

Northwest Community Evangelical Free Church

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Sermon manuscript

Sermon Series: Disciples, on the GO!
(Studies of the book of Acts)

Behind the Scenes of an “About Face” Study #12 (Acts 9:1-31)

Introduction: Force multipliers...

General Colin Powell has served as the Chairman of the Joints Chiefs of Staff and as Secretary of State. Powell once said, *“Perpetual optimism is a force multiplier.”*

You might think I’m going to go on now to talk about perpetual optimism. Instead, I’m going to focus on *force multipliers*.

When the military uses the term, *force multiplier*, it’s referring to *“an attribute that makes a given force more effective than that force would be without it.”*

So, a good battle plan + optimism is a *force multiplier*. So is good morale + a gun; a map + GPS; physically fit troops + good intel.

There are *force multipliers* in other realms of life, too.

Great skill in golf + the wind at your back (especially at the British Open...); a good business product + the wise use of social media; brains + good study habits are all *force multipliers*.

You can easily think of force multipliers in your own life, tools you add to your work or your play that make something easier, more do-able, higher quality. A new app. Health. A hammer. Your iPad. *Force multipliers*.

God, of course, needs no *force multipliers* in His work. God does what only He can do in the hearts and lives of people. He saves. He empowers. He opens doors. He changes lives.

And then we discover that God is not above using *force multipliers* to enhance His work.

Today, as we keep on exploring the book of Acts, we watch Him utilize a particular *force multiplier* that always pushes His work forward. It is a *force multiplier* He has used through the ages, one He still uses today, and one He wants to use here. With us.

Meet Saul of Tarsus...

The main character in our study this morning is a man named Saul, and we’ve met Saul before. He quickly became the early church’s Enemy #1, following the death of the first Christian martyr, Stephen.

Saul had been standing on the sidelines when Stephen was stoned to death. And, while Saul didn’t actually throw rocks, Luke tells us, ***[Acts 8:1] Saul was in hearty agreement with putting [Stephen] to death.***

After Stephen was killed, Saul got off the sidelines and got in the game, launching a major offensive against the church (Acts 8:1-3).

It was largely because of Saul’s attacks that the first believers in Jesus were ***“scattered”*** (Acts 8:4) from Jerusalem. One of those who was scattered was Philip. Acts 8 tells of the turning to Jesus that occurred when Philip went north to Samaria, and then of his leading a seeking Ethiopian eunuch to faith in Christ south of Jerusalem.

Luke leaves Philip at the end of Acts 8 and brings us back into Saul’s story again at the beginning of Acts 9.

Saul: “Church, You are My Enemy” (vv. 1-2)

Totally Opposed to Jesus’ Disciples (v. 1)

[9:1] Now Saul, still breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord...

Saul was willing to go to great lengths to stop the followers of Jesus from following Jesus. We get that.

But, before we go any further into Saul's story, have you ever stopped to wonder why? WHY was Saul so violently opposed to the message of Jesus and to the disciples of Jesus?

Certainly, Saul had what he thought were valid reasons for opposing. We all think we have valid reasons for doing what we do.

Here - I think, likely - was Saul's thinking.

Saul was deeply devoted to the Law of Moses. He had organized his life around the Law.¹ And here come these followers of Jesus who say that the Law was only paving the way for a new way to come to God. Coming to God has nothing to do with following the Law.

Jesus' followers were saying that faith alone in Christ alone was all that was required to begin a relationship with God. They said that eternal life is a gift of grace. Period.

This new belief system threatened the whole framework of Saul's life - that is, his worldview. And, when someone threatens your worldview, they are threatening YOU!

So, here at the outset, what are we to think of Saul?

- Was he persecuting the church just to be mean, for the fun of it?
- Was he a disagreeable person with a toxic personality?
- Did he know that the Christian gospel was true?

NO!

