

“Getting Off To A Good Start”

Acts 9:19-30

Book of Acts [#11]

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Introduction

Getting off to a good start” is important. Ask a sprinter or hurdler. Many races are won or lost with the start, in the first critical steps. There’s a world of difference between blasting and stumbling out of the starting blocks.

When you begin a new job, course of study or relationship, it is important to get off to a good start.

Today we see Saul, or Paul, at the start of his ministry. Last week we saw him come to faith in Christ. Christ stopped and then transformed this biggest troublemaker for the church into a believer who would become their leading missionary, teacher and theologian. Today’s section shows us that Saul got off to a good start.

Most of us have been Christians for some time. So, one might think, “Yes, that’s true for new believers. But, since I’ve been a believer for a while, I can tune out and think about dinner or my plans for later today or the week.”

Saul’s example here is valuable for every one of us. For those who have yet to come to faith, for those who are new in faith, and for those who have been believers for many years. God is the God of new beginnings. Every new day, every new insight into what God has made us and called us to be, every new opportunity— all of these, and more, are *new beginnings* where it is important for us to get off to a good start.

So, let’s all tune in and learn some things about getting off to a good start, some things about those ...

First Critical Steps.

There are 5 critical steps we will look at from Saul today. The first is to seek fellowship. Saul was saved, baptized, and then what? Go to the opening of the section, last part of verse 19, “Now for several days he was with the disciples who were at Damascus.”

Saul was bright. He knew the Old Testament Scriptures well and was able to preach the gospel as readily as he had been able to persecute the church. He also knew the need for fellowship with the other believers there at Damascus. When he came to faith he spent a period of time with the believers and also ministering there. When he arrived back in Jerusalem about three years later, verse 26 tells us, “...he tried to join the disciples, but they were all afraid of him, not believing that he really was a disciple.”

Saul saw and knew the need for fellowship. He didn’t wait for people to approach him. The Bible is clear—fellowship with other believers is not an option, but is required for spiritual health and growth.

In 1 Corinthians 12 Paul pictures the church as a body — with feet, hands, ears and eyes. Every believer is part of the body and we all need each other. Verse 21, “the eye cannot say to the hand, ‘I have no need of you’; or again the head to the feet, ‘I have no need of you.’” Rather, as Paul wrote to the church at Rome, “Be devoted to one another in brotherly love” (12:10). And, to the church at Thessalonica he wrote, “Encourage one another and build up one another” (1 Thessalonians. 5:11).

So, like Saul, take the initiative. Seek fellowship. It’s part of *getting off to a good start* at any and every point of life.

Another critical first step is to seek and receive instruction. Saul did this. Let’s put this into perspective by trying to piece together a time line for his first years as a believer. Everyone does not agree on the specifics, but from Acts, 2 Corinthians 11 and Galatians 1 let me suggest this time line:

- Saul came to faith and received his new marching orders from Christ, as we saw earlier here in chapter 9.
- He spent a period of time preaching in Damascus (9:19-22).
- After this he spent an extended period of time in Arabia (we are not told exactly where, but any place east of Damascus; Galatians 1:17).
- And then he returned to Damascus (9:23-25) until there was a plot against him, forcing his exit.
- And finally he returned to Jerusalem, about three years after coming to faith.

From this sketchy record we note that Saul began this three-year period by being with and receiving instruction from disciples in Damascus. He then went out to the desert, spending time receiving instruction from Christ. Finally, he went to Jerusalem where he met and interacted with Peter and others.

Saul sought and received instruction.

We also need to seek and receive instruction. God works with each of us individually and uniquely. At the same time, there are universal patterns and principles. One of them is to learn with, through and from others. The basis and measurement of all this instruction must be the Bible. As Paul wrote to Timothy,

“Be diligent to present yourself approved to God as a workman who does not need to be ashamed, accurately handling the *word of truth*.”
(2 Timothy 2:15)

Subjective, self-directed religious beliefs and practices have been growing for a number of decades. The thinking, “I will determine what I need and want. So what if it is a bit from here and there?” Or, “Don’t tell me what I should believe or what I should and should not do! I will be the judge of that!”

And so we have growing numbers of people...

- who don't really seek and receive instruction;
- growing numbers who have no accountability for what they think and do;
- growing numbers of people who end up with their own tailor-made and sometimes not Biblical version of Christianity.

Yes, each of us is responsible for what we learn and how we live, but God's plan and expectations for us includes seeking and receiving instruction from others.

If you and I are not spending time regularly in God's word ourselves and with others, we are not *getting off to a good start* for the days, opportunities and challenges that keep coming to us.

