

Saved to Serve
Acts 9:19-31
Rev. Brian Bill
September 26-27, 2020

My favorite verse from the song we just sang is...

*To this I hold...my sin has been defeated
Jesus now and ever is my plea
Oh, the chains are released...I can sing I am free
Yet not I, but through Christ in me*

This weekend is set aside as a time of prayer for repentance, return, and revival. Hundreds of churches across our country are taking time to pray on what has been called, "Repentance Sunday."

Listen to the words of Jesus to a church from Revelation 2:4-5: ***"But I have this against you, that you have abandoned the love you had at first. Remember therefore from where you have fallen; repent, and do the works you did at first."***
2 Chronicles 7:14 says, ***"If my people who are called by my name humble themselves, and pray and seek my face and turn from their wicked ways, then I will hear from heaven and will forgive their sin and heal their land."***

It's time for us to return to our first love, to humble ourselves and pray, to seek God's face, and to turn from our evil ways.

Repentance is a change of heart and mind that causes us to confess our sins, turn away from our sin and turn toward God. Acts 17:30: ***"The times of ignorance God overlooked, but now he commands all people everywhere to repent..."***
Jeremiah 18:7-8: ***"If at any time I declare concerning a nation or a kingdom, that I will pluck up and break down and destroy it, and if that nation, concerning which I have spoken, turns from its evil, I will relent of the disaster that I intended to do to it."***

Would you join me in praying this prayer? I adapted the words from another pastor.

Lord God, You alone are worthy to be praised for You have created us by Your mighty power, redeemed us by Your precious blood, and You hold all things together.

Lord, we know we have sinned against You and have acted in rebellious and wicked ways, by turning away from Your commandments and ignoring the truths contained throughout the Scripture for our instruction, training in righteousness and well-being.

We have not listened to Your Word and have turned aside from Your voice. We have ignored Your many calls to holiness, and we stand before You poor and wretched, naked and ashamed.

We confess the sins of our church, our community, our country and our world. We seem to be in a moral free fall as a nation. May the good news of the gospel penetrate hard hearts, and may you use us as salt in a decaying world and as light in dark places.

Lord God, according to Your grace and mercy, we ask for Your forgiveness. Wash away our many sins and enable us to walk into the future with a desire to do Your will and to live godly in Christ Jesus.

Thank You, Lord, that Your mercies are new every morning. Thank You that even though we have been so faithless towards You, You have remained faithful towards us. Cleanse our hearts from within and renew a right spirit within us. May we walk in holiness and righteousness from this day forward. In Jesus' name I pray, Amen.

→ Welcome to Charlotte Sears Bales. Charlotte is here today from Greenville, South Carolina. Her dad, Bill Sears, was pastor at Edgewood from 1953-1959. Let's give her a warm Edgewood welcome!

How many of you have ever had physical therapy? Do we have any physical therapists or physical therapy assistants here today? I'm 12 weeks into PT for my rotator cuff surgery and now know what PT stands for – *pain and torture!* JK. I'm actually making great progress...finally. I've graduated to using elastic bands and one-pound pink weights!

This week I asked my therapist what the key is to a successful rehab. She told me it's when the therapist and patient work together. The therapist inflicts pain and torture and the patient does excruciating exercises several times a day. There's no way I would be where I am without her outstanding work. I tried to trick her on Wednesday. When she asked me to raise my arm above my head, I decided to lift

my left arm instead of the one I had surgery on. I was hoping for some praise, but she wasn't fooled at all.

This week I called Liesl Parks to learn more about physical therapy. Liesl is a Physical Therapy Assistant and is studying to be a Physical Therapist. She shared some PT humor with me.

- *Never say it's easy because we'll just make it hard.*
- *Never lose count because you'll start at one again.*
- *Never scream or cry because it only encourages us.*
- *Never hold your breath because if you pass out, we have to fill out the paperwork.*

Liesl told me her biggest challenge is to persuade patients to do their part in rehabilitation. She tells patients she can get them back to around 50% full-range motion and the rest is up to them. When I asked her how many patients actually follow an exercise regime at home, she estimates about 75%. Those who don't exercise, end up going backwards. Those who refuse to do any therapy or exercises can end up with a frozen shoulder.

