

Beginning to Serve

Acts 9:20-30, 11:19-30



At Once

Saul¹ became a follower of Christ after Jesus met him on the road to Damascus (*Acts 9:1-19*). Read *Acts 9:20-22*. After becoming a Christian, Saul immediately began to serve God.

📖 “At once he began to preach in the synagogues that Jesus is the Son of God.” (*9:20, NIV*)

- **Reflection:** If you are a Christian, are *you* serving? Maybe you are a relatively new Christian and you don't feel ready to serve. But you too can serve “at once.”²

Arabia

In his letter to the Galatians, Saul wrote, “I went into Arabia. Later I returned to Damascus” (*Galatians 1:17, NIV*).³ The Bible does not tell us *why* Saul went to Arabia. Perhaps it was for personal reflection and prayer,⁴ or proclaiming the good news of Jesus,⁵ or both.

Attacked

Read *Acts 9:23-30*. In Damascus, the Jews conspired to kill Saul (*9:23*) and the governor sought to arrest him (*2 Corinthians 11:32*). Saul's old associates now opposed him. When Saul went to Jerusalem, the Greek-speaking Jews tried to kill him (*Acts 9:29*).

- When a person becomes a Christian and begins to serve, some level of opposition is expected (*2 Timothy 3:12*). The “world” (including society and government), old friends, colleagues, and even family members may oppose the Christian.



Accepted

When he arrived in Jerusalem⁶ Saul tried to join the disciples of Jesus, “but they were all afraid of him, not believing that he really was a disciple” (*9:26*). However, Barnabas⁷ took Saul to the apostles,⁸ told them what had happened, and encouraged them to accept him.

1. What was Barnabas' role in this story? How can Christians be like Barnabas in their church or Christian community today?

¹ Saul was also called Paul (*Acts 13:9*). Saul was his Hebrew name, and Paul (*Gr. Paulos*) was his Roman name.

² Of course, Saul's ministry was unique. But there are many ways to serve. A Christian's particular ministry will be affected by his/her abilities, spiritual gifts, personality, passion, opportunities, time, and spiritual maturity. But each Christian should serve! Each Christian is an important part of the Body of Christ (see *1 Corinthians 12:12-31*).

³ Acts does not mention Saul's time in Arabia. Saul apparently left Damascus for a while and then returned. In *Acts 9:23*, the ‘many days’ probably refers to his time in both Damascus and Arabia, which was about three years (*Galatians 1:18*). ‘Arabia’ refers to the Nabatean kingdom east and southeast of Damascus.

⁴ Certainly, Saul had some major rethinking to do! His meeting with Jesus was the start of a major transformation.

⁵ Aretas (the Nabatean king) may have wanted to arrest Saul because he was preaching in Arabia (*2 Cor. 11:32*).

⁶ Apparently, this trip to Jerusalem happened three years after Saul became a Christian. Saul stayed with Peter for a period of fifteen days (*Galatians 1:18*).

⁷ The name ‘Barnabas’ means ‘son of encouragement’ (*Acts 4:36*).

⁸ On this occasion, ‘the apostles’ probably included only Peter and James, the brother of Jesus (*Galatians 1:18-19*).

Certainly, the disciples had reason to suspect Saul. Even today, impostors may enter Christian groups to harm them or mislead them. Thus Christians should be careful and discerning.⁹

At Home

When the disciples learned that Saul's life was in danger, "they took him to Caesarea and sent him off to Tarsus" (*Acts 9:30*).¹⁰ Tarsus was Saul's birthplace and first home. The Bible does not say what Saul did in Tarsus, but he probably proclaimed the good news of Jesus.

- **Reflection:** Maybe you have become a Christian since you left home. What do *you* do when you return home? Do people see the change in your life? Do you share your faith?

Antioch

Read *Acts 11:19-26*.¹¹ Jesus' followers in Jerusalem were persecuted, which was bad.

2. However, how did bad things (persecution) result in good things? (*11:19-21*)¹²

The church in Antioch¹³ grew rapidly. Barnabas was sent to investigate.

3. What did Barnabas find in Antioch? In what ways did Barnabas (and Saul) serve the church in Antioch? (*11:22-26*)



Aid

4. Read *Acts 11:27-30*. After hearing about the upcoming, widespread famine,¹⁴ in what way did the Christians in Antioch serve? What impresses you about their act of service?¹⁵
5. Summarize the various ways that Saul, Barnabas, and the church in Antioch served, and were served. In what similar ways can *we* serve, and be served? Think of specific ways.

Application

- Saul served primarily by proclaiming the good news of Jesus. Do you understand "the good news?" If not, ask Jay or another Christian friend. See "The Good News" on the ICF website.
- If you are a Christian, in what specific ways are you serving God? If you are not serving, make a commitment to serve in some way. If you need guidance, ask a church leader.

⁹ We are not to 'judge' others in a negative sense, and we have limited knowledge of another person's heart. But the Bible instructs Christians to be discerning about false teachers and impostors who may mislead or harm others. This is not always easy, but their testimony and lives are indicators (see 1 John 4:1-3; 2:3-6; 3:14; Matthew 7:15-20).

¹⁰ Tarsus was in Cilicia. In his letter to the Galatians, Saul said that he went to "Syria and Cilicia" (*1:21*).

¹¹ This passage includes the first occurrence of the term 'Christian,' which is used only three times in the Bible (*Acts 11:26; 26:28; 1 Peter 4:16*). Christians preferred to be called 'disciples,' 'saints,' and 'brothers' [sisters].

¹² Persecution scattered Christians into other places where they shared the good news of Jesus Christ. Furthermore, the good news was shared not only with Jews but with Gentiles (non-Jews). In this way, the church grew rapidly.

¹³ Antioch, the capital of the province of Syria, was the third largest city in the Empire (after Rome and Alexandria).

¹⁴ Other sources mention famine conditions (lack of food supply) in the Empire. For example, Roman historian Suetonius confirms 'a scarcity of grain because of long-continued droughts' (*Life of Claudius*, 18:2). Jewish historian Josephus speaks of a severe famine in Judea between AD 44 and 48 (*Antiquities*, 20:51-53, 100-101).

¹⁵ The church in Antioch was primarily non-Jewish, but the Jewish Christians in Judea were their brothers and sisters (*11:29*). This act of care helped strengthen the bond of fellowship between Jewish and non-Jewish Christians.