If you had asked him, Saul would have told you that he was doing what he was doing for all sorts of good reasons. In fact, he would

have told you that he was doing what he was doing for God. (How's that for a sobering thought...)²

Still, his methods were unusually cruel.³ We're told that he ***[Acts 8:3] began ravaging the church, entering house after house, and dragging off men and women, he would put them in prison.***

At first, Saul was doing this in and around Jerusalem. Soon, though, he wanted to expand his reach. So, he began to look beyond Jerusalem.⁴

Planning for Maximum Arrests (vv. 1b-2)

[1b]...[Saul] went to the high priest, [2] and asked for letters from him to the synagogues at Damascus, so that if he found any belonging to the Way, both men and women, he might bring them bound to Jerusalem.

He wanted to bring as many of Jesus' disciples to Jerusalem as possible, have them stand trial before the Sanhedrin, and then have them suffer Stephen's fate.

Now, at this early point in church history (the church is, at most, a couple of years old) the disciples still met in Jewish synagogues,⁵ which meant that the best way to find these disciples was to go to the synagogues.

That's why Saul planned to travel north about one hundred and fifty miles, to go to the Jewish synagogues in the city of Damascus.⁶

² Saul's story should serve as a cautionary tale, giving us pause to reflect when we are filled with what we term "moral indignation" or "righteous anger." It is quite easy to be self-deceived. As James reminds us, ***[James 1:20] the anger of man does not achieve the righteousness of God.***

³ The prophecy of Jacob for his twelve sons, found in Gen. 49, pictures Benjamin as a ravenous wolf. Here, in Saul, is a real wolf from Benjamin's tribe! In fact, Luke describes Saul as a wild, uncontrolled beast (Acts 8:3, "***ravaging***").

⁴ See Acts 26:10, 11; Gal. 1:13.

⁵ Christianity was understood to be a sect within Judaism for the first several years.

⁶ Today, Damascus is one of the oldest continuously occupied cities in the world. But it was very old even in Saul's day, and was a large, very influential place, the capitol city of Syria.

¹ In one of the letters Saul wrote (spoiler alert!) after he became a Christian, he claimed that prior to coming to faith in Christ, he was *blameless* with respect to the righteousness found in the Law. (Philippians 3:6)

To travel to Damascus from Jerusalem, Saul would have made his way up the Jordan River valley, through Galilee, and into Syria to the city.

He went with companions - perhaps friends who shared his contempt for Christians. And they had an uneventful trip...at least until they got close to Damascus.

As they neared the city, their eagerness for their mission of arresting disciples increased. And that was when the trip - and Saul's life - was interrupted. He was bushwhacked by God's amazing grace.

Jesus: "Saul, Welcome to My Family" (vv. 3-9)

Confronted on the Damascus Road (vv. 3-5)

Light shines on Saul (vv. 3-4)

[3] As he was traveling, it happened that he was approaching Damascus, and suddenly a light from heaven flashed around him...⁷

Any Jew would have instantly recognized that this flashing light from heaven was a prelude to a revelation from God.

And sure enough, after the light, came a Voice. But the Voice wasn't comforting or affirming. The Voice accused Saul - zealous, God-fearing Saul!! - of persecuting God!⁸

[4] and he fell to the ground and heard a voice saying to him, "Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting Me?"

Never in his wildest dreams would Saul have intended to persecute God. Saul would have been devastated by this question. The ensuing exchange changed everything.

⁷ William Barclay wrongly suggests that Saul was confronted on the road to Damascus by an electrical storm, for which this region is famous. Nope.

⁸ In these words, as well, the Lord identified Himself with His Church. And the very clear message was, "*When you persecute My followers, you persecute Me.*"

Saul is enlightened (v. 5)

[5] And he said, "Who are You, Lord?" And He said, "I am Jesus whom you are persecuting"

What Saul had thought to be true is false. What he previously believed to be false is true. He had been perfectly wrong about Jesus.

Jesus was the Messiah, really was the Son of God, just like His followers had been saying. And what the arguments of Stephen had not done, a flash of light and a simple word had done. Just like that.