I'm a firm believer in physical therapy! I thought of some parallels between physical rehabilitation and spiritual rehabilitation.

- If we hope to grow spiritually, we must allow God to do His work in our lives, *and* we must do what we can do. Philippians 2:12-13 says, ***“Work out your own salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who works in you, both to will and to work for his good pleasure.”*** We work out what God works in.
- Also, we need the help of others who will push us to do what we can't do ourselves.
- Just as physical healing takes time, spiritual growth comes with time.
- The power of repetition and daily habits is critical. You won't grow spiritually without practicing the disciplines of time in the Word, prayer, fellowship and evangelism.
- Pain is necessary in order to grow physically and spiritually. One slogan PT's use is this: *“Today it hurts, tomorrow it works.”*
- Physical and spiritual setbacks are common. The key is to keep moving forward.

Last week we saw how the Lord saved Saul on the road to Damascus and learned that *no one is too sinful to be saved*. We pick up the narrative today in Acts 9:19-31 where we will discover how *God saves us so we will serve Him*. Would you stand as you're able and read this with me?

“For some days he was with the disciples at Damascus. And immediately he proclaimed Jesus in the synagogues, saying, ‘He is the Son of God.’ And all who heard him were amazed and said, ‘Is not this the man who made havoc in Jerusalem of those who called upon this name? And has he not come here for this purpose, to bring them bound before the chief priests?’

But Saul increased all the more in strength, and confounded the Jews who lived in Damascus by proving that Jesus was the Christ. When many days had passed, the Jews plotted to kill him, but their plot became known to Saul. They were watching the gates day and night in order to kill him, but his disciples took him by night and let him down through an opening in the wall, lowering him in a basket.

And when he had come to Jerusalem, he attempted to join the disciples. And they were all afraid of him, for they did not believe that he was a disciple. But Barnabas took him and brought him to the apostles and declared to them how on the road he had seen the Lord, who spoke to him, and how at Damascus he had preached boldly in the name of Jesus.

So he went in and out among them at Jerusalem, preaching boldly in the name of the Lord. And he spoke and disputed against the Hellenists. But they were seeking to kill him. And when the brothers learned this, they brought him down to Caesarea and sent him off to Tarsus.

So the church throughout all Judea and Galilee and Samaria had peace and was being built up. And walking in the fear of the Lord and in the comfort of the Holy Spirit, it multiplied.”

In this passage we see some exercises Paul employed as well as exercises others did to help him. Also, we will see some outcomes, or results that come from this partnership.

A Disciple's Exercises

1. Be with others. Look at verse 19: *“For some days he was with the disciples at Damascus.”* Saul understood the importance of gathering with God’s people. Notice they are called *“disciples”* here. We’ve defined a disciple as *“a believer who lovingly follows Jesus and intentionally helps others follow Him.”*

There are other terms used for followers of Christ in the Book of Acts. We belong to the Way (Acts 9:2), we are brothers and sisters (Acts 9:17), we are called Christians (Acts 11:26), we are Nazarenes (Acts 24:5), and we’re friends (Acts 27:3).

I realize it’s a challenge during this season, but how are you doing at being with other disciples? Are you looking for creative ways to gather with God’s people?

2. Bear witness. After drawing strength from the saints of God, in verses 20-21, Paul *“immediately”* started proclaiming Jesus in the synagogues. This word means, *“straight away, at once.”* I learned the importance of immediate exercise when I was scheduled for PT the very next day after having surgery.

D.L. Moody once said, *“If you don’t go to work for the Lord because you’re afraid of making mistakes, you will probably make the greatest mistake of your life – that of doing nothing.”*

Paul didn’t wait to bear witness of the One who had changed life. Since he was changed instantly, he immediately started telling others about it. A prisoner wrote Ray Pritchard last month to thank him for Anchor for the Soul in Spanish. Ray is president of Keep Believing Ministries, one of our Go Team partners. EBC members Gary and Kathy Pinger are in charge of sending these books all over the country. Here’s part of what this prisoner wrote...

