

## **Blessed Be the Opposition That Binds Us Together**

Acts 9:20-31

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Blessed be the opposition from others that that binds us together! For not all opposition we face in our marriages or in the church binds us together (sadly to say). At times opposition, persecution, conflict, or adversity rip us into pieces that divide us one from another.

What makes the difference between the adversity that brings us together and the adversity that pulls us apart? It is not the conflict itself that makes the difference. For the same conflict that divides one family will actually be used to draw another family together in throwing their arms around one another and in standing united in the truth and love of Christ. Have you considered that adversity can either unite or divide you? Will you take that conflict/adversity/opposition and use it as God's means to humble you and to bring you to your knees, or will you take that conflict and that offense as the means of destroying you?

I submit that it is the work of the Holy Spirit that makes all the difference in humbling our pride, in granting to us compassion for one another, in bearing the burdens of one another, in being full of mercy and good fruits, and in binding our hearts together in our mutual confession of biblical truth and brotherly love as being members of the same covenanted family in Christ Jesus.

Opposition from without or from within need not destroy those bonds of Christian love and covenantal faithfulness to the truth, even at the cost of great risk and sacrifice to us. As we consider our text this Lord's Day, this truth shines forth as the recently converted Saul stands for Christ, and the brethren in Damascus and in Jerusalem stand united with him (even at the risk of their own safety), and defend and protect him from the Jews that plotted and planned to slay him. The main points from our text this Lord's Day are: (I) Opposition to Saul's Preaching Unites the Brethren to Defend Saul (Acts 9:20-25); (II) Saul Gains Entrance to the Church of Jerusalem through the Testimony of Barnabas and Is Rescued Once Again (Acts 9:26-31).

### **I. Opposition to Saul's Preaching Unites the Brethren to Defend Saul (Acts 9:20-25).**

A. In recent sermons through the Acts of the Apostles, the Holy Spirit has revealed to us through the inspired words of Luke the miraculous conversion and transformation of Saul of Tarsus (who we subsequently know as the Apostle Paul in the letters he penned by the inspiration of the Holy Spirit in the New Testament).

1. Saul of Tarsus had unleashed horrible and cruel persecution against Christians in Jerusalem, beginning with the murder/martyrdom of Stephen (Acts 7:58), and then he continued that persecution by searching them out home by home in Jerusalem (Acts 8:1,3). His obsession in completely destroying Christians was such that he obtained letters from the high priest to pursue and arrest all the Christians he could find in Damascus as well (Acts 9:1-2). Saul would not be satisfied until the name of Jesus was wiped from the lips and from the memory of all Jews.

2. However, the power of Christ in saving even the chief of sinners is revealed in Saul's conversion (Acts 9:3-9). Saul was not seeking Christ, however, Christ sought Saul, and miraculously saved him in a moment, granting to him faith alone in Jesus Christ alone (who appeared to him on the road to Damascus). From beginning to end, salvation is of the Lord. The Lord Jesus miraculously turned the arch-persecutor of Christ's Church into the arch-defender of Christ's Church. Then the transformation of Saul began as he confessed Jesus, obeyed Him, prayed to Him, and was baptized in His name (Acts 9:10-19).

3. Dear ones, you read here of the great transformation in Saul's life, and perhaps you look at your own life, and you may be tempted to doubt whether the Lord is at work in your life at all (because you do not see the same earthshaking changes occurring in your life in such a relatively short period of time). Saul's amazing transformation and sanctification is an encouragement to our own, but it is not the standard for our own.

a. The Scripture teaches you not to compare yourself with others, but rather to keep your eye ever upon the Lord Jesus (2 Corinthians 10:12—they wrongly made themselves or others the standard by which to be measured—Paul says this is not wise). It is Jesus whose image you are being conformed unto, not Paul's, and not any other Christian ("looking unto Jesus the author and finisher of our faith" Hebrews 12:2). When the Apostle Paul commands us to follow him as he follows Christ (1 Corinthians 11:1), he does not make himself the standard (Christ is the standard)—He simply desires his life to be an encouragement to them in their growth in Christ.

b. Your growth in Christ may not even be perceptible to you from day to day, but I assure you that you are growing as you daily commune with Christ and feed upon Him through His Word, as you daily put off the old man and put on the new man. The inability to daily see your growth is not an excuse for laziness, for procrastination, for sin, lust, worldliness, or unrepentant hearts. There is no excuse for our continuing in our sin.

c. Just as the change that is occurring in your physical appearance every day cannot be seen (but it can be seen over several years' time), so likewise the change in your spiritual appearance is not usually seen from day to day (but can and should be seen over a longer period of time). Dear ones, you should not be looking back into the past to see when you were at your most mature age of sanctification—the best years for a Christian in his/her sanctification should always yet be ahead of him/her, not behind him/her.

