Son, your brother was lost and now he found. He was dead and now he is alive."**

Ephesians 2:4 “But God, who is rich in mercy, because of his great love that he had for us,⁵ made us alive with Christ even though we were dead in trespasses.”

But here's the context of this dead in trespasses language

¹¹ So, then, remember that at one time you were Gentiles in the flesh—called “the uncircumcised” by those called “the circumcised,” which is done in the flesh by human hands. ¹² At that time you were without Christ, excluded from the citizenship of Israel, and foreigners to the covenants of promise, without hope and without God in the world. ¹³ But now in Christ Jesus, you who were far away have been brought near by the blood of Christ. ¹⁴ For he is our peace, who made both groups one and tore down the dividing wall of hostility.

Now understand this, Paul is now, as a believer in Jesus and a preacher of the Good News of Jesus's death and resurrection—he's dead to his previous family.

Philippians 3:7-11

⁷ But everything that was a gain to me, I have considered to be a loss because of Christ. ⁸ More than that, I also consider everything to be a loss in view of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. Because of him I have suffered the loss of all things and consider them as dung, so that I may gain Christ ⁹ and be found in him, **not having a righteousness of my own from the law, but one that is through faith in Christ—the righteousness from God based on faith.** ¹⁰ My goal is to know him and the power of his resurrection and the fellowship of his sufferings, being conformed to his death, ¹¹ assuming that I will somehow reach the resurrection from among the dead.

Application:

Our faith is nourished and strengthened in Christian community. We need each other. And if any year, any event has ever proven beyond the peradventure of a doubt that human beings need to live in meaningful community together—it's this last year of this nightmare we've all been living in this pandemic.

The CDC Reports that the COVID-19 pandemic has had a negative impact on people's mental health due to isolation and financial difficulty.

During the pandemic, about 4 in 10 adults in the U.S. have reported symptoms of anxiety and depression (up from 1 in 10).

Along with mental disorders increasing exponentially has been sleeping disorders, substance abuse, domestic violence, arrests.

Our beliefs must translate to urgent action. If we really believe people are lost without Christ then we must have an urgency to tell them the good news. I have been frankly shocked at some very high profile preachers who have declared the US lost and under judgment. Now, is our culture under judgment? Of course it is. The wrath of God is being revealed against all the godlessness in our culture. You better believe it. But who are we to declare that God is done with America? The nonchalant attitude is striking. Shocking actually.

Was that ever Paul the Apostle's attitude toward the lost. "Ah, you know God is going to save whomever he's sovereignly elected to save?"

Of course, Paul believed that he had been elected from eternity past. He likely believed that God would save whomever he had appointed and predestined for eternal life. No doubt.

He acted as everyone's salvation depended on him and the feverish effort of proclaiming to every person under heaven.

He gave himself, he exhausted himself for the proclamation of this message to the lost. He left the grave an empty shell—spent for the world and for the gospel.

The losses we suffer for Christ in this life are nothing compared to what we gain in Christ. You see the cross is not just something Jesus died on, it's something he calls us to carry.

The cross saves us and it offends us. It confronts our sin, saves our souls, and bids us to come and die.

In the end, some of the people or relationships you have—they may reject you for your beliefs and your devotion to Jesus. And that's heartbreaking. We don't want to minimize what we've lost for the sake of Christ.

We must have the perspective that, in comparison to what we've gained, the losses—though real and heartbreaking, are nothing compared to the surpassing greatness of knowing Jesus Christ our lord.

Let's Be the Barnabas Church. How great would it be if we were the church that was known in this community for being welcoming, friendly, and helping people—encouraging them to connect in the life of the Church. Not to keep them out—but to help them connect.

If you're here and you want to plug into community—frankly some of the responsibility is on you. Take the initiative, show up to a small group, a summer dinner, get your kids plugged into community.

But some of it is our responsibility. We could run every snappy program there is on the market—but it takes more than a program it takes a people who are constantly looking for new faces, for folks who look like they don't know their way around here because their new.

Let's not be the church that creates an impenetrable bubble fellowship for the insiders. Let's be the Barnabas church that takes the initiative to welcome people into community, to help them adjust and to be patient with new believers who are saved, filled with the Spirit, baptized—but they're new at it.

God we thank you for giving us the gift of this holy Community. May we be strengthened and our faith nourished in it.

God we ask that you would give us a sense of urgency in sharing and proclaiming the Gospel of Jesus with family, friends...

God we choose to count our losses, though they are real and some of them heartbreaking, we count them all a loss—as nothing for the exceedingly great opportunity to know you, to be in reconciled to you through the blood of your Son for us.

God we choose to be the Barnabas church. A community always on the lookout for those who are new, who need to find and connect with other believers.