

Keep Bearing Witness

I. Introduction

- A. Before Jesus ascended, he told his disciples, “You will be my witnesses” —in Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria, and to the ends of the earth. We have watched that promise unfold through Peter, Stephen, and Philip. Last week, the risen Jesus met Saul on the road to Damascus and called the man who had persecuted his people to carry his name. Today we see Saul begin to do just that. Acts 9 gives us a picture of witness that is centered on Jesus, sustained through years and opposition, and carried forward by the Spirit.

II. Keep Bearing Witness

A. Keep Jesus at the center of our witness.

1. Saul is now our primary witness to the truth of Jesus’ resurrection and identity. The witnesses change, but the center of their witness does not. Philip proclaimed the Christ in Samaria. Now Saul enters the synagogues of Damascus and proclaims Jesus, saying, “He is the Son of God.” This is an amazing, and up to this point unprecedented turn. As we saw last week Saul came to Damascus to arrest people who called on Jesus’ name. Instead, he begins speaking that name publicly. Jesus had met him on the road, and Saul now bears witness to the one he had opposed.
2. This morning I want us to notice the content of Saul’s witness. Acts 9 gives us a bit of insight into this. V. 20 tells us that Paul was proclaiming Jesus as “the Son of God.”
 - a) “Son of God” was a meaningful title for Saul’s Jewish hearers. In the Old Testament, Israel is called God’s son (Ex. 4:22), and the title is also associated with Israel’s king (2 Sam. 7:14; Ps. 89:26-27). Psalm 2 speaks of the promised king as God’s Son. Although used only here in Acts, Jesus as the Son of God takes a prominent place in Saul’s understanding of the nature of Jesus, the phrase will be used extensively in his writings (Rom. 1:1-4, 9; 5:10; 1 Cor. 1:9; 2 Cor. 1:19; 4:3-6; Gal. 1:16; 2:20; 1

Thess. 1:10). Saul proclaims that Jesus is that promised one—the Christ.¹ But this is more than a claim that Jesus fits a royal title. The one God raised from the dead stands in a unique relationship with the Father. God’s saving work has come to us in him.²

- b) Luke tells us that Saul “increased all the more in strength” and confounded (to leave his opponents bewildered) the Jews in Damascus “by proving that Jesus was the Christ.” There is serious intellectual work done on the part of Saul to prove Jesus was the Christ. “The arguments of Saul by which he seeks to convince the Jews in Damascus that Jesus is the Messiah rest on three sets of facts: (1) God’s promises and the prophets prophecies in the Scriptures, (2) the bestowal of the Spirit of prophecy, and (3) his own encounter with Jesus on the road to Damascus.”³ Saul had studied the Scriptures for years. Now, having encountered the risen Jesus, he could see how their promises came together in him. He brought those Scriptures before his hearers and made a compelling case for Jesus.
- 3. As Saul’s ministry continued, Jesus remained at the center. Years later he would write, “We preach Christ crucified.” (1 Corinthians 1:22-25) He would tell the Corinthians, “I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ and him crucified.” (1 Corinthians 2:2-5) And he would say, “What we proclaim is not ourselves, but Jesus Christ as Lord.” (2 Corinthians 4:5-6) Saul’s audience would change, and his circumstances would change, but the person to whom he bore witness would remain the same.

¹ Darrell L. Bock, *Acts*, Baker exegetical commentary on the New Testament, (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Academic, 2007), 365.

² Eckhard J. Schnabel, *Acts : Zondervan Exegetical commentary on the New Testament*, Zondervan exegetical commentary on the New Testament, (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan, 2012), 453.

³ Nicholas Perrin, *Luke: An Introduction and Commentary*, ed. Eckhard J. Schnabel, 20 vols., Tyndale New Testament Commentaries, (Downers Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 2022), 454.

4. That is our calling too. When Jesus says, “You will be my witnesses,” he gives us someone to speak about. Our stories matter because they can tell others what he has done. The Scriptures matter because they help us show others who he is. But the aim of our witness is for people to see Jesus: the crucified and risen Son of God, the Christ, and our Lord. Too often our witness centers around ‘my church’, ‘this book I’m reading’, ‘what Jesus has done for me’—These may be part of our testimony, and important parts at that—but at the end of the day what we are ultimately bearing witness to, what we are testifying too—is that Jesus of Nazareth is Lord—that he came, he died, he rose, and he ascended. These are the central truths we proclaim—and through this proclamation it is our hope, like Saul—that the individuals we encounter will themselves encounter the risen Lord, place their faith in him, and forever be being transformed and healed by his love and grace.
5. Reflection question: When I speak about my faith, does my witness help people see Jesus? What parts of what I share may block their view of him?

