

## Northwest Community Evangelical Free Church

(July 18, 2010)

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Sermon manuscript

### Series: Next!

(studies in the book of Acts)

## **Behind the Scenes of an “About Face”** Study #13

(Acts 9:1-31)

### Introduction: Force multipliers...

The military describes a *force multiplier* as “an attribute that makes a given force more effective than that force would be without it.”

In combat, that would mean a gun + good morale is better than a gun. A map + GPS is better than a map. A well-trained soldier + a few other well-trained soldiers is better than well-trained soldier.

A golfer enjoys the force multiplier of a wind at his back. An investor benefits from the force multiplier of a bull market. A homemaker out to clean up delights in the force multiplier of nap time.

We could think of *force multipliers* in all walks of life - academics, the workplace, sports - you name it.

In the work of God, the primary and indispensable force is His own sovereign power. He does what only He can do in the hearts and lives of people. He saves and empowers and gifts.

But when it comes to deploying people He has saved into Kingdom work, He is eager to use certain force multipliers to help equip Christians for service.

Today we see one of the most powerful force multipliers around as we continue our exploration of the New Testament book of Acts.

*Meet Saul of Tarsus...*

The main character in our study this morning is Saul of Tarsus, and we’ve met Saul before. Luke has told us that he was the early church’s Enemy #1.

- Saul had been holding the garments of those who stoned Stephen (7:58).
- Saul was in hearty agreement with Stephen being put to death (8:1).
- Saul launched a major offensive against the church (8:3).

Luke picks up Saul’s story again at the beginning of Acts 9.

### Saul of Tarsus - The Church’s (and Jesus’) Enemy #1 (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, went to the high priest...*

Saul was enraged with the church and its activities and was willing to go to great lengths to stop its progress. OK, but have you ever asked yourself, “*WHY was Saul so violently opposed to the message of the Christians?*”

No doubt Saul had what he considered to be valid reasons to oppose the followers of Jesus. (Don’t all of us think that we have valid reasons for the things we do?)

Saul was deeply devoted to Jewish tradition and to the Law of Moses. He had organized his life around the Law.

In fact, in one of his letters, 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) He took Moses and the Law very seriously.

Yet, the followers of Jesus were proposing a new “WAY” that threatened Paul’s understanding of the Law and its role in believers’ lives. Christ-followers said that faith alone in Christ alone was all that was required to begin a relationship with God and to have eternal life.

This new belief system threatened the framework on which Saul's life was based and the grid through which he viewed life. In short, the message of Jesus threatened Saul's world view, his meta-narrative. And, frankly, when someone threatens your worldview, they are threatening YOU!

So, what are we to think of Saul?

Was he persecuting the church just to be mean? Was he a disagreeable person with a toxic personality? Did he know that the message the Christians brought was true and his was false? Was he harassing them for the fun of it? No!

Had you 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. (Scary thought, actually.)

Still, Saul's methods were unusually cruel.<sup>1</sup> Not satisfied with what he had done to terrorize the church in Jerusalem, he turned his attention to those outside of Jerusalem.<sup>2</sup>

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

*[2] [Saul] 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.*

Saul's hope was that once he had the disciples of Jesus back in Jerusalem, they would stand trial before the Sanhedrin, and would face Stephen's fate - capitol punishment.

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<sup>1</sup> 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"). Pharisees were schooled in the necessity of caution in executing punishment. But, evidently, this pupil had parted company with his teachers!

<sup>2</sup> See Acts 26:10, 11; Gal. 1:13.

Now, at this early point in church history (at most, a couple of years after the original Pentecost) believers still frequented the synagogues and made free use of the Temple in Jerusalem. (In fact, most people considered Christianity a sect within Judaism.)

For this reason, Saul knew that he would be able to find Christians wherever there were synagogues. And, to test that theory, Saul, with his companions, were journeying north from Jerusalem to the city of Damascus.

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

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

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

Still occupied to this day, Damascus is one of the oldest (perhaps the oldest) continuously occupied cities in the world. Even in the first century, it was a very large, influential city, located a week's journey north of Jerusalem (about one hundred and fifty miles).

To travel to Damascus, a Jew would make his way up the Jordan River valley, go through the region of Galilee, keep heading north of the Sea of Galilee, and then enter Syria, where Damascus was located.

Saul and his companions (perhaps Temple police or friends who shared Saul's contempt for Christians?) had an uneventful trip, at least until they got close to the city of Damascus itself.

As they neared the end of their journey and anticipation heightened for the capture of Christians, Saul's trip - and his life - was interrupted.

He found himself square in Jesus' loving crosshairs as he was about to be bushwhacked by grace.

