

A Scout is Dependable and Dependant. Acts 9:20-31 Ecclesiastes 4:9-12

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A certain Scoutmaster wanted his Scouts to be prepared for the upcoming Court of Honor. So he asked each of them to be ready at the next meeting to tell of a good deed they had done.

At the next meeting, the Scoutmaster asked the first boy, "What was your good deed?" The first Scout replied, "*I helped a little old lady cross the street.*"

"Very good," said the Scoutmaster, and he turned to the next boy and asked, "What was your good deed?" The second Scout replied, "*I helped him help the little old lady across the street.*"

"I see," said the Scoutmaster, and he turned to the next boy and asked, "What was your good deed?" The third Scout replied, "*I helped those two help the little old lady across the street.*"

Frowning now, the Scoutmaster asked the fourth boy what his good deed was. The fourth Scout replied, "*I helped the other three guys help the old lady across the street.*"

"Now, look here," the Scoutmaster said sternly. "Why did it take four boys to help one little old lady across the street?" The fourth Scout replied, "*Because she didn't want to cross the street.*"

Are you someone who does not easily accept help from others? Some of us are willing to help others, but we are unwilling to receive help – does that describe you?

Historically, America was built upon the idea of an independent spirit. We have had it drilled into us that we should pull ourselves up by our own bootstraps, and never depend on anyone for anything. But, if this attitude is taken to an extreme, it can be both dangerous and just plain lonely for individuals and for society.

Truth is, the ideal of living independent and self-sufficient is not taught in the Bible. In reality, every single one of us not only need the Lord, we need each other. **God created us for dependence, not for independence.**

Some people might argue, "*Well, you know, the Bible says God helps those who help themselves.*" Guess what? The Bible does not say that anywhere! In fact, the Bible teaches the opposite truth. God waits to assist those who finally come to the point in their lives where they cannot help themselves, and they willingly surrender themselves to the care and support of a loving God.

So, to help us get this lesson of life being better when we work together rather than alone, today we will meet a person who grew up completely self-sufficient, independent of everyone – he never even got married. Then he met Jesus in a most miraculous way and quickly learned of his need, his dependence on all his brothers and sisters in faith. His name was **Saul of Tarsus** – *Tarsus being his hometown in Turkey* - but after becoming a believer himself, he was so humbled by the events of his life and those who came along to help him, that Saul eventually changed his name to Paul (which means “small” or “humble”).

When we first meet Saul he was a proud Jewish leader in Jerusalem and rabidly opposed to the budding Christian community now growing there after Jesus’ death and resurrection. Having arrested and condemned to death several prominent Jesus followers in Jerusalem, Saul decided to do the same in Damascus, the next big Jewish city up the road.

But along the way, he came face to face with Jesus in such a dramatic way that it literally knocked him off his horse and left him blind. He had to be led by hand the rest of the way into Damascus where he remained blind and fasting, praying for three days until God sent a follower of Jesus to pray over him that God might restore his sight.

You could say Saul twice saw the light: first when a blinding vision of Jesus confronted him and second when after three days God restored his sight. Let’s stop and think about this for a moment. Close your eyes and sit there until I say you can open them again. (pause for one minute ok you can open your eyes)

That was just one minute. How would you feel if suddenly you went blind and had to wait for three days until God gave your sight back; it would probably change your thinking on a few things. Certainly, after his meeting with Jesus and receiving back his sight, Saul was a changed man. The former persecutor of believers was now himself an outspoken believer; which as you learned from today’s Scripture reading made him doubly dangerous to his former Jewish friends.

As today’s scripture picks up the story, immediately after getting his sight back, Saul became such a powerful witness for the Christian faith in Damascus, that now the Jewish leaders there *were watching the gates day and night so that they might kill him.*

Can you imagine what it would feel like to have a contract out on your head; to actually have people wanting to kill you because of what you believe? Yet that was one of the first things Saul experienced in his new Christian faith. The mighty hunter had now become the hunted.

Can you imagine the fear he must have felt, hiding in some unknown room afraid to go out into the streets?

But notice how God worked to help Saul when he found himself in this place of need. As our Bible tells the story, to save his life and help him get away, *his disciples took him by night and let him down through an opening in the wall, lowering him in a basket* (Acts 9:23-25).

Who came to Saul's rescue? They are simply identified as "*his disciples*", which means those people who were his students, his friends. We don't know their names, but Saul did. In the middle of the night they lowered him outside the city walls in a basket. How's that for a special operations rescue!

Can you imagine the great Saul of Tarsus, five years earlier, saying, "*sure, I'll get in a basket and run away in to the night!*" ? But that was then and this is now. His need forced the once-independent Saul to depend on a nameless group of faithful friends to rescue him from certain death, by means of a basket hanging from a rope.

Would you trust a wicker basket and a hand woven rope to get you safely down out of dangerously high place? There's nothing like a basket rescue to teach a little humble dependence.