4. We left the newly converted Saul and the Saul who was being transformed by the Holy Spirit in Acts 9:19. Now let us proceed to briefly consider the adversity that immediately confronts Saul and how the Lord delivers Saul from death through the brethren who come together at great risk to themselves to rescue Saul.

B. Saul was called by Jesus Christ to preach the gospel, and he goes forth to do so "straightway" (Acts 9:20).

1. Saul's great knowledge of the Old Testament, of the many types, shadows, and prophecies of the Old Testament that pointed to Jesus Christ as the divine Son of God and as God's Prophet, Priest, and King come are now illuminated in his understanding by the Holy Spirit (as God's Son, Jesus had the very same nature as God the Father, John 5:18). Paul's preaching was not about himself or even about what he had experienced, but was about Jesus and His power to save sinners. Too often preaching is more about stories and anecdotes than about sin, condemnation, Christ's death and resurrection, God's mercy, and the need to trust alone in Jesus Christ alone.

2. Saul immediately goes into the Jewish synagogues in Damascus and begins to proclaim the truth concerning Jesus Christ. He doesn't delay, procrastinate, or run from his calling (as did Jonah). Dear ones, loving obedience that is quick, immediate, and straightway to the call and commandments of Jesus upon your life is evidence that God has given to you saving faith in Jesus Christ. Questioning God's authority and commands, waiting for a better time to obey Him, making excuses for your sin and rebellion, blaming others for why you cannot obey the Lord are the traps and temptations of the devil. Resist the devil and he will flee from you (James 4:7). Don't play his games. Call him a liar, and take up the sword of the Spirit, the Word of God (just as Jesus did when He was tempted).

C. When the truth of Christ is proclaimed, opposition to the message and against the messenger comes (Acts 9:21-25).

1. What is amazing to the Jews is that this is the very Saul that recently had violently persecuted Christians in Jerusalem and had obtained a commission from the high priest to arrest and bring back to Jerusalem all Christians he could find in Damascus as well. This was indeed Saul of Tarsus, but he was a transformed man by the power of the gospel—the old Saul was dead with Christ, and the new Saul was alive in the resurrected Christ. So this is true of every one of you who is born of the Spirit—the old you died with Christ and the new you is raised with Christ (this is not some fanciful fiction, but is the very truth of God which you are to reckon as legally true, Romans 6:11). This is the basis for your sanctification—without it there is no sanctification (not only your justification, but your sanctification as well).

2. As Saul increased in strength (i.e. in strength of boldness) and demonstrated to the Jews from the Scriptures that Jesus was their anointed Messiah, and when the Jews could not refute Saul, they sought to silence him (as they did the Lord Jesus and as Saul himself did with Stephen). The Jews conspired to lay a trap for Saul and physically take him unaware that they might murder him—and so they carefully watched the gates of the city (Acts 9:23-24).

3. But here is the point that the Holy Spirit drives home—the Lord delivered Saul through fellow believers in Damascus who risked their own safety and lives and came together in the truth of Christ and love of Christ to rally around Saul who had been targeted by the enemies of the gospel (Acts 9:25).

a. They did not scatter and run away when adversity against Christ's truth and against Christ's servant might have brought them into the net of enemies. Adversity and opposition to the truth brought the brethren in Damascus together even to the risk of their own reputation, livelihoods, and lives. They were willing to sacrifice everything in this life to follow Christ when opposition was mounted against one of their own who stood faithfully for the doctrine of Christ. They saw themselves bound together and when one suffered for Christ's truth, they were all willing to suffer; when one was persecuted for the gospel of Jesus Christ, they were all willing to risk persecution.

b. They might have fled or might have been indifferent to Saul's safety, but their mutual covenant with Christ and with one another was stronger by far than the risk of mere personal injury.

4. There was a time in Scotland of old when faithful Covenanters were imprisoned, their earthly homes and possessions confiscated, and huge fines imposed upon them that they could not pay because they had helped, housed, fed, and preserved faithful field preachers who had been ejected from their pulpits for refusing the indulgences and bribes of Charles II. The opposition and persecution that these faithful Covenanters faced did not have the effect of diminishing their numbers, but actually increased their numbers as they viewed the suffering of one of them to be the suffering of all of them, and willingly sacrificed property, possessions, liberty, and life for Christ and for one another. They adhered with full faith and loyalty to this portion of the Solemn League and Covenant (Article 6) to which they were bound (and to which we are bound as well):

We shall also, according to our places and callings, in this common cause of religion, liberty, and peace of the kingdoms, assist and defend all those that enter into this League and Covenant, in the maintaining and pursuing thereof; and shall not suffer ourselves, directly or indirectly, by whatsoever combination, persuasion, or terror, to be divided or withdrawn from this blessed union and conjunction, whether to make defection to the contrary part, or to give ourselves to a detestable indifferency or neutrality in this cause, which so much concerneth the glory of God . . . .

