# Northwest Community Evangelical Free Church

November 15, 2026
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Sermon manuscript

## Sermon Series: Jesus' Faithful Witnesses…
## …bearing witness to Jesus' life-changing message.

(Studies in the book of Acts)

## The Many Makeovers of Saul of Tarsus

Study #12

(Acts 9:1-31)

**Introduction: Makeovers …**

When a friend tells you, *"She got a makeover"* or *"He got an extreme makeover"* you probably think of a new hairstyle, something to do with the face, body sculpting, or a new wardrobe.

Or you could give your home a makeover by exterior or interior repainting, or by a refreshed bedroom, bath, kitchen, or deck.

A makeover turns what was into something new and improved.

Jesus had a cosmic makeover in mind when He said in the book of Revelation, ***[21:5] "I am making all things new."*** He's not going to replace the current heavens and earth with a "new and improved" model. He's going to give this one a makeover.

And on this theme of makeover, today you and I get the thrill of seeing God give one man a heart and soul, inside and out, top to bottom, personal makeover.

His story will move us to worship for God's life-changing ways and will give us all a vision for a path to our own maturity in Jesus.

The makeover man's name was Saul, and we've already met Saul in our studies in Acts.

He was the one who quickly became the early church's Enemy #1, following the death of Stephen, the first Christian martyr.

Saul had been standing on the sidelines when Stephen was stoned to death. And, while Saul didn't throw any rocks, Luke tells us, ***[Acts 8:1]…Saul approved of putting Stephen to death.***

From that event forward, Saul moved off the sidelines and into the game as a chief persecutor of the Jesus Movement. (Acts 8:1-3)

He was likely a major factor in the ***"scattering"*** of those first believers in Jesus from Jerusalem. (Acts 8:4) But God used that scattering. The persecution that led to the scattering resulted in the disciples spreading the good news of Jesus.

Two Sundays ago, we saw the evangelistic exploits of one of these who were ***"scattered,"*** Philip, who led many people in Samaria and one Ethiopian to faith in Jesus.

Today, we leave Philip's story and return to the story of Saul.

**An Interior Makeover (from unbelief to faith in Jesus) (Acts 9:1-9)**

**Totally Opposed to Jesus on the Damascus Road (9:1-2)**

*Still on track to destroy The Way (v. 1)*

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

So, time had passed and STILL Saul was opposed to Jesus. We get that, but we wonder why?

Was Saul persecuting the church just to be mean, for the fun of it?

I don't think so.

My thought is that just as we all have what we think are good reasons for doing what we do, Saul had what he thought were good reasons for opposing the way of Jesus.

I think it's unfair to simply paint Saul as a bad person.

Plus, Jesus had already told His disciples, ***[John 16:2] "…an hour is coming for everyone who kills you to think that he is offering a service to God."***

Yes, he was wrong in his thinking about Jesus. But if you had asked him, Saul would have told you - and this is a sobering thought - that he was doing what he was doing for God.[1]

Still, his methods were unusually cruel.[2]

Luke tells us that he ***[Acts 8:3] began ravaging the church, entering house after house, and he would drag away men and women and put them in prison.***

At first, Saul was only doing this in and around Jerusalem. He soon wanted to expand his reach.

*Planning for maximum arrests (9:1b-2)*

So, ***[1b]…[Saul] went to the high priest, [2] and asked for letters from him to the synagogues in Damascus, so that if he found any belonging to the Way, whether men or women, he might bring them in shackles to Jerusalem.***

Once he got these disciples of Jesus to Jerusalem, he would bring them to trial and let them suffer Stephen's fate.

Saul traveled with friends to Damascus who probably shared his hatred for Christians. And they had an uneventful trip…at first.

As they got close to the city, eager to fulfill their mission of arresting Jesus followers, Saul's trip and his life were interrupted.

**Confronted On the Damascus Road (9:3-6)**

*Light shined on Saul (vv. 3-4)*

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

Saul would have instantly known that this flashing light from heaven was a prelude to a revelation from God.