Having left Damascus in the middle of the night, where now could Saul go? The answer is that he went back to Jerusalem. But wasn't Jerusalem the headquarters of the Jewish opposition? Yes it was. Just think about how different it felt for Saul returning to Jerusalem – so much had changed, not about Jerusalem, but about him.

Saul had been a V.I.P. in Jerusalem (a very important person). He had known everyone of significance in that city. How do you think he was now received back in town?

- Do you think his former Jewish friends welcomed him home?
- Was the red carpet rolled out for him?

Oh, no! Now Saul was a "*persona non grata*," his old friends did not want him around. So, when he came back to Jerusalem, he tried to join with the Apostles and other followers of Jesus. (9:26).

But neither did the believers in Jerusalem want anything to do with Saul. They were afraid of him and that was certainly understandable, remembering that he had imprisoned and killed some of their friends and relatives. They now thought he was a spy and that this was a trap – which would have been a brilliant plan if he was the same person who had left Jerusalem – pretend to be a believer, gain access to the leaders and then in one fell swoop arrest them all! So when Saul knocked on their doors and asked to join with them, the doors were closed.

He was someone whom nobody wanted to have anything to do with – he couldn't go to his old friends, they wanted to arrest and kill him, and the believers were afraid that he wanted to arrest and kill them!

Have you ever felt the sting of such rejection?

Have you ever felt like a person who nobody wanted to have around?

It is a hard place to be, but it is the place where we can learn the most about depending on God. We are not told how long Saul wandered friendlessly around town, but then he met **Barnabas**, just an ordinary member of the Jesus community, but here was someone who was everybody's friend and the kind of friend everybody wants to have."

So Barnabas brings Saul to meet the apostles. *He told them how Saul on his journey had seen the Lord and that the Lord had spoken to him, and how in Damascus he had preached fearlessly in the name of Jesus. So Saul stayed with them and moved about freely in Jerusalem, speaking boldly in the name of the Lord.* (Acts 9:27-28)

How did Barnabas overcome fears that the other Christians had? We don't know. Did God's Spirit give assurance to Barnabas' spirit? Perhaps, but again we don't know. Actually his real name was "**Joseph**" but he was such a friend to those in need that his friends had nicknamed him **Barnabas** which means "**Son of Encouragement.**"

Barnabas was a person who was willing to take a chance and step out on a limb for someone else. Barnabas took a chance on Saul and Saul was willing to accept his assistance – that's humble dependence at its best. Then once Barnabas befriended Saul so did all the other believers.

With the support of the community of believers, Saul got busy doing the same thing in Jerusalem that he had done in Damascus: spreading the good news about Jesus. And as you could probably predict, his speaking about Jesus prompted further opposition. Now it's the Jerusalem Jews who were plotting to kill him so his newfound friends in Christ took him down to the coast and shipped him back to his hometown of Tarsus.

(Acts 9:29-30)

Again Saul finds himself in need of help to survive and again he is assisted by others who were simply described as "the brothers." Look what they do for Saul: to keep him safe, they personally escort down him to Caesarea by the sea, about 70 miles away, and they probably also paid for his ticket on the boat so that he could sail back home.

Why send him back home? Because Tarsus was almost 600 miles away from Jerusalem. There, Saul was not a hunted man and could resume his trade of tent making, content to await God's next mission for him.

Perhaps four or five years pass with nothing happening. But wasn't Saul personally commissioned by Jesus to speak to the kings and rulers of the world? Wasn't he the

one who was to bring the Gospel to the Gentiles? Why would he be sent back to Tarsus to wait?

None of us like to wait, do we? We don't even like to wait for red lights to turn to green! But notice what the last verse of chapter nine says.

Meanwhile the church throughout Judea, Galilee, and Samaria had peace and was built up. Living in the fear of the Lord and in the comfort of the Holy Spirit, it increased in numbers.
Acts 9:31

You mean the church prospered for the next period of time without Saul? Saul was called and he was so gifted? Yes, he was! But the secret of the church both then and now is not a remarkably gifted individual like Saul. The secret to the blessing and health of any church is Almighty God. Period!

The secret is not Saul, it's not you, and it's certainly not me, or anyone else we may be tempted to think is indispensable to the cause. Saul still had very important roles to play in this growing crowing community of faith, but not until he learned some of the lessons he needed to learn, such as **humble dependence**.

Saul first learned about dependence having to escape from Damascus by sitting in a basket dangling from a rope being lowered outside the city walls by friends.

Saul learned some more humble dependence when he came to Jerusalem and was rejected by everyone, until Barnabas took a chance on him.

And Saul learned even more dependence when his life was once again threatened and his new found Jerusalem friends escorted him safely to the coast and shipped him home to Tarsus, there to wait patiently for God's next instructions.

