

# HIT THE GROUND RUNNING FOR YOUR LIFE

ACTS 9:19-31 FEBRUARY 12, 2020

We've all seen those sequences in movies or television where a police officer stops a motorist and commandeers their vehicle while in pursuit of some bad guy. Giving up your car in that situation is the right thing to do, but it's also still the law.<sup>1</sup> It's part of the long-standing concept of posse comitatus, where a law enforcement official, typically a sheriff, can deputize and mobilize ordinary citizens for things like manhunts or other extraordinary situations.<sup>2</sup>

It may be a staple of old Westerns, but you may be surprised to learn that a posse was formed as recently as 1994 in Hinsdale County, Colorado. More than 100 deputized citizens were sent house to house in an effort to find violent bank robbers.<sup>3</sup> In a situation like that, you have to hit the ground running because every second counts and lives hang in the balance.

If anyone ever hit the ground running, it was Saul of Tarsus. After his conversion, he performs one of the most dramatic about-face maneuvers in history. He who had been the foremost adversary of Jesus Christ and His Church was immediately deputized and joined the posse, preaching the Gospel with boldness and fearlessness.

In our text this evening we'll see the beginning of his long walk with the Lord. It's written more as a *case study* than a biography. In fact, when it comes to the *details* of this part of Saul's life, Dr. Luke is going to leave a lot of things out. In just 12 verses he's going to cover *10 years*. We're left to piece some other references together to get an idea of what was going on during most of that time. But, remember, Luke's goal isn't necessarily to write a history text book. His purpose is to testify concerning the work of Jesus Christ by the Holy Spirit and through His disciples. He gives us these case studies of how God changes lives and the ways the Gospel went out with power from a single upper room to the far edges of the world.

In tonight's text, there are a couple of interesting changes compared to the previous 8 and half chapters that we've read. First of all, the focus is starting to shift from Jerusalem and Peter to Gentile cities and Saul. We'll get a little more of Peter's story in the next few chapters, but after that the book will center on the work done in Saul's life and ministry.

But one other interesting change that we get starting here is that we're able to track the development of a remarkable Christian life from spiritual birth through decades to maturity. So far, we've seen people get saved in general, like the crowd at Pentecost. Or, when we *do* see an individual get saved, we're told maybe one thing about them and then they leave the pages of Scripture. Think of the lame man at the Beautiful Gate or the Ethiopian Eunuch. But, with Saul of Tarsus, we are able to see a lot more of the Lord developing an individual and using him in the life of the Church along the way. And that's great, because he is presented to us in the New Testament as *the* example to follow. He would later write in 1 Corinthians 4: "be followers of me." 1 Corinthians 11: "Imitate me as I imitate Christ." Philippians 4: "The things which you learned and received and heard and saw in me, these do." So as we see him begin the Christian life, we're to be inspired and instructed and sent out to go and do likewise.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.superlawyers.com/california-southern/article/can-police-commandeer-my-car-to-help-in-a-chase/18bf8225-4a82-4345-b0b1-0f9f45f8d5a7.html>

<sup>2</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Posse\\_comitatus](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Posse_comitatus)

<sup>3</sup> *ibid.*

By the way, if you want a good biographical look at the life of Saul, our pastor did a really great series a number of years ago that you can find on the website. Visit [calvaryhanford.com/Saul](http://calvaryhanford.com/Saul) and you'll be able to see each stage of his life with all the references and research brother together.

**Acts 9:19b - Saul was with the disciples in Damascus for some days.**

Saul is our main character tonight, but the supporting cast is remarkable as well. These Christians in Damascus show some incredible love and generosity here. Saul had no family in the city. No friends who would want to associate with him after his conversion. He had come as a killer, but was welcomed as a brother into this church. I wonder if Ananias had some fun with him the first time he brought him to a gathering. "Ok, this is our secret meeting place now that we're running for our lives." Or, "Hey everybody! I've got a guest with me here tonight. His name is Saul. You might have heard of him!" For Saul's part, these were probably days of wonderful discovery. It's almost impossible for us to think of him as a 'baby' Christian, rather than as *the* Apostle. But, in reality, he must've walked into that first meeting and said, "So...what do you guys do?"