And sure enough, after the light, came a Voice. But this Voice wasn't at all comforting. This Voice accused Saul - zealous, God-fearing Saul - of something awful.

***[4] and he fell to the ground and heard a voice saying to him, "Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting Me?"***[3]

Never in Saul's worst nightmare would he want to persecute God. The question would have been devastating.

Saul asked, ***"Who are You, Lord?"*** - and the even more devastating answer changed everything.

*Saul - enlightened! (v. 5)*

***[5]…And He said, "I am Jesus whom you are persecuting."***

So, what Saul had thought to be true was false. What he had believed to be false was true. He had been perfectly wrong about Jesus.

Jesus was the Messiah, 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.

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[1] Saul's story can serve as a cautionary tale for those times when we are filled with *"righteous anger."* James reminds us, ***[James 1:20] the anger of man does not achieve the righteousness of God.***

[2] 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. (Philippians 3:5) Luke describes Saul as a wild beast. (Acts 8:3, ***"ravaging"***)

[3] By these words, the Lord identified Himself with His Church. And the clear message was, *"When you persecute My followers, you persecute Me."*

In a moment's time, Saul's world was unmade, preparing him for the first of several makeovers.

Jesus wasn't at all done with Saul. Next came marching orders.

*Saul's first commission (v. 6)*

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

Now, having been blinded by the flashing light from heaven, Saul needed help.[4]

**Confounded on the Damascus Road (9:7-9)**

So, ***[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 into Damascus. [9] And for three days he was without sight, and neither ate nor drank.***

His friends got him settled in Damascus - and after that we don't hear anything more about them. This story is all about Saul.

At the instant of the revelation of who Jesus was, Saul was convinced. He believed and was born again. He received the gift of eternal life and was converted.

The early church's Enemy #1 was saved by grace through faith in the living Lord Jesus Christ. Just like that. For the next three days, Saul sat.

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.

Over the course of those three days, his worldview synched with his new beliefs about Jesus.

This first makeover describes Saul's internal change from spiritual death to life and from darkness to light.

The second makeover follows. It describes something external that changed his reputation with the people of Damascus.

Now I think that when someone believes in Jesus, he or she should be met by a welcoming committee. There ought to be a fiesta to celebrate the great news of new life in Jesus.

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

Even after the word began to get out about Saul's Damascus Road experience, none of the disciples there were planning a party.

But God was determined that somebody should welcome Saul. So, He tapped a man to be Saul's welcoming committee of one.[5]

The welcomer was Ananias, a Jewish disciple of Jesus who lived in Damascus.

**<u>An Exterior Makeover (from opponent to proponent)</u>**
**<u>(Acts 9:10-20)</u>**

**Jesus: "Ananias, find and speak to Saul!" (9:10-12)**

***[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."***

[4] Saul was granted a clearer revelation than these other men. Saul not only heard a voice. He saw Jesus. (v. 7) The New Testament states elsewhere that Paul saw the Lord, likely a reference to this event. (9:17; 22:14; 26:16; 1 Cor. 9:1; 15:8-9).

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

Ananias was shocked at Jesus' command. He couldn't bring himself to accept Jesus' commission, so he decided to help Jesus with some valuable information.

**Ananias: "Lord, are You sure about this?" (9:13-14)**

***[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 arrest all who call on Your name."***

No doubt Jesus appreciated Ananias' updating Him on what Saul had been up to.

But Jesus didn't rub His beard, and say, *"Ananias. Thanks for your input. You've helped Me get a good grasp of the situation. So, no. Now that I'm better informed, You don't have to welcome Saul."*

Jesus actually expanded on the command and doubled-down on the commission.

**Jesus: "Yes, now GO!" (9:15-16)**

***[15] But the Lord said to him, "Go, for he is a chosen instrument of Mine, to bear My name before the Gentiles and kings[6] and the sons of Israel; [16] for I will show him how much he must suffer in behalf of My name."*** [7]

Jesus had His eye on Saul. He had a great work for Saul to do. God's word to Ananias was, ***"Go!"*** - and this time Ananias went.