*[3] As he was traveling, it happened that he was approaching Damascus, and suddenly a light from heaven flashed around him;*<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> William Barclay actually had the gall to suggest that the phenomenon which confronted Saul on the road to Damascus was an electrical storm, for which this region is famous! Ridiculous

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

Any Jew - especially a well-educated, biblically minded Jew like Saul - would have recognized immediately that here was a word from God, a divine revelation in process.

But it must have been terrifically disturbing to this zealous young man to hear God asking him, ***“Why are you persecuting ME?”***<sup>4</sup>

Certainly, Saul never in his wildest dreams would have intended to persecute God! So, he responded with a question of his own.

*Saul is enlightened (v. 5)*

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

The instant Saul recognized the Voice as the voice of Jesus (had Saul ever actually heard Jesus’ voice while He was alive?), everything about his life, his worldview, changed. What he had previously thought to be true he now saw was an error.

Saul instantly recognized that in his opposition to Jesus’ followers, he had been attacking God.<sup>5</sup> He had chosen the wrong enemy. He had leaned his ladder against the wrong wall.

His efforts to stamp out “the WAY” in its infancy were **perfectly, exactly** wrong. Jesus of Nazareth really was alive, really was the Messiah, really was the Son of God!

And what the arguments of Stephen and others had not done, a flash of light and a simple question and answer had done, without debate or deliberation.

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<sup>4</sup> 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.”*

<sup>5</sup> It is vain to consider what Saul might have been thinking about as he journeyed toward Damascus. Paul’s own writings give no justification for imagining a psychological build-up of self-distrust combined with misgivings about the rightfulness of his course as a persecutor. Clearly, the changes that came about on this day were wrought by outside forces, not inside.

But Jesus wasn’t finished with Saul - not by a long shot. After giving him the blinding illumination that he had been wrong, Jesus gave him 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.”***

Notice that there are no suggestions. No requests. This is the Lord Jesus giving commands. He forcefully ordered Saul around, like He is in charge or something. Nothing is up for debate. And if we wonder, *“Just who does this Jesus think He is anyway, God?”* the answer is, *“Yep.”*

Now, let’s remember that Saul was not alone on this journey. He was with companions, and those companions were aware that something very unusual was going on. Saul had been granted a clearer revelation than these other men had. In fact, the implication from verse 7 is that Saul not only heard a Voice. He saw Someone.<sup>6</sup>

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

*Speechless friends on the road (v. 7)*

***[7] The men who traveled with him stood speechless, hearing the voice but seeing no one.***

Whether the other men only heard the voice without seeing the Lord, or heard a sound without understanding the words, we don’t know.<sup>7</sup>

*Sightless Saul in the city (vv. 8-9)*

***[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.***

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<sup>6</sup> 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)

<sup>7</sup> F.F. Bruce suggests that the “voice” the men heard was that of Saul, neither hearing nor seeing whom he was speaking with. I think this unlikely

But his companions did lead him by the hand into Damascus, arranged lodging for him and made sure that he was taken care of.

During those three days of inactivity, we can only imagine that Saul's mind was racing.

As he pondered what had happened to him on the Damascus Road and prayed and fasted, he started to retrofit Old Testament prophecies he had known since childhood, now recognizing their fulfillment in Jesus.

His world view changed. God had revealed Himself to Saul in Jesus, leading to a mid-life *about face*. Saul was converted. He believed in Jesus, and whether that was at the instant of seeing the light and hearing the Voice or at some point during the three days of darkness we don't know.

We do know that he entered a life-changing relationship with the living Lord Jesus Christ.

Seeing who Jesus was, he placed his trust in Jesus, the One who died on a cross to pay the penalty for his sins, and to make him a child of God. He was saved and entered into a life-changing relationship with God "just like that."

But there were other life-changing relationships into which Saul would enter because of his new-found relationship with Jesus. And it to these other relationships that we turn our attention now.

Whenever a person becomes a part of the family of God by placing his trust in Jesus, he needs to be welcomed home. And a believer named Ananias in Damascus was privileged to make up the "Welcoming Committee" of ONE for Saul.

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

#### **Welcomed by Gutsy Obedience (vv. 10-20)**

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

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.

Ananias, a Jew who lived in Damascus, was a disciple of Jesus. And, to this man who had only followed Jesus for a brief time, Jesus gave one whale of a commission.

***[10] Now there was a disciple at Damascus named Ananias; and the Lord said to him in a vision, "Ananias." And he said, "Here I am, Lord." [11] And the Lord said to him, "Get up and go to the street called Straight,<sup>8</sup> 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."***

That Ananias was shocked at what the Lord was requiring of him should come as no surprise.

*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."***

Ananias may not have known Saul, but he certainly knew of him.