But he wasn't just a bystander, he hit the ground running in his new position as agent for Christ.

**Acts 9:20 - <sup>20</sup> Immediately he began proclaiming Jesus in the synagogues: "He is the Son of God."**

Scholars note that there were dozens of Jewish synagogues in Damascus. Those first meetings would've each had an amazing moment where the leader recognized the great Saul of Tarsus. The Pharisee champion. The protector of Judaism. The *one* man stemming the threat of the sect of Jesus the Nazarene. "Saul, do you have anything to share with us?" "As a matter of fact, I do. You mentioned Jesus. I've met Him, and He's God."

Now, Saul was a brilliant man who had the finest education the world could offer at the time. He knew more about the Hebrew Scriptures than anyone in the room. But his message wasn't complicated or intricate. It wasn't some long, drawn out theory that only academics could follow. It was, "Jesus is the Son of God." That's a message that any one of us can share. It contains a lot of information and implications and revelation, but you don't need an advanced degree to spread that message and explain what it means.

What does it mean? Well, first of all, it means that Jesus Christ is the most important Person of all time. It means that He is Divine. That God, the Creator of all things, put on flesh and dwelt among mankind. Why did He do that? Because mankind has been ruined by sin and is doomed to hell. But God intervened by sending His *Son*. Jesus, the Son of God, sacrificed in *your* place so that you could be saved from the guilt of your sin. Since Jesus is the Son of God, that means that everything He said was Divine truth. It means that God is a God of grace and love and mercy. And it means that Caesar is *not* God. During this era, many of the Roman Emperors like Augustus and Tiberius and Nero used the title *Divi filius*, which means "son of the god."<sup>4</sup> But Saul's message proclaimed the truth that there is *one* God, *one* Savior, *one* true King of heaven and earth, and His name is Jesus.

**Acts 9:21 - <sup>21</sup> But all who heard him were astounded and said, "Isn't this the man who, in Jerusalem, was destroying those who called on this name and then came here for the purpose of taking them as prisoners to the chief priests?"**

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<sup>4</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Divi\\_filius](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Divi_filius)

Imagine if, at the next Democratic primary debate, Bernie Sanders came out and started saying that our country needs to establish a truly free market economy, end entitlements and abolish abortion! At first, everyone would be deeply confused. The Jews, we're told, were "astounded." One Greek scholar explains that term means to be beside themselves or dumbstruck.<sup>5</sup>

At first it was hard for people to hear what Saul was saying, but he kept at it, day after day. Throughout this passage he demonstrates *persistence* and a willingness to face hurdles to his ministry. It wasn't easy, right from the get go, but he was undeterred. They weren't listening yet, but they *would* eventually, as he continued to share the truth of Jesus Christ.

Now, we learn in Saul's letter to the Galatians that somewhere in verses 21, 22 and 23, he spent 3 years in Arabia. It seems like it would've been between verses 21 and 22. We know that, while he was there, he was receiving revelation from Christ Himself. But we don't want to think of him as being some weird hermit in the desert, living under a rock in a trance. It seems that he was busy preaching and even planting churches there. Then, at some point, he came *back* to Damascus, and the story picks back up in verse 22.

**Acts 9:22 - <sup>22</sup> But Saul grew more capable and kept confounding the Jews who lived in Damascus by proving that this One is the Messiah.**

Saul could *prove* that Jesus Christ is the Messiah. What a comfort to know that what God has told us can be *confirmed*. For example: The accuracy and integrity of the Scriptures are more reliable than any book in ancient history. The resurrection is one of the most provable events of all time. Thousands of Bible prophecies have been *literally* fulfilled. Ours is a *provable* faith. It doesn't rely on secret hallucinations or invisible arrivals of the Messiah.