In a moment's time, Saul's world was undone. He's soon to be redone, but Jesus wasn't anywhere near done with Saul. Next came marching orders.

Commissioned on the Damascus Road (v. 6)

[6] "but get up and enter the city, and it will be told you what you must do."

Of course, to obey Jesus' command to go into the city, Saul will need help. He's been blinded by the flashing light from heaven and he can't see a thing.⁹

Confounded on the Damascus Road (vv. 7-9)

[7] The men who traveled with him stood speechless, hearing the voice but seeing no one. [8] Saul got up from the ground, and though his eyes were open, he could see nothing; and leading him by the hand, they brought him to Damascus. [9] And he was three days without sight, and neither ate nor drank.

⁹ Saul had been granted a clearer revelation than these other men had. I conclude from verse 7 that Saul not only heard a Voice. He saw Someone. In fact, other passages in the New Testament state with sufficient clarity that Paul did see the Lord. (9:17; 22:14; 26:16; 1 Cor. 9:1; 15:8-9), and that was probably here.

His traveling companions got him settled into lodging, made sure he was taken care of - and then we don't hear anything more about them. For the next three days, Saul sat.

Those three days after the Damascus Road event must have seemed long. Imagine how Saul's mind raced during those days.

He had nothing to do but think. So, he thought. He rethought everything he had thought since childhood about how the world works, how God works, what Scripture means.

His worldview was flipped, 180 degrees change, in an instant and over the course of three days. And Saul, the church's Enemy #1, was converted and became a fervent follower of Jesus.

He was saved by grace through faith in the living Lord Jesus Christ. Just like that. When Saul believed in Jesus his sins were forgiven.

When you believe in Jesus, your sins are forgiven. You are born again, become a child of God, receive the gift of eternal life. God gives you transcendent purpose and meaning in life.

As well, when you trust in Jesus, you enter a never-ending relationship with Almighty God. And all those who believe in Jesus also enter into other relationships.

Having seen the beginning of Saul new relationship to God through faith in Jesus, we'll spend the rest of our time, exploring his new relationships with others who have also believed in Jesus. These other relationships are *force multipliers* for the advance of the gospel.

Now I believe that when anyone believes in the Lord Jesus, receives the free gift of eternal life, and becomes a son or a daughter of God, he or she should be met by a welcoming committee.

There ought to be a fiesta to celebrate the salvation of anyone for whom Jesus gave His life! You probably think the same thing.

I can pretty well guarantee you that the idea of a party for Saul never occurred to the Jesus-followers in Damascus.

Saul had gone to Damascus to arrest and kill them. So, even after the word began to get out about Saul's Damascus Road experience and conversion, none of the disciples were planning a party for him.

But God was determined that Saul be welcomed. So, He tapped someone to be a welcoming committee of one for Saul.¹⁰

The welcomer-to-be was Ananias, a Jewish disciple who lived in Damascus. And Jesus gave Ananias one whale of a commission.

The Church: "Saul, Welcome to Our Family" (vv. 10-31)

Welcomed by Obedient Love (vv. 10-20)

Jesus: "Ananias, find and speak to Saul!" (vv. 10-12)

[11] And the Lord said to him, "Get up and go to the street called Straight, and inquire at the house of Judas for a man from Tarsus named Saul, for he is praying, [12] and he has seen in a vision a man named Ananias come in and lay his hands on him, so that he might regain his sight."

Ananias was shocked at the Lord's command. He wondered if maybe Jesus hadn't heard about what Saul had been up to.¹¹

Ananias: "Lord, are You sure about this?" (vv. 13-14)

[13] But Ananias answered, "Lord, I have heard from many about this man, how much harm he did to Your saints at Jerusalem; [14] and here he has authority from the chief priests to bind all who call on Your name."