5. We may not face the same threat of life and limb as did Saul, but we may face the threat of slander for Christ's sake, or the threat of losing a job for Christ's sake, or the threat of losing the closeness of family members for Christ's sake—at such times, we show we are bound together by covenant by defending, aiding, and encouraging our brethren who stand faithfully for our Confession of Faith, our worship

and government, and our Solemn League and Covenant (all faithful summaries of the teaching of Scripture). Satan will try with all his might to divide us (in families and in Christ's Church) that we find ourselves warring against one another rather than warring against the world, the flesh, and the devil. Dear ones, our marching orders are clearly given to us in 1 Corinthians 1:10.

## **II. Saul Gains Entrance to the Church of Jerusalem through the Testimony of Barnabas and Is Rescued Once Again (Acts 9:26-31).**

A. Before considering more carefully the words of our text, let me present what appears to be the chronology of these events from a comparison of Acts 9 with Galatians 1.

1. In Galatians 1 Paul gives a summary of the important events after his conversion. Paul is demonstrating that the gospel he preached was not given to him by man (not even by the other apostles), but rather came to him directly by the revelation of Jesus Christ (and was later confirmed by the apostles).

2. Where do we locate Paul's time spent in Arabia soon after his and then his return to Damascus (Galatians 1:17-18). This time spent in Arabia was a time of Christ revealing to Paul the truth of the gospel he preached (not the Arabia in the Sinai area, but the Nabatean Arabia southeast of Syria whose capital was Petra). Perhaps this three year period of time occurred between Acts 9:22 and Acts 9:23 ("And after many days" is not a short period of time, but refers to a significant period of time, 1 Kings 18:1).

3. Paul says in Galatians 1:18 that the purpose of his trip to Jerusalem was to see and inquire of Peter in particular, and says in Galatians 1:19 that he did not see any of the other apostles except James, the brother of Jesus (who was not one of the original apostles, but was called perhaps to be an apostle as was Paul after the resurrection of Christ). Since Paul was only in Jerusalem for fifteen days and only saw Peter and James, this would imply that the other apostles must have been scattered at this time while Paul was in Jerusalem. Therefore, Acts 9:27 must refer to only Peter and James and not to the twelve.

B. Now back to our text in Acts 9. What Saul finds when he arrives in Jerusalem is a church that does not believe he is now a true convert and has been called by Jesus Christ. After all, it has only been three years since Saul ravaged Jerusalem, and he had spent a significant amount of that time in Arabia gaining more and more revelation from the Lord Jesus Christ. Thus, the Church of Jerusalem was fearful and apprehensive, when Saul appeared on their doorsteps (and they would seem to have had some warrant to be cautious in these matters).

1. Perhaps they had heard some accounts of Paul from soon after his conversion, but had heard nothing in the last 2-3 years (while he was in Arabia). Was the initial conversion of Saul a setup, so that he could plan now the complete destruction of the Church in Jerusalem?

2. But the Lord sends Barnabas (the son of consolation) to Saul, who examines Saul and who being a prophet himself (Acts 13:1) comes alongside Saul and puts his own life on the line and the lives of the rest of the brethren and they all receive him as one of their own (Acts 9:27). From that initiation into the Church of Jerusalem he boldly preaches to the very Grecians to whom Stephen once preached, and once again the enemies of the gospel seek to murder the messenger (Acts 9:29). Once again the church risks its own safety and rallies around Saul whose life was threatened (Acts 9:30). These severe adversities that came their way did not divide them, but united them.

3. The initial fear surrounding Saul seemed to bring division within the Church, but that which could have divided them was used to unite them even to the point of being willing to suffer with him in the truth of Jesus Christ. The Church of Damascus was tested and then the Church of Jerusalem was tested as to their loyalty to Christ and to those who stood faithfully for Jesus Christ and His doctrine. This had the effect of unifying them together and multiplying them, rather than dividing them and splintering them (Acts 9:31).

Dear ones, how far does your loyalty and commitment to the gospel and covenanted cause of Jesus Christ go? Only so far as it does not separate you from family and friends? Only so far as it does not mean the loss of your job? Only so far as it does not mean you will be ridiculed, slandered, or opposed publicly? Dear ones, loyalty to Christ and His revealed will surpasses our loyalty to everything in this world (Matthew 16:24). A Christian is one whose faith is evidenced in his/her willingness to give up everything for Jesus Christ and His revealed truth in Scripture. Beloved, the Covenant of Grace which binds us to Christ and to one another requires us to stand for the truth of Christ and with those who stand for the doctrine, worship, and government of Christ, but our Solemn League and Covenant (1643) additionally binds us to Christ and to one another (even if the whole world stands opposed to our testimony and terms of communion as faithful summaries of the teaching of Scripture).

Dear ones, let no power of the enemy, no persecution, no slander, no loss of worldly favor or worldly goods or worldly relationships render our solemn covenant engagements to Christ and to one another a mere matter of convenience when it is comfortable. We must be willing to sacrifice our honor and our lives for Christ, for the Cause of Christ, and for our covenanted brethren who stand faithful in this battle.

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