Luke says that Saul "grew more capable." It's hard to imagine him as *less* capable, but what a great encouragement for us. He had a starting point and he developed and matured. Along the way he kept exercising his gifts and became more effective in his ministry. He learned things. He got better at preaching the Gospel. And he didn't have to *wait* until he was an apostle to serve God. Neither do you or I. We're never going to be *apostles*. But we've been deputized and enabled just like Saul was. And as we continue walking with the Lord, and as we continue to develop and mature, we'll grow in our knowledge and our ability. And we'll learn to overcome hurdles to ministry. In verse 21, people weren't even listening to him. Now he's getting some traction, though not all of it was positive.

**Acts 9:23-24 - <sup>23</sup> After many days had passed, the Jews conspired to kill him, <sup>24</sup> but their plot became known to Saul. So they were watching the gates day and night intending to kill him**

We learn elsewhere that it wasn't just the Jews who wanted Saul dead, the Gentile officials wanted to kill him, too. How sad that, after waiting for centuries for the arrival of the Messiah, the Jews were now *unwilling* to hear that He had, in fact, come and was ready to save any and all who would turn to Him.

**Acts 9:25 - <sup>25</sup> but his disciples took him by night and lowered him in a large basket through an opening in the wall.**

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<sup>5</sup> Bible Knowledge Commentary

Notice there it says, “*his* disciples.” So not only was Saul developing as a disciple, but he was discipling others as well. We’re not told the mechanics of *how* he did it. We just know, from the rest of his story, that he would preach to people and care for them and include them in ministry and help them along in *their* walk with the Lord. We’re prone to want to make everything a program or a system and that’s not always what we need to do. We’re commanded to “make disciples.” The way the Spirit uses us to *do* that work is going to be different from time to time and place to place.

So there’s Saul, making a daring escape under the cover of night. Metaphorically, he had hit the ground running as a Christian, preaching and growing in Christ. Now he’d have to *literally* hit the ground running - running for his life - while the kill squad scouted for him. Where would he go? Well, his hometown of Tarsus was at least 250 miles away. Plus, he had been living in Jerusalem. He had no one with him. He had only the supplies he could carry on his back. So he started his flight to Jerusalem, over 130 miles on foot. Before we leave Damascus, we should commend the disciples there once more for their generosity and willingness to help the man who had once been their enemy. I’m sure, as they packed him into the basket, they also slipped in whatever provisions they could. They’re absolute heroes of grace and compassion. We want to be a church like that.

I’m sure it was a tense trip for Saul, but we know that he carried one more important treasure with him down the long road, and that was the promises of God. What had the Lord said? We know from Saul’s later testimony that Jesus had promised him that he had assignments to carry out. That he would speak to kings. And that he would be *rescued* from the people who wanted to kill him.

What has God promised you? Time fails us to even make a rudimentary list but there are promises for your future, for your present. For your relationships and your heart. For your peace and your help. For wisdom and for empowering. You may be lean on physical provision, you may even feel like you’re running for your life. Don’t forget the promises of God. Search them in the Scriptures and secure them in your heart.

**Acts 9:26 - <sup>26</sup> When he arrived in Jerusalem, he tried to associate with the disciples, but they were all afraid of him, since they did not believe he was a disciple.**

Saul clearly thought that connecting with the local church was an *essential* part of discipleship. He obviously knew how difficult and tense it would be to join with them, but he kept trying. Again, he had spiritual persistence, despite the many hurdles he faced.

If Ted Kaczynski was somehow paroled and showed up to church next week, I’m guessing that we’d feel a little nervous about it. That would be only natural. Of course, the Lord wants the *supernatural* for us. The Jerusalem church’s behavior may be understandable but it’s a disappointment to see them controlled by their fear, especially in comparison to the disciples in Damascus who were so brave and so gracious. We live in a time when *fear* is a selling point. Fear is the message of the wider world. That’s not how God wants us to live our lives. Our lives should be defined by trust.

The Jews and Gentiles of Damascus had seen enough to know that Saul *really* was a Christian. It was obvious! The contrast drives us to the conclusion that the disciples in Jerusalem simply weren’t willing to give him a chance.