He had heard the reports of Saul's cruelty and ruthlessness toward Christians in and around Jerusalem. In Ananias' mind, to go to Saul was tantamount to giving himself up to the Gestapo!<sup>9</sup>

Still, no amount of personal anxiety about God's commands can ever be sufficient to prompt us to stop short of obedience. The Lord spoke once more to Ananias - and that was enough.

<sup>8</sup> Just for fun, I thought I would include this quote from one of the reference books I consulted this week in study. The street called Straight "was so named because, like the main streets of nearly all the great Hellenistic cities, it ran straight as an arrow from one end of the city to the other." (H.V. Morton) (duh)

<sup>9</sup> Did he feel as if he had been "Jonah-ed" by the Lord, sent to a personal "Nineveh" named Saul.

*The Lord: “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 kings<sup>10</sup> and the sons of Israel; [16] for I will show him how much he must suffer<sup>11</sup> for My name’s sake.”***

And with that, Ananias’ protest was overruled. Jesus had His eye on Saul, and had a great work for him to perform. So Ananias left to travel up Straight Street, and found Saul in Judas’ home, just as the Lord had said he would.

*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.”<sup>12</sup>***

Can you imagine the impact of those first words, **“Brother Saul.”**? I’m betting that those words of welcome brought tears to his now-seeing eyes and that they echoed in his mind for the rest of his life.

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.

Yet, here he is, accepting him, welcoming him into the family of God. He laid his hands on him (lovingly). He was the tool that brought Saul’s sight back and was the one who introduced him to life in the Spirit.

After being so warmly received, Luke tells us the next steps in Saul’s journey with Jesus.

<sup>10</sup> Saul did speak to Kings Agrippa and Caesar, governors Felix and Festus.

<sup>11</sup> He also knew that the great work to which Saul was being called was going to involve great suffering. But, even this suffering was not on account of his past persecutions of Christians. Even with Saul, the thought is not that of “pay-back.”

<sup>12</sup> Technically what happened here is the filling of the Spirit, not the baptism.

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; [19] and he took food and was strengthened.***

We’ve seen it over and over again. Someone believes - and is immediately baptized. Baptism matters!

And this new believer, Saul of Tarsus, still dripping wet from his baptism, proceeded to make quite a splash there in Damascus.

Saul, the Christian evangelist (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.”***

Almost overnight, the persecutor became the preacher, building up the faith which he had formerly sought to destroy.

It may be that a few days period elapsed between his filling with the Spirit and his bold proclamation (perhaps not).

But ironically, the synagogues, which had been the places where Saul had planned on interrogating and arresting Christians, now serve as the platforms from which he proclaimed Jesus as the Messiah!<sup>13</sup>

His bold proclamation prompted a response among those who heard him, and that response is recorded for us.

<sup>13</sup> 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 the region of Arabia (Galatians 1:17, very close to Damascus, located directly to the east of the city) for a period of 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 verse 21 of Acts 9.

## Protected 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.***

He took Damascus by storm! Saul’s encyclopedic knowledge of the Scriptures and Jewish tradition proved too much for any one who tried to debate him.

His Damascus Road encounter with Christ equipped him with an irrefutable arsenal of argument that Jesus was the Promised Messiah, the Son of God, the Savior who died and was raised again.

Saul effectively linked prophecy to fulfillment as he explained the life of Jesus to his audiences.<sup>14</sup>

But, just as Stephen before him had courted danger by his bold testimony, so Saul also prompted opposition by his words.

*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***

Saul was so unanswerable and the Jews so helpless in debate, that they saw no recourse but to resort to violence - and just like that, the persecutor became the persecuted.

The opposition was organized and determined.

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<sup>14</sup> Even though Saul had been specifically commissioned to specialize in Gentile outreach, his first ministry was to the Jews, those most like him, those with whom he was most familiar.

Not only did Jews from within the city oppose Saul, but we learn from 2 Corinthians 11:32-33<sup>15</sup>, that the ruler (ethnarch) of Arabia, Aretas, was also laying for him in Damascus.<sup>16</sup>

The opposition blockaded the city, so that Saul was hemmed in, with no escape through the major gates. The city became an escape-proof prison, guaranteed to lead to Saul’s capture.

Those who wanted Saul dead, though, had left out one detail in their plan to capture Saul. They didn’t count on Saul’s brothers and sisters in Christ who lived in Damascus coming to his rescue!

*Saul escaped Damascus, with a little help from his friends (v. 25)*

Demonstrating that necessity really is the mother of invention - but mostly, that “love will find a way” - Saul’s new Christian friends became very creative in providing a means of escape for him.

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

And thus, Saul of Tarsus became a basket case for Jesus... (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.)

The walls around the city in Damascus were so thick that they actually housed people (just like the walls of some of the ancient Missions south of downtown San Antonio).