This time he obeyed without question. He walked up Straight Street and found Saul just where the Lord said he would be.

We have imagined how anxious Ananias would have been about approaching Saul. Now, let's put ourselves in Saul's shoes.

If you're Saul, you've been fasting for three days. You're hungry and thirsty. 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.

You hear the door open to your room. You hear footsteps. You tense. Strong hands come down on your shoulders. Talk about scary.

And then, a voice you don't recognize speaks.

**Ananias: "Saul, welcome home, BROTHER!" (9:17-19a)**

*Saul, the embraced (v. 17)*

***[17]…"Brother Saul"*** - and I'll bet that those first words Saul heard from this stranger, ***"Brother Saul"*** - stayed with him for the rest of his life. Those words were all the fiesta he needed.

Ananias continued.

***[17]…"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."*** [8]

Luke now tells us what Saul's first "next steps" with Jesus were.

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

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

First, he can see. The recovery of his physical sight was a metaphor for the spiritual makeover that has just happened. He once was blind (spiritually)…now he sees (spiritually).

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[6] Saul (by then, known as the Apostle Paul) did speak to Kings Agrippa and Caesar, and to governors Felix and Festus.

[7] This suffering was not "payback" for his past sins, but simply a price he would pay for the privilege of serving as an apostle, and for which he would be richly rewarded for his faithfulness.

[8] Helpfully, Ananias identified Saul's experience as a ***"filling"*** by the Holy Spirit, not a ***"baptism.,"*** He had been baptized by the Spirit when he was converted.

And he was baptized. In the water, Saul would have declared his faith in Jesus and his intention to obey Jesus' commands.

Whether he was baptized publicly in the presence of other disciples or privately by Ananias (like the Ethiopian eunuch was baptized by Philip) didn't matter.

The word would have gotten out and spread like wildfire.

Saul's *internal* make-over happened the instant he believed in Jesus. That was between him and God.

This second makeover was *external*. It consisted of letting the world of fellow believers and outsiders know that Saul of Tarsus was not now who he was.

Now he is a believer in and a follower of the Jesus he had formerly opposed.

His self-imposed three-day fast was over. He ate, drank, was strengthened, and then, still sopping wet from his baptism, proceeded to make quite a splash in Damascus.

**A Life Mission Makeover (from persecutor to preacher) (Acts 9:20-22)**

**Saul, Set Free to Serve Jesus (9:19b-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."***

This was an instantaneous turnaround - ***"immediately."*** And notice where he is proclaiming Jesus: in the Jewish synagogues.

The very places where he had been planning to interrogate Christians have become the places where he's arguing that Jesus is the Messiah.[9]

The first responses from those who either knew Saul or knew about him were really encouraging.

**Saul Proclaimed Jesus (9:21-22)**

***[21] All those hearing him continued to be amazed.***

Saul's encyclopedic knowledge of the Bible, coupled with his experience with Jesus was too much for anyone who tried to debate him.

He linked prophecy to history to his own story as he explained Jesus to his fellow Jews. And their response?

***[21]…"Is this not the one who in Jerusalem destroyed those who called on this name, and had come here for the purpose of bringing them bound before the chief priests?"***[10]

Saul's identity as a persecutor of the Jesus Way was erased. This third make-over for Saul was a change in identity.

His about-face has made him the face of the Jesus Way in Damascus. Nobody was as well known for following Jesus as Saul was.

***[22] But Saul kept increasing in strength and confounding Jews who lived at Damascus by proving that this Jesus is the Christ.***

He was a very effective witness, evangelist, preacher.

But just like Stephen found danger when he boldly proclaimed Jesus in Jerusalem, Saul's public identity makeover as a bold Jesus follower brought with it a makeover in his public status.

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[9] 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 a chronology that I think is most likely: In his letter to the Galatians, Paul says that very shortly after becoming a believer, he went away to Arabia (Galatians 1:17) for three years, we believe for the purpose of spiritual growth and prayer. 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.