¹⁰ Jesus had spent much of His time in the northern region of Galilee, not far from Damascus. After His resurrection, he appeared to more than 500 people at one time in Galilee and it is very likely that the Gospel had made its way, shortly after Pentecost, north to Galilee, and from there to Damascus.

¹¹ Ananias knew full well that had Saul not been apprehended by God on the road to Damascus, he would have watched helplessly as Saul carried off Christians to imprisonment or death.

Or, “Jesus, are You sure about this? Are you sure you want me to turn myself over to ISIS?”¹²

Jesus completely understood Ananias’ concern. But Jesus didn’t pull back, rub His beard, and say, “Well, thanks, Ananias. I really hadn’t seen this situation clearly. Thanks for your input. So, no. You don’t have to welcome Saul.”

That’s NOT what happened. Instead, Jesus expanded on the assignment and doubled-down on the commission.

Jesus: “Yes, now GO!” (vv. 15-16)

[15] But the Lord said to him, “Go, for he is a chosen instrument of Mine, to bear My name before the Gentiles and kings¹³ and the sons of Israel; [16] for I will show him how much he must suffer¹⁴ for My name’s sake.”

Jesus had His eye on Saul and had a great work for him to perform. So, God’s word to Ananias was, “**Go!**”

It might be a fun game to wonder what might have happened had Ananias said, “No!” to God’s, “**Go!**”, but thankfully, Ananias said, “**YES!**” He walked up Straight Street, and found Saul in Judas’ home.

Now, you and I have been trying to get inside Ananias’ head as he approached Saul. He would have been anxious about approaching Saul. This was a nerve-wracking assignment.

Now, put yourself in Saul’s shoes.

You’ve been fasting - no food or drink - for three days. You’ve recently been struck completely blind. The God you thought you knew has told you that you’ve been wrong about everything - and you’ve been all alone with your thoughts.

¹² Did Ananias feel as if he had been “Jonah-ed” by the Lord, sent to a personal “Nineveh” named Saul?

¹³ Saul/Paul did speak to Kings Agrippa and Caesar, governors Felix and Festus.

¹⁴ He also knew that the great work to which Saul was being called was going to involve great suffering. But, this suffering was not “payback” for his past sins.

You sense a man entering the room you’re staying in. You tense. Strong, unfamiliar hands come down on your shoulders.

Talk about scary! And then, a voice you don’t recognize speaks.

Ananias: “Saul, welcome home, BROTHER!” (vv. 17-20)

Saul, the embraced (v. 17)

[17] So Ananias departed and entered the house, and after laying his hands on him said, “Brother Saul, the Lord Jesus, who appeared to you on the road by which you were coming, has sent me so that you may regain your sight and be filled with the Holy Spirit.”¹⁵

The first words Saul heard after his personal earthquake were, “**Brother Saul.**”

There’s no way he would ever forget that welcome. It was, evidently, all the fiesta Saul needed, because Luke goes on to tell us of Saul’s first “next steps” with Jesus.

Saul, the baptized (vv. 18-19a)

[18] And immediately there fell from his eyes something like scales, and he regained his sight, and he got up and was baptized;¹⁶ [19] and he took food and was strengthened.

And then Saul, this brand-new believer, still sopping wet from his baptism, proceeded to make quite a splash in Damascus.

¹⁵ Ananias speaks helpfully, here, identifying Saul’s experience as a “filling” with the Holy Spirit, not the “baptism”, indicating that he had already been baptized by the Spirit when he was converted (some time during the three days).

¹⁶ Again, just like what happened on the Day of Pentecost and in Samaria and in the desert with the Ethiopian, conversion is followed by water baptism.

Saul, set free to serve Jesus (vv. 19b-20)

[19b]...Now for several days he was with the disciples who were at Damascus, [20] and immediately he began to proclaim Jesus in the synagogues, saying, "He is the Son of God."

Talk about an overnight turnaround!