B. Keep bearing witness through opposition and over time.

1. Saul’s first days as a witness were dramatic. He encountered the risen Jesus, and almost immediately he began proclaiming him in Damascus. But if we read this passage too quickly, we might imagine that everything else happened just as quickly. Luke moves from “some days” in verse 19 to “many days” in verse 23, and then takes Saul from Damascus to Jerusalem to Tarsus in a handful of sentences. A great deal of life is compressed into those verses.
2. Saul gives us a little more of that story in Galatians. After his encounter with Jesus, he went to Arabia and returned to Damascus. It was *three years* before he went up to Jerusalem, where he spent fifteen days with Peter and also met James. Luke does not tell us how long Saul spent in Arabia, and the exact dates of these early years are difficult to pin down. But we can see enough to know that Saul’s calling did not become a mature ministry overnight. After Jerusalem, the believers sent him through Caesarea to Tarsus. Later, Barnabas would go to Tarsus to find him and bring him to

Antioch. By the time Saul set out on the journey we often think of as the beginning of his missionary work, years (over a decade) had passed since that first day on the Damascus road. (Galatians 1:17-24; Acts 11:25-26).

3. These years were anything but easy. In Damascus, the people Saul once counted as his own (the Jews) were now plotting to kill him. He had come as an admired defender of their cause; now he escaped their city at night, lowered through an opening in the wall in a basket. Think about how quickly his world had changed. His witness to Jesus had cost him his place among the people who once welcomed him.
4. Then he arrived in Jerusalem and tried to join the disciples. These were the people he now belonged with, but they were afraid of him. Given what Saul had done to believers, we can understand their caution. Luke's wording suggests that Saul *kept trying* to join them, yet they could not believe he really was a disciple. His encounter with Jesus was real, but trust would take time. Many times you have to earn the right to be trusted; and that's OK. Saul had to live faithfully while others came to see the change in him. "... Such an amazing transformation was beyond their experience and expectation. Even believers who have seen the power of God at work in their own lives can doubt God's ability to change others."⁴ And Barnabas did something Saul could not do alone: he came alongside him, brought him to the apostles, and told them what Jesus had done.
5. Once Saul was received, he began preaching boldly in Jerusalem. He even spoke with the Greek speaking Jews—the same community of opponents with whom Stephen had disputed. Soon they, too, were seeking to kill him, and the believers sent him away to Tarsus. Saul's witness did not mean staying in every dangerous situation. In Damascus he escaped; in Jerusalem he accepted help and left. Yet wherever this passage places him, he continues to bear witness to Jesus.

⁴ David Peterson, *The Acts of the Apostles*, The Pillar New Testament commentary, (Grand Rapids, Mich.: William B. Eerdmans Pub. Co. ; Apollos, 2009), 316.

- a) In time, opposition would become a recurring part of Saul's ministry:
Listen to his description of his ministry in 2 Corinthians 11:23-28, "Are they servants of Christ? I am a better one—I am talking like a madman—with far greater labors, far more imprisonments, with countless beatings, and often near death. Five times I received at the hands of the Jews the forty lashes less one. Three times I was beaten with rods. Once I was stoned. Three times I was shipwrecked; a night and a day I was adrift at sea; on frequent journeys, in danger from rivers, danger from robbers, danger from my own people, danger from Gentiles, danger in the city, danger in the wilderness, danger at sea, danger from false brothers; in toil and hardship, through many a sleepless night, in hunger and thirst, often without food, in cold and exposure. And, apart from other things, there is the daily pressure on me of my anxiety for all the churches."
- 6. Eugene Peterson called discipleship "a long obedience in the same direction." Saul's early ministry helps us see what that can look like in the life of a witness. At times our witness to Jesus may be exciting, fast paced, and effective. Yet at other times, we are met with opposition, disinterest, and long periods of mundane living. At times witness means enduring misunderstanding, rebuilding trust, receiving help from others, accepting an unexpected open door, when the door we had hoped would open never materializes—all of this is seen in Saul's life, and in all likelihood will be encountered by each of us as we faithful bear witness to Jesus over the long course of our life.
- 7. Reflection question: Where is Jesus calling me to keep bearing witness, even though the road is taking longer or meeting more resistance than I expected?
- C. Keep trusting the Spirit to sustain our witness and build the church.
 - 1. After following Saul through Damascus and Jerusalem, Luke pulls back to show us the wider church: "The church throughout all Judea and Galilee and Samaria had peace and was being built up." We have been watching one witness move from place to place. Now Luke reminds us that Jesus' promise