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

**A Status Makeover (from preacher to persecuted (9:23-25)**

**Saul's Bold Witness Fueled Opposition (9:23-24)**

***[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 closely watching the gates day and night so that they might put him to death…***

This makeover from preacher to persecuted wasn't surprising, given that Jesus had warned that His followers would face opposition.

Saul's fourth makeover has him joining the ranks of those he had formerly been trying to kill. He was living the same life he had forced them to live.

This identity makeover, for Saul, resulted in persecution.

The opposition blockaded the city. Saul was hemmed in, with no escape through the major gates. Damascus became a cage.[11]

And the one thing those who wanted Saul dead hadn't counted on was that his new friends in Jesus would come to his rescue. But that is exactly what they did.

And at what I assume was great personal risk, they rescued a man who had come to their city to kill them.

**Saul Left Damascus With a Little Help From His Friends (9:25)**

***[25] but his disciples[12] took him at night and let him down through an opening in the wall, lowering him in a large basket.***

Saul was now free, delivered by the Damascus believers. And 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, the birthplace of Christianity. When he arrived, he received a very cool reception.

**A Welcoming Makeover (from outside opponent to insider) (Acts 9:26-28)**

**Barnabas Extended a Risky Welcome (9:26-27)**

*A nervous church (v. 26)*

***[26] When he came to Jerusalem, he tried repeatedly to associate with the disciples; and yet they were all afraid of him, as they did not believe that he was a disciple.***

Of course, we get their stand-offishness. These disciples knew Saul as the guy who had been dragging their brothers and sisters in Christ out of their homes to stand trial before the Sanhedrin.

They didn't trust his profession of faith. They probably 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. (That is what I probably would have thought.)

Of course, we know what happened on the Damascus Road. But, in the absence of reliable internet connections to a 24/7 news cycle, they didn't know that. They had heard, but they were suspicious.

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

We've seen this hero before. He is Joseph, nicknamed Barnabas (the Son of Encouragement) by the apostles. Barnabas welcomed Saul of Tarsus.

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[11] Not only did Jews from within the city oppose Saul, but in 2 Corinthians 11:32-33, Paul says that a ruler of Arabia, Aretas, was also out to get him in Damascus. If our chronology (see footnote 15) is correct, this implies that Saul had done something during the three years in Arabia that had offended Aretas - maybe he preached Jesus. Paul related the story of his basket experience because it was the one that he could boast about, as it showcased his weakness. It was in his weakness that God could most powerfully demonstrate His strength. (2 Corinthians 12)

[12] Fascinating that the Christians in Damascus so soon after his conversion, are referred to as ***"his"*** - that is, Saul's - disciples.

*A courageous sponsor (v. 27)*

This scene is unlike the scene between Saul and Ananias back in Damascus. Yes, Ananias welcomed Saul, but only after God told him to. Twice!

There is no record here of God telling Barnabas to welcome Saul. He just did it.

And it is possible that Barnabas was as unsure of Saul's testimony as everybody else was. But he welcomed Saul, anyway.

Here's how I understand why Barnabas did what he did.

He calculated that it would be better to risk being killed by Saul if he was faking than it would be to refuse to welcome Saul if he was actually his brother in Christ.

And there was never a time when Barnabas was more truly a "Son of Encouragement" than right here, the day he became Saul's sponsor.

What's happening here is the last of Saul's several makeovers we'll see today, and it was critical one.

***[27] But Barnabas took hold of him[13] 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 he had spoken out boldly in the name of Jesus at Damascus.***

Barnabas accepted Saul's testimony. He believed him. And then the church welcomed him with open arms.

**A New Fully-Accepted Part of the Church (9:28)**

***[28] And he was with them…***

Saul was no longer a "them." Thanks to Barnabas, he was an "us." He moved from fierce opponent of the faith to proponent, from enemy to friend, from outsider to insider. Just like that.