*“I know that Jesus Christ loves convicted felons like me, and although I have been characterized as a complete failure and an outcast, I know that there is future with God and our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ...Please remember that losers and outcasts like me do believe that Jesus Lord is redeemer and **can change things instantly**, thus resurrect my ‘dead’ life, like He did with Lazarus.”*

Saul didn’t know a lot, but because he was changed “instantly,” what he did know, he boldly proclaimed: *“He is the Son of God.”* The first message he declared was the deity of Jesus. Jesus is omnipotent, omniscient, sovereign, immortal and eternal. Jesus is fully man and fully God.

Verse 21 tells us **“all who heard him were amazed.”** This means they were “astounded” or more literally, “struck out of their senses.” They remembered Saul causing **“havoc”** and arresting Christians. Previously he had persecuted Christians in the synagogues and now he was preaching Christ there.

A well-known author tells how he was asked to be a counselor at a junior high camp. At this camp, there was a little boy named Billy who had cerebral palsy. As Billy walked across the camp, the other kids would line up and imitate his strange movements, teasing him mercilessly. One day, Billy asked for directions, *“Which way is the craft shop?”* he stammered, his mouth contorting. The boys mimicked him as they stuttered, *“It’s over...there...Billy.”* And then they laughed at him.

Two days later, Billy was chosen by his fellow cabin mates to give the morning devotional so they could make fun of him. As Billy dragged his way to the front, you could hear giggles rolling over the crowd. It took him almost five minutes to say these 7 words: *“Jesus...loves...me...and...I...love...Jesus.”*

When Billy finished, there was dead silence. The speaker looked around and saw junior high boys crying everywhere. Repentance and revival broke out in that camp after Billy’s short testimony. To this day, as the speaker travels all over the world, he still finds missionaries and pastors who say, *“Remember me? I was converted at that summer Bible camp!”*

If you’ve been saved by the Savior, you already know enough to share the Savior with others.

After doing the exercises of *being with others* and *bearing witness*, Paul began growing by disciplining himself to go deep.

3. Begin growing. We see this in verse 22: **“But Saul increased all the more in strength...”** The tense here indicates he *“kept increasing”* as he grew more and more capable. As a result, people were **“confounded,”** which means, *“baffled to the point of uproar.”* They couldn’t believe how Saul was able to **“prove that Jesus was the Christ.”** The word **“prove”** has the idea of *“demonstrating by bringing together”* and was used of *“knitting together.”*

Later, in Acts 17:3, it says he **“explained and proved”** who Jesus was. In Acts 18:5, he testified to the Jews **“that the Christ was Jesus.”** *He not only proclaimed Jesus as the Son of God; He also proved He is the Savior from God.* The title

Christ is the Hebrew “*Messiah*,” or Anointed One. Jesus is the fulfillment of all the prophecies in the Old Testament.

In a sermon some time ago I showed this graph which depicts over 63,779 cross-references in the Bible. The white bars along the bottom represent each chapter and the line’s color shows the reference’s distance from the other. I doubt Saul had a graph like this, but he no doubt linked multiple references from the Old Testament to show how they were fulfilled by Christ. I’m sure he explained how Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement, which begins Sunday night, was fulfilled by the final atonement accomplished by Christ on the cross. Don’t you love how the Bible has one unified message, with every Scripture pointing to the Son of God as Savior of the world?

Have you ever wondered how Saul learned so much about the Lord in such a little time? There’s a clue found at the beginning of verse 23: “*When many days had passed...*” We know from Galatians 1:17-18 he spent three years in Arabia for some intensive spiritual therapy: “*...I went away into Arabia, and returned again to Damascus. Then after three years I went up to Jerusalem to visit Cephas and remained with him fifteen days.*” Most commentators believe this period of time took place between Acts 9:22 and Acts 9:23.