in Acts 1 is still unfolding across whole regions. His witnesses are bearing the good news beyond Jerusalem, and the church is growing.

- a) Notice that Luke speaks of *the church* in the singular, though he names Judea, Galilee, and Samaria.⁵ These believers lived in different places, but they belonged to one community gathered around the risen Jesus. Saul's story matters, but the mission does not rest on Saul. Across these regions, the Lord is building his church.
2. Luke tells us what life in that church looked like. It had peace. It was being strengthened. It walked "in the fear of the Lord and in the comfort of the Holy Spirit." And it multiplied. The order matters. Luke does not give us a strategy for increasing numbers. He describes a community being formed and sustained by God, and then tells us that it grew.
 - a) The *fear of the Lord* gave the church its direction. Pete Santucci describes the 'fear of the Lord' as living your life in a Godward direction. These believers had good reasons to fear what people might do to them. Saul himself had been driven from two cities by threats against his life. Yet the church learned to live with a deeper reverence for Jesus than fear of its opponents. They had reoriented their lives in a godward direction, no matter the cost. And in this move the *comfort of the Holy Spirit* gave them strength. The Spirit's presence did not mean they would never face opposition again. It meant they were not left to bear witness alone.
3. This helps us understand the peace Luke describes. It was a real season of peace for the church, and one in which believers were being built up. But the peace did not come from Saul finally winning every argument or overcoming every threat. Luke has just told us that Saul was sent away because people were trying to kill him. Then he turns our attention to what God was doing among his people. As they walked in reverence for the Lord and received the

⁵ Bock, *Acts*, 372.

Spirit's comfort, the church multiplied. The passive probably points to God's growing the church in the midst of all of these factors."⁶

4. There are many times in our life where we need that wider view of witness. We are called to speak of Jesus faithfully, as Saul did. We may also need patience when trust takes time, when opposition comes, or when we cannot yet see the fruit. But the church's future does not depend on the strength of any one witness, it cannot be summed up in one local congregations experience, or be judged by their failure or shortcomings either. Jesus has given his Spirit to his people. The Spirit sustains us, builds us up together, and carries the witness of the church forward.
5. Reflection question: Where am I trying to carry the weight of our witness myself, when Jesus is calling me to trust the Spirit who strengthens and builds his church?

III. Closing Thoughts

- A. Saul's story begins with a sudden encounter with Jesus, but his witness unfolds over a long road. He proclaims Jesus in Damascus, escapes a plot against his life, struggles to be welcomed by the believers in Jerusalem, and then faces threats there as well. Through it all, he keeps bearing witness to the risen Jesus. Then Luke lifts our eyes from Saul to the church throughout Judea, Galilee, and Samaria. The church has peace. It is being built up. It walks in the fear of the Lord and the comfort of the Holy Spirit, and it multiplies. Saul has a calling to fulfill, but the growth of the church rests in God's hands.
- B. This morning RVF let us remember our calling as faithful witnesses to Jesus. May we remember to keep him at the center of our witness. When we speak about our faith, may we help others see him. May we Keep bearing witness over time. If trust takes longer to build than we hoped, or the response is harder than we expected, may we remain faithful to the people and places God has given us. And may we always keep trusting the Spirit. Ask him for courage, receive his comfort, and remember that he is at work in the whole church. Jesus called his people to be his witnesses. Saul's life shows us that this calling can take us

⁶ Bock, *Acts*, 373.

down a long and difficult road. But it is the risen Jesus to whom we bear witness, and his Spirit goes with us.

C. Bibliography

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