This was a makeover of full participation into life in Jesus' church. He was invited to every pot-luck supper and after church fellowship. He was welcomed at worship, at Scripture studies, and at prayer meetings.

I have to believe that for this new believer, being accepted and loved and called "family" by the people he had been intending to harm meant the world.

The remainder of this story shows us Saul continuing in his bold ways, ***[28]…moving about freely in Jerusalem, speaking out boldly in the name of the Lord.***

Luke even tells us that he Hellenistic Jews he was evangelizing wanted to kill Saul.[14] And, once again, it was his friends in the church who came to his rescue.

***[30] But when the brothers learned of it, they brought him down to Caesarea and sent him away to Tarsus.***[15]

Then, Luke concludes this story by telling us what things were like *after* Saul left.

***[31] So the church throughout Judea, Galilee, and Samaria enjoyed peace, as it was being built up; and as it continued in the fear of the Lord and in the comfort of the Holy Spirit, it kept increasing.***

Peace ruled the church throughout Palestine, not with the *death*, but with the *conversion* of the main persecutor - and with his *departure* to Tarsus. :-)

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[13] ***"Took hold of him"*** - read this *"seized / embraced / Spanish abrazar!"*

[14] Danger will be a recurring theme in Saul's life. He was later stoned and assumed 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 imprisoned in Rome before his martyrdom.

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

**Conclusion:**

*God's makeover of Saul of Tarsus*

Luke gives a lot of space to the story of Saul's conversion and to the initial "next steps" he took in his new life in Christ.

Not only here, but also later in the book, he recorded Paul's own testimony before the Jews in Jerusalem (Acts 22:3-21) and before King Herod Agrippa (Acts 26:4-23) where Paul recounted much of what we've seen today.

Why so much space?

Well, it was crucial that the first readers of Luke's book and that we, today, recognize that Saul - soon to be known as the Apostle Paul - was God's messenger, appointed as an apostle as surely as Peter or any of the others were apostles to evangelize, establish churches, make disciples, and teach with all authority.[16]

*God's makeover work in us*

As we close, I'm going to ask if Saul's story might become ours. Could the biography we've seen today be, for you and for me, autobiography?

There is no doubt that God wants everyone of us here to come to grips with who Jesus is: He is Christ. Messiah. Son of God. Lord of all. He is the One who died and rose again and who alone can offer eternal life to anyone who believes in Him.

Have you come to the point where you have seen Jesus for the trustworthy Lord and Savior He is?

When you believe in Jesus, you are born again. You are justified before God. You become a child of God. You receive the gift of eternal life and God gives real purpose and meaning to your everyday life.

This indescribably great gift is offered to you, free of charge because Jesus paid it all. You can believe and receive it today, just like Saul did.

Having been born again, we know that God wants each of us to make a public profession of faith through baptism, to boldly proclaim Jesus, and to live for Jesus despite any suffering that may come our way. Just like Saul did.

And He wants us each to fully participate in the life of Jesus' body, the church. So, jump in with both feet into regular involvement in community, in worship, in prayer, in giving, in service.

And welcome well, just as Saul was welcomed well by the Christians around him when he first believed.[17]

So, we talk a lot around here about taking "next steps" with Jesus and about helping others take their "next step" with Jesus. So…

Be on the watch for the person who may need an Ananias or a Barnabas. Take a step toward that person. Listen to their story. Pray for them, in the moment.

Take the initiative to connect with that person who is on your mind right now to grab a meal or coffee this week.

Your opportunity to be a loving welcomer begins now.

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[16] That explains the focus on Saul's many "makeovers": salvation (9:1-5); public profession (9:6-19); new identify as a preacher of the gospel (9:2022); experiences of persecution (9:23-25); full assimilation into the life of the church. (9:26-28)

[17] Ananias welcomed him in Damascus and Barnabas sponsored him in Jerusalem. Disciples lowered him over a wall to rescue him from death in Damascus and a different group of disciples in Jerusalem bought a ticket out of town.