And notice where he is proclaiming - in the synagogues! The very places where Saul had been planning to interrogate Christians, have become the places where he's arguing that Jesus is the Messiah!¹⁷

The first responses from those who knew Saul were encouraging.

Delivered from Danger by Sacrificial Love (vv. 21-25)

Saul proclaimed Jesus (vv. 21-22)

[21] All those hearing him continued to be amazed, and were saying, "Is this not he who in Jerusalem destroyed those who called on this name, and who had come here for the purpose of bringing them bound before the chief priests?" [22] But Saul kept increasing in strength and confounding the Jews who lived at Damascus by proving that this Jesus is the Christ.

Saul's encyclopedic knowledge of the Bible, coupled with his experience with Jesus was just too much for anyone who tried to debate him. He linked prophecy to history to his-story as he explained Jesus to his fellow Jews.¹⁸

¹⁷ It is impossible to piece together the life of Saul during these early days without going to other New Testament passages where his story is filled out with details left out of Acts. Here is one possible chronology: In Galatians (1:15-24) Paul tells us that very shortly after becoming a believer, he went away to Arabia (Galatians 1:17, very close to Damascus, located directly to the east of the city) for three years. His time in Arabia was primarily for the purposes of spiritual retreat and prayer, but I can hardly picture Saul not engaging in ministry of some kind to the Arabians while there. Then, after those three years in the desert, he returned to Damascus (Galatians 1:18), which is where we pick up the story at Acts 9:21.

¹⁸ Even though Saul had been specifically commissioned to specialize in Gentile outreach, his first ministry was to his fellow Jews.

But, Stephen had courted danger by his bold testimony in Jerusalem, and the same thing happened to Saul.

Saul prompted opposition (vv. 23-24)

[23] When many days had elapsed, the Jews plotted together to do away with him, [24] but their plot became known to Saul. They were also watching the gates day and night so that they might put him to death...

Just like that, the persecutor has become the persecuted.

The opposition blockaded the city. Saul was hemmed in, with no escape through the major gates. Damascus became a cage. Saul's capture was certain.¹⁹

The one thing those who wanted Saul dead hadn't counted on, though, was his new family - his brothers and sisters in Christ - coming to his rescue.

But that is exactly what they did, at great personal risk, to save a man who had come to their city to kill them.

Saul got out with a little help from his friends (v. 25)

[25] but his disciples²⁰ took him by night and let him down through an opening in the wall, lowering him in a large basket.²¹

As was the case in most large, ancient cities, homes were built into Damascus' thick walls.

¹⁹ Not only did Jews from within the city oppose Saul, but we learn from 2 Corinthians 11:32-33, that the ruler (ethnarch) of Arabia, Aretas, was also laying for him in Damascus. If our chronology (see footnote 15) is correct, this would imply that Saul had done something during the three years in Arabia that had offended Aretas - like preaching Jesus, perhaps. The apostle Paul relates his basket experience as the thing that he could boast about, because this showed his weakness. It was in his weakness that God could most powerfully demonstrate His strength. (2 Corinthians 12)

²⁰ Isn't it fascinating that the Christians in Damascus, after only a few days, or perhaps longer, are referred to as "his" - that is, Saul's - disciples.

²¹ As he been noted many times, Saul became a basket case for Jesus... ☹

In the dead of night, Saul was taken into one of these homes, placed inside a large basket, and let down with ropes on the other side of the wall.

He is free, delivered by his new Jesus-following friends! So, what will he do now that he is safe and sound outside the city wall?

Saul traveled straight from the frying pan of Damascus into the fire of Jerusalem - and what kind of a reception do you figure he got there?

Sponsored by Risk-Taking Love (vv. 26-30)

Barnabas extends a risky welcome (vv. 26-27)

A nervous church (v. 26)

[26] When he came to Jerusalem, he was trying to associate with the disciples; but they were all afraid of him, not believing that he was a disciple.

Remember. The disciples in Jerusalem would have known Saul as the guy who had been dragging men and women out of their homes to stand trial before the Sanhedrin.