Here’s a possible timeline:

- Saul is converted (Acts 9:1-19)
- Saul preaches in Damascus (Acts 9:20-22)
- Saul retreats to Arabia (Galatians 1:17)
- Saul returns to Damascus (Acts 9:23-25)
- Saul visits Jerusalem (Acts 9:26-30)
- Saul ministers in Caesarea, Syria, Tarsus and Cilicia (Acts 9:26-30; Galatians 1:18-24)

After being with others, bearing witness and beginning to grow, Saul braces himself for opposition. Just as there’s no gain without some pain in physical therapy, so too suffering helps us grow spiritually.

4. Brace yourself for opposition. Look at verses 23-24: “*...the Jews planned to kill him, but their plot became known to Saul. They were watching the gates day and night in order to kill him.*” This is a direct fulfillment of the words Jesus

spoke to Saul on the road to Damascus in Acts 9:16: ***“For I will show him how much he must suffer for the sake of my name.”***

Opposition and adversity are themes throughout the Book of Acts. Brothers and sisters, there’s no way to follow the Savior and somehow get a pass on suffering. According to 2 Timothy 3:12, we must brace for it because persecution is a promise for each of us: ***“Indeed, all who desire to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted.”***

As disciples of Christ, we must discipline ourselves to exercise our faith. At the same time, we’re not meant to do all this alone. As disciples, we’re also called to be disciplers who help others in their spiritual rehabilitation. We see this in verses 25-30.

A Discippler’s Exercises

1. Help a brother or sister out. We’re called to stick close to a brother or sister so we can help them out when they’re in a jam. Notice verse 25: ***“But his disciples took him by night and let him down through an opening in the wall, lowering him in a basket.”*** This was likely a wicker basket used for grain. That’s better than the picture in my mind of Saul being lowered in a laundry basket!

Saul entered Damascus blind and exited in a basket. We could call him a “basket case”! This reminds me what Rahab did in Joshua 2:15: ***“Then she let them down by a rope through the window, for her house was built into the city wall, so that she lived in the wall.”***

We can learn two things from this incident.

- **Be flexible.** These Christ-followers probably had *“never done it this way before”* but they were willing to think outside the box. We’re sure learning this as a church as we seek to be creative with our ministry methods during COVID.
- **Be faithful.** I think of the guys who held on to the ropes as they let Saul down over the wall. They had to remain focused or they would have dropped him. Plus, they probably needed two or three involved to make this happen.

Here are a couple questions: *Are you being flexible or are you fairly rigid? Are you being faithful by holding the rope for someone right now?*

2. Bring a brother or sister in. Not only did Saul need help getting over the wall, but also, he needed someone to knock down the walls between him and the disciples in Jerusalem. We see this in verse 26: ***“And when he had come to Jerusalem, he attempted to join the disciples. And they were all afraid of him, for they did not believe that he was a disciple.”*** Saul ***“attempted to join”*** which means he ***“kept trying”*** but he was not having any success. The saints were skeptical of Saul’s salvation. They had heard about his conversion but after three years they were still terrified he was a terrorist.

I love the next four words in verse 27: ***“But Barnabas took him...”*** Barnabas, whose name, means, ***“son of encouragement,”*** took hold of Saul, possibly by the hand, and ***“brought him to the apostles...”*** The word “encouragement” literally means to ***“put courage into someone.”*** Then Barnabas spoke up and shared Saul’s salvation story: ***“...and declared to them how on the road he had seen the Lord, who spoke to him, and how at Damascus he had preached boldly in the name of Jesus.”***

In his commentary on the Book of Acts, Harry Ironside tells the story about a young Christian man from New Guinea who had gone away to college. When he returned to New Guinea after graduation, he gathered for communion on a Sunday morning with his brothers and sisters in Christ. A man came in a few minutes late and sat next to this college graduate, causing him to straighten up and become very, very tense. After a few minutes, he relaxed.