There is also the critical step of being ready to witness and serve. Saul was a remarkable example of this. After Ananias visited and instructed him, we read in verse 18, "... [Saul] got up and was baptized." Then, verse 20, "and immediately he began to proclaim Jesus in the synagogues, saying, 'He is the Son of God.'"

He was transformed and telling, saved and serving. He was immediately ready to serve God. Now, to be sure, Paul was outgoing, bold, determined and experienced in speaking, teaching and debating. Those were some of the abilities God had given him.

Look at what verse 28 tells us about what he did when he made it back to Jerusalem, "[he] was moving about freely in Jerusalem, speaking boldly in the name of the Lord." He was always ready to witness and serve.

What about us? You and I are not Saul—no one has to point that out. But God has given each of us gifts and abilities, responsibilities and opportunities to be His witnesses, His servants. As I and others have said many times, we need to be ready, available and faithful. Consider a current example—Genevieve on Friday. A woman was wondering and searching for purpose and meaning—really, searching for God. Genevieve was aware and sensitive and so walked into her part of God's appointment for her with this woman, and through that did a work in that woman's heart.

Sometimes God leads us to serve and speak where it is familiar and comfortable. At other times, where it unfamiliar and uncomfortable.

Let's move on to the fourth critical step— Keep moving forward. Saul certainly kept moving forward. Go to verse 22, "But Saul kept increasing in strength and confounding the Jews who lived at Damascus by proving that this Jesus is the Christ." He "kept increasing in strength." What a wonderful description! He kept learning, growing and serving. He kept moving forward.

In his gospel, Luke described Christ in the same way:

- First, as a young child, "The Child continued to grow and become strong, increasing

in wisdom; and the grace of God was upon Him” (2:40).

- Then, as he grew older, “And Jesus kept increasing in wisdom and stature, and in favor with God and men” (2:52).
- The next reference Luke gives us is at Christ’s baptism in chapter 3, “and the Holy Spirit descended upon Him in bodily form like a dove, and a voice came out of heaven, ‘You are My beloved Son, in You I am well- pleased’” (22).

Saul followed the example of his Savior from the start. He kept moving forward. And many years later he was still at it. He wrote, “I press on...[I keep on] reaching/striving forward...I [keep on] pressing on” (Philippians 3:12-14).

And so it is critical for us to keep moving forward. Am I, are you, are we continuing to press, stretch, strain, reach forward in our spiritual life each day? *Really?* We will always need to grow. We will always have room for growth while we are here on earth. *Always!*

And, now the fifth and last critical step we see in Saul’s example, listen to the counsel of others. This very similar to step 2, “*Seek and receive instruction.*” This point, however, is more specific, and deserves attention on its own.

Let’s review Saul’s situation again. He was converted and began ministering in Damascus. He went out to the desert for God’s instruction. He returned to Damascus where he ministered boldly for a while (27), and was then forced to leave.

He went to Jerusalem where he preached boldly. But that was not well received. Drop down to verse 29, “And he was talking and arguing with the Hellenistic Jews; but they were attempting to put him to death.” The next verse tells us the believers in Jerusalem learned about these plans and so took him to Caesarea. There they put him on a ship and “sent him away to Tarsus”—his home town.

Saul was bright, insightful and forceful. It was not in his nature to sidestep a problem or duck a confrontation. He frequently gave counsel and instructions to others. But he also respected others, listened to them and followed their counsel as we see here.

We also need to “Listen to the counsel of others.” This starts with our character including the quality from Romans 12:3, of not thinking more highly of ourselves than we ought to think, *and* verse 10, giving preference to one another in honor. As well, the quality in Philippians 2:3, of humbly regarding others as more important than ourselves. It also is built on the practice in James 1:19, being quick to hear and slow to speak.

Yes, we may know more about the subject at hand than some others and think our analysis and ideas are the best, but we *need* to listen to the counsel of others. After all, we know we are not infallible and things are not always the way we think they are.

Saul got off to a good start.

The Results Of Getting Off To A Good Start.

One of the first results we see is opposition. This may surprise you. We *are* involved in spiritual conflict, spiritual warfare: the battle between light and darkness. Jesus has told us that He came to bring us life and peace, to unite us in the family of God, *but* He also came to bring division—the division between truth and falsehood. He told us that “if they persecuted Me, they will also persecute you” (John 15:20).

Saul experienced that in this early period of his Christian life and ministry.

- In Damascus in those first days and months the Jews “plotted together to do away with him” (23).
- In Jerusalem, “they were attempting to put him to death” (29).
- And on throughout the rest of his life there was persecution that came along with the great blessings and joys.

Toward the end of his life, he wrote to Timothy, his young protege, “...all who desire to live godly in Christ Jesus will be persecuted” (2 Timothy 3:12).