So, we “get” why they were a bit stand-offish. They didn’t trust Saul. They figured that he was working undercover for the High Priest, *pretending* to be a Christian so that he could lure them into his confidence - and then arrest them.

I probably would have thought the same thing.

Of course, we know what happened on the Damascus Road. We know that Saul is genuinely converted. But, in the absence of reliable internet connections to a 24/7 news cycle, they didn’t know that.

There’s an impasse, and the impasse appeared impassible - until a hero showed up who broke the logjam.

We’ve seen this hero before. His given name was Joseph, but his nickname was Barnabas, the Son of Encouragement.

A courageous sponsor (v. 27)

[27] But Barnabas took hold of him and brought him to the apostles and described to them how he had seen the Lord on the road, and that He had talked to him, and how at Damascus he had spoken out boldly in the name of Jesus.

As far as I can see, nobody told Barnabas to do this. He was under no obligation to welcome Saul. And, he was, perhaps, as unsure of Saul’s testimony as everybody else.

Nothing in the Bible tells us of an independent report Barnabas got about Saul’s conversion. He simply chose to trust Saul’s story, calculating that it would be better to risk being killed by Saul if he was faking, then to risk refusing fellowship with Saul if he was not.

There was never a time when Barnabas was more truly a “Son of Encouragement” than right here, the day he became Saul’s sponsor.

Just try to think back to the last time you were the newcomer - at work, at school, in the neighborhood, in church? Do you remember what that was like?

Was it tough to break in to the new thing? Were people stand-offish? Did they give you the cold shoulder?

If you were welcomed by a “Barnabas” when you were just getting introduced at a new job, or walking into a class in a new school, or unpacking the moving van, you know what an invaluable service this Barnabas provided Saul.

The sponsor, the welcomer, steps out of his or her comfort zone to help - and changes everything. All of a sudden, you’re not the outsider looking in. You’re accepted because a Barnabas took the personal risk to befriend you.

In Jerusalem, Saul was warmly welcomed, which certainly helped him. But the church that welcomed him reaped the benefit of a man who powerfully impacted the world for Jesus.

What a deal!

So, having been warmly welcomed and accepted, Saul hung around Jerusalem for no more than a couple of weeks.

During that time, he got to know the leaders of the church, including Simon Peter and James, the half-brother of Jesus (See Galatians 1:18).²²

And, of course, as he had done in Damascus, he boldly spoke out about Jesus in Jerusalem.

The church pays for a ticket to safety (vv. 28-30)

[28] And he was with them, moving about freely in Jerusalem, speaking out boldly in the name of the Lord. [29] And he was talking and arguing with the Hellenistic Jews;²³

It looks like Saul sought out the Hellenistic Jews, the very group he had recently applauded for stoning Stephen. That was a bold move - and, predictably, it landed him in hot water.²⁴

When the Hellenists tried to put him to death, once again, it was his brothers and sisters in Christ, his new found friends, who came to his rescue.

[29]... but they were attempting to put him to death. [30] But when the brethren learned of it, they brought him down to Caesarea and sent him away to Tarsus.²⁵

²² Saul probably pummeled these guys with questions about Jesus, asking James about Jesus' growing up years, asking Peter about Jesus' ministry.

²³ Note Saul's courage here - and maybe his sense of remorse for having played a part in Stephen's martyrdom at the instigation of the Hellenistic Jews. He knew full well what might happen to him when he talked to them about Jesus, having watched what they did to Stephen.

²⁴ Danger would be a recurring theme in Saul's life. He went on to be stoned and left for dead in Lystra, beaten and imprisoned in Philippi, the center of a public riot in Ephesus, arrested and imprisoned in Jerusalem, shipwrecked in the Mediterranean, held under house arrest in Rome, and finally imprisoned in Rome before his (we assume) martyrdom.