Homes were built into the walls. And in the dead of night Saul was taken into one of these homes owned by a friend, let down with ropes in a basket and smuggled out of Damascus.

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<sup>15</sup> 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)

<sup>16</sup> If our chronology (above, footnote 16, is correct) this would imply that Saul had done something during the three years in Arabia that had offended Aretas - like preaching Jesus, perhaps!

After his escape from Damascus, Saul went immediately to Jerusalem. And what kind of a reception do you suppose he received while there?

### Sponsored by Bold Courage (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.***

It had been in Jerusalem that Saul had wrecked such havoc in the church after Stephen's death.

And I can certainly understand the members of the church being a bit stand-offish toward him. The disciples didn't trust Saul.

They suspected him of working undercover as an agent for the High Priest, *pretending* to be a Christian so that he could lure believers into his confidence and then arrest them.

Of course, we know that was not the case. We know that Saul, having tasted the richness of Christian fellowship in Damascus, hungered for the same thing in Jerusalem.

This impasse appears impossible. But then a hero arrives on the scene. And the hero who emerges is a man we have seen before, Joseph of Cyprus, or 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.***

Everyone else was steering clear of Saul, not knowing whether to take his profession of faith seriously or not.

Not Barnabas. He took Saul by the hand and became his *sponsor*. Never was he more truly a "Son of Encouragement" than right here.

Do you recall what it is like to be the new person?

When was the last time you were the newcomer, at work, at school, in the neighborhood, in church? Do you remember what it was like?

It's tough to break in to a new situation. But, everything changes if there is a Barnabas on the scene, someone who is willing to serve as a sponsor and throw out the **WELCOME** mat.

If you were welcomed by a Barnabas when you were just getting introduced at a new job, or settling down in class in a new school, or unpacking the moving van, you probably have pretty warm feelings toward your Barnabas. He met your need!

But the blessing works both ways. The Barnabas who stepped outside of his comfort zone to help you feel accepted reaped the benefit of a loyal friend.

And, in the case of Saul, the church into which he was welcomed reaped the benefit of a man who powerfully impacted the world for Jesus!

Having been 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 (Galatians 1:18).

Can't you imagine Saul pummeling both of these apostles with questions about Jesus, asking James about Jesus' growing up years, asking Peter about Jesus' three years of active ministry ("What was it like at the feeding of the 5,000? on the Sea of Galilee? at Lazarus' tomb? at the cross? at the empty tomb? - and afterwards?").

And, as he had done in Damascus, Saul also boldly proclaimed the Gospel with people in Jerusalem.

Specifically, he sought out the Hellenistic Jews and was evangelizing them.<sup>17</sup> Predictably, his bold testimony landed him in hot water.

*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; 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.***<sup>18</sup>

Once again, Saul's life was in danger.<sup>19</sup> And once again, his brothers and sisters in Christ, his new found friends, came to his rescue, and spirited him away from Jerusalem to the city of Caesarea,<sup>20</sup> and from there they provided passage to the region of Cilicia and his hometown of Tarsus.

And the result of Saul's conversion and welcome and rescue is given in verse 31.

### **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.***

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<sup>17</sup> It is interesting that this is the same group he had formerly been persecuting so violently, as well as the group from which Stephen had arisen, the man whose execution he had applauded.

<sup>18</sup> 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. Gal. 1:21 indicates that throughout this time Saul was active in Christian service throughout the regions of Syria and Cilicia.

<sup>19</sup> Danger was to 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, and finally held in custody in Rome.

<sup>20</sup> I am drawn to wonder if Saul met Philip the evangelist, the star of Acts 8, in Caesarea?

Peace permeated Palestine as the first major persecution of the church died out - not with the **death**, but with the **conversion** of the main persecutor!

The story of Saul's conversion in Acts 9 begins with him leaving Jerusalem to arrest fugitive Christians, and ends with him leaving Jerusalem as a Christian fugitive in grave danger himself.

This is the story of the wolf who devoured Christians becoming a follower of the Lamb, and finally, a shepherd of the sheep.

### **Conclusion:**

God intercepted Saul on the road to Damascus as he was on his way to arrest Christians. Had God not acted, more and more Christians would have been arrested and martyred and Saul would have been lost forever.

But a force multiplier was added to the primary work of God. And this force multiplier contributed to making Saul the man he became. That force multiplier was the love of the family of God.

- Ananias welcomed him.
- Barnabas sponsored him.
- The church rescued him in Damascus and in Jerusalem.

Who knows what might have happened had the church not come alongside of Saul to help him?

And who knows how God will use the force multiplier of YOUR and OUR LOVE and WELCOME and CARE in the lives of "Sauls" today for the advance of Christ's kingdom.