When the service was over, an older man asked the young man why he was so upset: ***“Well, that man who came was the man who killed my father and ate him. But as I sat at the communion table, I realized he had come to faith in Christ and I’m to receive him as my brother.”***

I’m sure that’s a bit like how the believers in Jerusalem felt when they saw Saul the assassin. Barnabas took the time to stand with Saul and to speak for him. Are you known as someone who comes alongside the underdog? Do you help others accept outsiders? Are you willing to believe in, and befriend a new believer? Who can you come alongside this week? Do you have the courage to speak up for a new Christian when others are tearing him down?

Because Barnabas brought Saul in, verse 28 indicates he preached ***“boldly in the name of the Lord. And he spoke and disputed against the Hellenists...”*** The Hellenists were Jews who spoke Greek. Because Greek was Saul’s first language,

this was easy for him. Incidentally, the last one to preach to them was Stephen, who Saul had a part in martyring. Now Saul continued the work of Stephen.

3. Send a brother or sister along. Because people were trying to kill Saul for the third time in this chapter, verse 30 tells us ***“they brought him down to Caesarea and sent him off to Tarsus.”*** Caesarea was the coastal capital of a Roman province and the home to the Roman procurator. Located 65 miles away, the disciples made sure he got there safely and then they put him on a ship to Tarsus, Saul’s hometown, which was about 300 miles away.

Sometimes we need to help a brother or sister get to where God wants them to go. One application of this is for us as a church, and as individuals, to continue to get behind our Go Team partners financially and prayerfully as we send them with the gospel. I’m reminded of the original covenant of Edgewood, signed by 40 members in 1905: *“...to contribute cheerfully and regularly to the support of the ministry, the expense of the church, the relief of the poor, and the spread of the Gospel through all nations.”*

In 2018, we asked you to make a 2-year commitment to *Grow Time* and I want to thank those who have faithfully fulfilled your commitment. It’s possible God is leading some of you to continue giving *Grow Time* so we can further lower our loan balance. As a way to demonstrate our cheerful and regular support of the ministry of Edgewood, Beth and I are going to extend our *Grow Time* commitment. If you’re able to do the same (and not everyone will be able to), we’ll be in a position to pay down our mortgage and save a lot of money in interest payments.

By the way, thanks to the persistent and tireless work of our deacons, we just found out our lending institution lowered our interest rate from 4.5% to 3.85%! This will end up saving us \$265,000 in interest! If we find a way to pay our loan off within 10 years, we will save an additional \$773,000 in interest. On top of this good news, we recently received a bequest from an Edgewood member’s will of over \$170,000 for *Grow Time*!

Progress Report

When I have a good day at PT, I often ask my therapist for a smiley face when she records my progress on her laptop. I’m sure I’ve only gotten a couple of these, but it helps me to keep going when I see some improvement. She has some goals she wants me to achieve so I can get back to some normal activities. On Friday, she

told me I could begin vacuuming the house because it would be good for my shoulder. Not sure I want Beth to hear about that but I am thankful for some progress.

Acts 9:31 is the third of seven progress reports in the Book of Acts (2:47; 6:7; 12:24; 16:5; 19:20; 28:30-31): ***“So the church throughout all Judea and Galilee and Samaria had peace and was being built up. And walking in the fear of the Lord and in the comfort of the Holy Spirit, it multiplied.”*** The word “so” could also be translated as “then.”

It’s fascinating Paul used the singular “**church**” and not “**churches**.” This shows believers are part of one united church. We could call this the capital “C” church. What a great reminder that born-again believers make up one church. As Paul said later in Ephesians 4:4-6: ***“There is one body and one Spirit—just as you were called to the one hope that belongs to your call— one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all.”***

In addition, the reference to Judea, Galilee and Samaria makes us think of our marching orders from Acts 1:8 to take the gospel to our neighbors and the nations. The church is not just established in Jerusalem but is now scattered throughout Judea, Samaria and to the ends of the earth.

Here are five results of individual believers exercising their faith with others who had come alongside them. We could call this a progress report.