**Acts 9:27 - <sup>27</sup> 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 He had talked to him, and how in Damascus he had spoken boldly in the name of Jesus.**

No one wanted to believe that the Winter Soldier was a good guy except Steve Rogers. But, in *Captain America: Civil War*, because one guy was willing to stick his neck out, an innocent man was saved and a fierce ally was brought into the team. What Barnabas does here is remarkable, because he did have to stand alone at first. But the things he did are all simple, Christian things. We don't know how he researched what was going on with Saul in Damascus, but he got the story, he believed it, he was willing to actually interact with this man who was looking for other Christians to connect with. And he was willing to forgive. He was willing to take real initiative to help Saul. He didn't just say, "Sorry man. That's tough." He took Saul in and brought him to Peter and spoke for him. He identified with Saul the way Christ identifies with us.

**Acts 9:28 - <sup>28</sup> Saul was coming and going with them in Jerusalem, speaking boldly in the name of the Lord.**

These must've been hard meetings. I've never had to sit in a church service with someone who killed my friends or my family. But God's power is sufficient for even an extreme case like this one.

I'm sure many of you followed the case of the Dallas police officer who was convicted of murdering a man in his apartment last year. At the sentencing, Brandt Jean, the brother of the victim, used his victim-impact statement time to say that that despite what the officer took from his family, if she is truly sorry for what she did, then he forgives her and that his main desire wasn't for her to go to jail, but to "give [her] life to Christ."<sup>6</sup>

They may have been afraid at first, but the Christians in Jerusalem showed supernatural forgiveness to Saul. He would spend just 2 weeks in the city with Peter and James, the brother of Jesus. They must've had some *incredible* conversations. After all, it's altogether possible that Saul was the last one to have seen their Lord.

**Acts 9:29-30 - <sup>29</sup> He conversed and debated with the Hellenistic Jews, but they attempted to kill him. <sup>30</sup> When the brothers found out, they took him down to Caesarea and sent him off to Tarsus.**

The difficulty that Saul had encountered as a result of preaching in Damascus didn't make Saul want to quit. His commission was still in effect. His message was still powerful. His heart still ached for the lost men and women around him.

Once in Jerusalem we're told he went to the Hellenistic Jews. Those same people who had killed Stephen with his approval. He wasn't ducking his past, he was making it right. He couldn't bring Stephen back to life, but he could pick up where he left off and he did, knowing full well what that might cost.

Why Tarsus? Well, that was his hometown. No doubt he had family and connections there. He'd spend another 7 years there before Barnabas comes to find him again.

**Acts 9:31 - <sup>31</sup> So the church throughout all Judea, Galilee, and Samaria had peace, being built up and walking in the fear of the Lord and in the encouragement of the Holy Spirit, and it increased in numbers.**

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<sup>6</sup> <https://www.npr.org/2019/10/03/766866875/brandt-jeans-act-of-grace-toward-his-brother-s-killer-sparks-a-debate-over-forgi>

Dr. Luke likes to take the vitals of the Church every 3 or 4 chapters. This is the 3rd of seven such assessments. With Saul as our focus tonight, we note that there *was* no church in Tarsus. Just him. While it was a blessing that the wave of persecution had ended, it's hard to know whether the leaders in Jerusalem had Saul's best spiritual interests in mind. No matter. The Lord was with him and could use him up in Tarsus for the next 7 years. Wherever he went, he hit the ground running, even if that meant he'd end up having to run for his life.

Back in 2004 or so I found myself on a police ride along as part of a requirement for a college class I was taking. After getting in the squad car, the officer pointed a few things out then said, "Have you ever used a shotgun before?" I indicated that I had and then he showed me the release for the one mounted between our seats. He said, "Should the need arise, please intervene." It was a sort of soft-deputization I suppose. Luckily for all of us, the need did *not* arise that evening.

But when it comes to the spiritual battle for human souls, the need for action couldn't be more urgent. As Christians, we've all been deputized, whether we're been saved for 5 days or 5 decades. And each one of us is *able* to hit the ground running in the Lord's strength. Along the way, we should take courage in the promises of God and in our dedication to His service, know that we're going to become more and more capable as He conforms us into the image of Jesus Christ. And, as a *group*, we want to be a local body that is full of faith, full of grace, full of forgiveness and generosity, even toward those who do not deserve it.