Saul's time to shine once again would come soon enough. Several years later, some Jewish followers of Jesus went over to the Gentile city of Antioch and began witnessing about Christ to non-Jews and a large number of them were then becoming believers. This was news to the church leaders in Jerusalem, who up until then thought only Jews could become followers of Jesus. So guess who they sent to Antioch to investigate? Good old Barnabas, everybody's friend. And when Barnabas saw how many Gentiles were coming into the faith in that town, he then remembered the abilities and zeal of his friend Saul.

The conclusion of this story says, Then Barnabas went to Tarsus to look for Saul, and when he had found him, he brought him to Antioch. So it was that for an

entire year they associated with the church and taught a great many people, and it was in Antioch that the disciples were first called 'Christians'. (Acts 11:25-26)

Barnabas didn't just send a letter, he personally went to Tarsus to find and then fetch Saul back to Antioch where together they helped the young church grow strong. Antioch would eventually become Saul's second home; from there – now calling himself Paul – he would go on many more adventures, actually years long mission trips, with his friend Barnabas taking the Good News of Jesus deeper into the gentile world, but these stories must wait for another day.

One final comment about the growing church in Antioch. It was in Antioch that the locals first gave these dedicated, excited, believers in Jesus, a sarcastic nickname; calling them "**little Christs**," which is what the word "Christian" means. It was probably Barnabas who declared that "**Christians**" was exactly what they wanted to be, and so the nickname not only stuck, it became a badge of honor.

What then can you Scouts and the rest of us take home from this story of how the proud independent Saul of Tarsus, with the help of his Christian friends became the somewhat more humble missionary known as the Apostle Paul?

First of all, Saul's story encourages us to learn to value the other people in our lives. **Can we see how others might play an important role not only in our personal survival but also our success?** Where would we be today if it weren't for our parents, our Senior Patrol Leader, or our Scoutmasters teaching us important survival skills like how to build a campfire in the snow. God didn't create us to make it through life completely on our own; He rarely asks us to fly solo. When God leads us into new skills, new trials, He always encourages us to travel with others. As the Bible teaches: "*a three strand cord is not easily broken*" (Ecclesiastes 4:12)

A pastor friend of mine (Charles Swindoll) shared a lesson learned from his training days in the Marine Corps. One of the tips for surviving in combat was: **always dig a foxhole big enough for two, or three.** Inevitably, the strain of battle will cause a person who is all alone to get scared. Most of us do better with someone nearby, to help keep us steady and strong.

God has designed our families to be that sort of support network – both our physical family, and our Scouting and spiritual family. Hopefully from Saul and Barnabas we have learned the value of having close friends in all these families.

Second, today's story of Saul's early adventures encourages us to learn to be more humble. You and I are not indispensable, nor are we irreplaceable – only God is. So let's be willing to let God use us as He see fit. God may ask some of us, like Paul, to go be evangelists and missionaries in other countries, or He may use us to be friend

makers like Barnabas. Or God may call us to be just some of the numerous, everyday individuals who always make a big difference in many small ways. How beautiful and freeing it is when we can simply walk with God in humble dependence, trusting Him to use us where best He can!

Which is today's **third** and final lesson. Like Saul, we need to learn that we can trust God. God knows what we need! God knows how to protect and provide for us! When Saul needed it, God provided friends with a rope and basket to help him escape from Damascus. When he was all alone in Jerusalem, God also provided a strong friend named Barnabas to stand up for Saul and take him in. And when he needed such again God provided more friends to get Saul safely on a ship bound for home.

When we trust God, we are in good hands...better than Allstate!

Let me leave you with one more story. During World War II, a US marine was separated from his unit on a Pacific island. The fighting had been intense and in the smoke and crossfire he had lost touch with his comrades. Alone in the jungle, he could hear enemy soldiers coming in his direction. Scrambling for cover, he found his way up a high ridge to several small caves in the rock. Quickly he crawled inside one of the caves.

Although safe for the moment, he realized that once the enemy soldiers swept up the ridge, they would quickly search all the caves and he would be found and killed. As he waited, he prayed, *"Lord, if it be your will, please protect me. Whatever your will though, I love you and trust you. Amen."*

After praying, he lay quietly listening as the enemy begin to draw close. He thought, "Well, I guess the Lord isn't going to help me out of this one." Then he saw a spider begin to build a web over the front of his cave. As he watched, listening to the enemy searching for him all the while, the spider layered strand after strand of webbing across the opening of the cave. He thought, "What I need is a brick wall and what the Lord has sent me is a spider web. God does have a sense of humor."

As the enemy drew closer he watched from the darkness of his hideout and could see them searching one cave after another. As they came to his cave, he got ready to make his last stand. To his amazement, however, after glancing in the direction of his cave, they moved on. Suddenly, he realized that with the spider web over the entrance, his cave looked as if no one had entered for quite a while.

"Lord, forgive me," prayed the young man. "I had forgotten that with You a spider's web is stronger than a brick wall."

Like Saul of Tarsus, like that Marine, as we learn to live in humble dependence, we may see God work in surprising ways.

Let's pray about this.