1. Rest. The church experienced “**peace**,” which refers to holy harmony. God did something similar for Israel in Joshua 21:44: ***“And the LORD gave them rest on every side just as he had sworn to their fathers.”*** No doubt the tension deescalated once Saul headed to Tarsus. Also, God brought peace to the church when the Emperor Tiberius died and was replaced by Caligula, Rome’s cruelest emperor. He was filled with murder and debauchery and even tried to erect a statue of himself in the Temple at Jerusalem. This outraged the Jews and they stood up to him, which caused them to tone down their persecution of Christians...for a short period of time.

2. Reinforcement. The church was “**built up**” or constructed. As we were reminded last weekend, in the midst of the polarization in our country, Romans 14:19 urges us to build up our brothers and sisters instead of tearing them down: ***“So then let us pursue what makes for peace and for mutual upbuilding.”***

3. Reverence. Also, the believers walked in ***“the fear of the Lord.”*** Walking implies movement. To fear the Lord is to honor and revere Him. Tim Keller defines it this way: *“To fear the Lord means to be in awe and wonder of his greatness and love.”* 2 Corinthians 7:1 reminds us how a proper reverence of the Lord leads to reflection and repentance of sin: ***“Since we have these promises, beloved, let us cleanse ourselves from every defilement of body and spirit, bringing holiness to completion in the fear of God.”***

4. Reassurance. In addition, the believers received the ***“comfort of the Holy Spirit.”*** The word ***“comfort”*** can be translated as, *“exhortation or encouragement.”* It literally means, *“to be called to one’s side.”* Jesus told us in John 14:16-17 the Holy Spirit will come alongside, He will dwell within, and He will never leave us: ***“And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Helper, to be with you forever, even the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive, because it neither sees him nor knows him. You know him, for he dwells with you and will be in you.”***

5. Replication. The church was ***“multiplied,”*** which means, *“to increase in magnitude by making full.”* As they lived on mission for the fame of His name, the church not only experienced addition, it multiplied exponentially! As we continue to proclaim the gospel, we’ll experience something similar to Acts 16:5: ***“So the churches were strengthened in the faith, and they increased in numbers daily.”***

This week, I received a very encouraging email from EBC member Kathleen Kehoe (I have permission to share it): *“When people ask me why our church is growing, I say we preach the whole Bible always and unapologetically. To me it’s that simple...I also want to thank all of the leaders, staff, trustees, and deacons. You have all done a monumental job guiding our congregation through the COVID crisis. I pray for all of you frequently and for pastors in general.”*

When I first started Physical Therapy, I was pretty discouraged by my pain and the lack of progress. One day I asked my therapist why it was taking so long to see results. She told me that as people get older, they heal more slowly. As she described older people, I immediately thought of people my parent’s age and then I realized she was looking at me!

No matter how old you are, the key is to keep doing the spiritual exercises required of a disciple.

1. Be with others
2. Bear witness
3. Begin growing
4. Brace yourself for opposition

We're to also look for ways to disciple others.

1. Help a brother or sister out
2. Bring a brother or sister in
3. Send a brother or sister along

Then, we'll see God do His work of growth within us and within our church.

1. Rest
2. Reinforcement
3. Reverence
4. Reassurance
5. Replication

If you have not yet repented and received Christ as the Son of God and the Savior of the world, you could do so right now by praying this prayer: *“Lord Jesus, for too long I’ve kept You out of my life. I admit I am a sinner and I cannot save myself. I repent of my sins by changing my mind about the way I’ve been living. By faith I appropriate Your gift of salvation. Thank You, Lord Jesus, for coming to earth. With all my heart I believe You are the Son of God who died on the cross for my sins and rose from the dead on the third day. Thank You for bearing my sins and giving me the gift of eternal life. I believe Your words are true. I repent and receive You into my heart. Be my Savior and Lord, my Forgiver and Leader. I surrender to Your leadership in my life by saying, ‘Here I am, Lord.’ Make me into the person You want me to be. Amen.”*

New Members (10:45) – Kerry and Trisha Maitlen