



Learning to Surf on the Damascus Road

Acts 9

Tips for Surfing

Recently I suggested to my congregation that growing in your faith is like learning to surf. I also suggested that teaching yourself to surf is similar to standing at the top of a flight of steps, balancing on an ironing board, and sliding down, while family and friends throw buckets of water and watch you crash in a heap at the bottom, drenched and discombobulated.

I then added that learning to balance on a surfboard, being able to fall properly, and remembering not to panic when turbulence pulls you under are crucial skills if you are ever to become a successful surfer.

To further develop your surfing skills, you must eventually go out into the whitewater and learn how to lean into large waves and use the ocean's power to ride on the crest of a wave.

In the book of Acts (Acts 9:1-18), we read one of the most compelling passages in all of Scripture. The details of this well-known story reveal Saul of Tarsus (who will later become the Apostle Paul) meeting the risen Christ on the road to Damascus. In those early moments of encountering Christ, Saul felt disorientated and uncertain of what was happening. He would soon discover that the powerful force of the love of God would transform his soul and draw him into a whole new relationship with Christ.

Saul was born in Damascus, a busy metropolis of diverse cultures and international commerce. Its strategic location made it a popular trade route for caravans carrying their goods all the way from the Orient in the east to Rome in the west.

Saul grew up in a Jewish household. His father, a Pharisee, demanded strict obedience to the Law of Moses. After moving with his family to Jerusalem during his early teen years, Saul was educated under the influence of Gamaliel, a highly respected teacher and scholar.

“Meanwhile...” (Acts 9:1)

In the days immediately after Jesus' resurrection, the early Christians began to live out their faith: *“So the Word of God spread. The number of disciples in Jerusalem increased rapidly, and a large number of priests became obedient to the faith”* (Acts 6:7).

Sadly, opposition grew, and Stephen, *“a man of God's grace and power,”* became the first martyr. He was arrested, tried, and stoned to death. *“And Saul was there giving approval to his death”. On that day a great persecution broke out against the church... and all except the apostles were scattered throughout Judea and Samaria.... Saul began to destroy the church. Going from house to house, he dragged off both men and women and put them in prison”* (Acts 8:1, 3).

As we come into chapter 9, we read, *“Meanwhile, Saul was still breathing out murderous threats against the Lord's disciples.”* Please understand what is going on here. Saul was not merely content to see the religious authorities move against the young church in Jerusalem, arrest many of those involved, and watch the rest scatter. He used his authority to follow them to the communities they had escaped to, *“still breathing out murderous threats”* (Acts 9:1).

Saul's fury had intensified almost to the point of no return. His bloodthirsty determination and enmity for the followers of Christ drove him hard toward Damascus. His blind hatred involved a fanatical addiction to a belief that was cold, narrow, and legalistic. Saul knew nothing about the intimacy with God, forgiveness, and transforming grace that the disciples had encountered.

The disciples had experienced the reality of Jesus' resurrection for themselves. But Saul simply could not see it. In his mind he was asking, *“How could this carpenter from Nazareth be the Son of God? He was a criminal. He was found guilty and crucified. Sure, there were stories about miracles and a resurrection, but they are all exaggerations. People see and say things because they want to believe. This Jesus is clearly not the Messiah.”*

“Saul, Saul, why...” (Acts 9:4-9)

But then it all changes. The impossible happens. There is no prior announcement, no heavenly calligraphy across the skies. God has remained silent and restrained as Saul proceeded with his murderous plan, but then without warning, the course of Saul's life is changed forever. He finds himself in the presence of the living God and hears Jesus ask, *“Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?”* Saul responds, *“Who are you, Lord?”* The response is clear: *“I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting.”*

Overwhelmed, Saul falls to the ground, blind, fearful, and uncertain. There is no way out, no escaping. His past, his current activities, his plans and desires—all fall away in the presence of the risen Christ. God is working in the life of Saul of Tarsus. In Acts 9, however, God not only calls Saul; he also calls Ananias.

“Ananias!” (Acts 9:10)

The focus of this chapter moves from Saul to Ananias in verse 10: *“In Damascus there was a disciple named Ananias. The Lord called to him in a vision, ‘Ananias!’”* When he hears God's call, Ananias, like Saul, finds it difficult to believe what God is doing.

Yet despite numerous reservations, Ananias is obedient to the call of God. Knowing who Saul is, Ananias demonstrates remarkable courage in meeting with him. He steps out into the unknown and displays great faith in the One who knows the unknown.

When God calls you amidst difficult circumstances and you demonstrate the faith to respond, the courage to obey, and the willingness to follow His call, then you are ready for what He has in store for you. You are ready to go out into the whitewater. You are ready to lean into a powerful wave and let Him take you where He wants you to go.

To watch Dr. Gibbons' messages online, go to FirstPresGreenville.org (click the Media tab). His messages are also broadcast on WHNS-TV, Fox Carolina, each Sunday morning at 10:30.