²⁵ Following this trip to Caesarea and then Tarsus, there is a ten-year silence about Saul's activities, to be broken when he emerged as a leader in the church at

Then, maybe with tongue in cheek, Luke wraps up by telling us what things were like *after* Saul left.

Summary: The Church Progresses (v. 31)

[31] So the church throughout all Judea and Galilee and Samaria enjoyed peace, being built up; and going on in the fear of the Lord and in the comfort of the Holy Spirit, it continued to increase.

Peace ruled Palestine, not with the *death*, but with the *conversion* of the main persecutor...and with his *departure* (☺).²⁶

Conclusion:

God does what only He can do

This morning, we have seen the power of God to save a soul.

He intercepted and saved Saul on the road to Damascus while Saul was on his way to arrest Christians. Had God not acted, more and more Christians would have been arrested and killed and Saul would have been lost forever.

God saves those we might never imagine Him saving - because every person is of great value in His sight.

Who do you think would have been the person voted "Least Likely to Become an Apostle of Jesus" in the first century? Saul!

But God, in works of amazing grace and power, does what only He can do in human hearts. He saves. He empowers. He changes lives.

Antioch. Galatians 1:21 indicates that throughout this time Saul was active in Christian service throughout the regions of Syria and Cilicia.

²⁶ ***[Proverbs 14:4] - where no oxen/Sauls are, the manger is clean, But much increase comes by the strength of the ox/Saul.***

From this amazing story of Saul's conversion, you and I can learn to develop an expectant eagerness, a prayerful anticipation that God can move in anyone's heart, can save anyone, can change anyone.

The "force multiplier" of a welcoming, loving church

So, God did with Saul what only He can do. But a *force multiplier* was added to the saving work of God. This *force multiplier* contributed to making Saul the man he became. The *force multiplier* was the love of the family of God.

- Ananias welcomed him in Damascus.
- Barnabas sponsored him in Jerusalem.
- The disciples lowered him over a wall to rescue him from death in Damascus. A different group of disciples in Jerusalem bought a ticket out of town.

Who knows what would have happened had Ananias and Barnabas NOT taken the risk to welcome Saul? What would have happened had his new friends not lowered him over a wall? Not provided safe passage out of Jerusalem back home to Tarsus?²⁷

Without supportive friends, would Saul have become a shrinking violet, never to get involved in ministry? No. He was God's chosen agent to preach the Gospel. He was going to be involved.

But, without these formative loving experiences, might Saul have been less effective in ministry? Sure. Did these loving initiations into life in Jesus mark him for the rest of his life? You bet.

When later - as the Apostle Paul - he wrote, **[1 Corinthians 13:7] [Love] bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things**, was he remembering Ananias' welcome and Barnabas' embrace and a nighttime ride in a basket over a wall? Probably.

A call to supportive friendship

Today, you and I are called to imitate the early church's loving support and welcome, the protection and acceptance, they gave to its former Enemy #1.

We are called, today, to be as loving as we possibly can be, for Jesus' sake, to the one who is new, to the outsider looking in - whether at work, at school, or here at church.

Yes. Welcoming well costs.

There is the cost of time and energy, the cost of availability, and vulnerability. Each time we extend the right hand of fellowship, we open ourselves up to the *richness* of relationship AND to the *risk* of relationship (i.e. someone taking advantage of you, using you, not reciprocating your love, etc...).

But, each time we entrust ourselves to God and welcome, we walk in Jesus' steps who consistently took the first step toward others.

And, of course, there was the benefit that came to the Body of Christ by these personal investments in Saul / Paul that you and I continue to experience today.

Who knows how God will use the *force multiplier* of YOUR love and the *force multiplier* of OUR WELCOME here, today?

²⁷ Might Saul have been killed? That's a provocative brain teaser of a question. God had plans for Saul, so I think it unlikely. God might have intervened, independently, to rescue Saul, had the church not protected him. But had He done that, Saul would not have known the beauty and courage and love of the body of Christ at the formative, initial stages of his life with God.