So we should not be surprised when people do not receive the good news of Christ as *good news* to them, or if there is ridicule along with the rejection, maligning our motives or character, trying to squelch our witness. We don’t go looking for it, we try to be wise and gracious, but you *cannot* be godly—you cannot live out the character of Christ in service for Him—without opposition.

Then, getting off to a good start also results in effective ministry. Remember what we have seen in Saul in this section. We start in Damascus. Go to verse 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?’ But Saul kept increasing in strength and confounding the Jews who lived at Damascus by proving that this Jesus is the Christ.” (21-22)

The record continues in the next verse,

“When many days had elapsed, the Jews plotted together to do away with him, but their plot became known to Saul. They were also watching the gates day and night so that they might put him to death; but his disciples took him by night and let him down through an opening in the wall, lowering him in a large basket.” (23-25)

These last verses don’t look positive at first glance. But notice the phrase “his disciples.” By this time Paul had gained the respect of believers in Damascus with the result being some had committed themselves to learn from him, serve with him, and also serve him.

In John 15 Jesus stated some facts which are also promises. The believer who abides, who remains in fellowship and harmony with Him “bears much fruit” (5). And, “...I chose you, and appointed you that you would go and bear fruit, and that your fruit would remain...” (16).

When we get off to a good start in a new day, opportunity or responsibility, we *will* experience effective ministry. Few, if any of us will have wide-ranging public ministries in different cities, countries and continents, nor our own band of disciples as Saul did. But that is not the issue, it is not the measurement of effective ministry.

Jesus’ statement and promise applies to each one who knows Him. It applies to you and me! As we abide in Christ, we *will* bear fruit that *will* remain for eternity! Some, and perhaps much of that fruit we will not see here on earth. But again, that is not the point! When we get off to a good start we are on the way to effective ministry.

Conclusion.

Wherever you are in circumstances, stage of spiritual life or stage of life in general, you need to, you can get off to a good start today. The question often is not so much about what we know or don’t know, but about how we actually translate that knowledge into action. And in turn, this question is not so much about the nuts and bolts of process as it is about the quality and priority of our relationship with Christ.

In his book *Say It With Love*, Howard Hendricks wrote about the impact of one person who consistently *got off to a good start* because she was engaged with and excited about her life in Christ and her ministry for Him. The incident took place at a Sunday School convention where he was speaking. He writes,

A number of us ... went across the street at noon to get a bit to eat at a hamburger stand. The place was crowded and people were standing in line. An elderly lady was in front of me. ... She was 83. She wore a convention badge, so I knew she was a conferee. There was a table for four open, so two friends and I invited her to join us.

I asked her the obvious question, “Do you teach a Sunday School class?” “Oh, I certainly do,” she said. I visualized a class of senior citizens, but asked her: “What age group do you teach?” “I teach a class of junior-high boys.”

“Junior-high boys! How many boys do you have?” “Thirteen,” she said sweetly. “Tremendous! I suppose you come from a rather large church.” “No sir, it’s very small,” she said. “We have about 55 in Sunday School.”

Hardly daring to go on, I said, “What brings you to this Sunday School convention?” “I’m on a pension—my husband died a number of years ago,” she replied, “and, frankly, this is the first time a

convention has come close enough to my home so I could afford to attend. I bought a Greyhound bus ticket and rode all last night to get here to attend two workshops. I want to learn something that will make me a better teacher.”

Three convention speakers slithered across the ground back to the convention after that encounter. I couldn't help thinking about all the frauds across America who would be breaking their arms patting themselves on the back if they had 13 boys in a Sunday School of 55.

She tipped her hand—she told us she had a passion to communicate! I heard a sequel to this story some time later. A doctor told me there are 84 young men in or moving toward the Christian ministry as a result of this woman's influence. We have some in our seminary. I asked two of them, “What do you remember most about her?” They said, “She is the most unforgettable person we've ever met.”¹

Question: do you have, have you ever had that kind of passion to live for, to serve Christ?

- If you have, keep it up!
- If you once had it but now don't, renew the flame!
- If you never really have had that kind of passion, isn't it about time to light the flame?

It's that kind of passion for Christ, grounded in experiencing His love, forgiveness and daily grace that will move you to take those first critical steps each day, to get off to a good start in each opportunity and challenge.

As you spend a few moments with God now.

- Thank Him for His great love, His great passion for you.
- Thank Him that He is a God of new beginnings.
- Evaluate your life for Christ. Are you stumbling or blasting out of the starting blocks? Determine to consistently take good, strong first critical steps so you can see God be glorified as He does His work through you.

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¹ *Say It With Love*, p. 46-48. Howard G. Hendricks, Victor Books, 1972