

SPREADING THE GOOD NEWS

Last week we heard how a man named Saul, who was leading the violence and arrests against the followers of Jesus, was changed on the road to Damascus. A bright light shined down on him and Jesus spoke to him, saying, “Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?!” The light blinded him, and he stayed blind until God sent Ananias to pray for him. Changed by his direct experience of Jesus and by Ananias’s prayers for him, Saul totally switched sides; instead of persecuting Jesus’s followers, he became one himself.

People thought it was kind of crazy that Saul was suddenly all about telling people how great Jesus was. The religious leaders, who still hoped to end the Jesus movement, tried to convince him to come back to their side; but his arguments were so strong that a few of them even came to believe in Jesus’s power themselves! But most of them just got angry. So angry, in fact, that they made a plan to have Saul killed. He and his new friends heard about the threat and decided he would have to leave the city—only, the religious leaders were watching the gates to stop him from getting out. So late at night some of the local believers snuck up on to the city wall, leading Saul and carrying a rope and a big basket. Saul got into the basket and they carefully lowered him down the wall, far away from the gates and the watchers. Then he circled around to the road to Jerusalem.

Back in Jerusalem, Saul tried to get in touch with the apostles there—the people who had been following Jesus from the beginning. Of course, they wanted nothing to do with him: the last they knew of him he’d been trying to arrest them, or even kill them! But a man named Barnabas, who had heard Saul talking powerfully about Jesus, managed to convince them that he had really changed his ways—and so Saul joined the ever-growing group of believers preaching about Jesus in Jerusalem.

He didn’t stay in Jerusalem for long, though. Once again, he managed to make people angry enough at him that he had to leave. He considered Jerusalem his home, but he had been born in Tarsus, and that’s where he went next. Tarsus was far to the north, as close to Greece as it was to Judea. I wonder if he was discouraged about having to run away from another city? On the other hand, maybe it turned out for the best. In Jerusalem, Peter and James were doing strong work building the community of believers. But not many people were talking about Jesus up in Tarsus until Paul arrived. He spent the next few years sharing the Good News with folks there.

It was interesting how the community of believers grew. At first only people in and around Jerusalem knew about Jesus. Then, after Stephen was killed and so many of them had to leave the city, they brought the message to people in other cities and towns. Before long, there were groups of believers meeting all over, mailing encouraging letters to each other and even sending out small groups to bring the Good News to still more places. Not far from Tarsus, a city called Antioch had a particularly strong community of believers. Antioch, so distant from Jerusalem, was the first place where large numbers of people who weren’t Jewish became believers.

To help guide the growing community there, the apostles in Jerusalem sent Barnabas—the man who had convinced the apostles to welcome Saul—to Antioch. Barnabas, in turn, asked Saul to come from Tarsus to help him. Together they began working out how they could even more clearly bring Jesus’s message to people there who had never read the Bible or heard of Abraham or Moses. And they made plans for taking that message even farther, towards Greece... or even Rome.

flip over for more!

Wondering Questions

I wonder what it was like getting lowered down the city wall in a basket?

I wonder why Saul was so good at bringing people to Jesus, and also at making people mad at him?

I wonder what Saul thought about Peter and John and the other apostles who had known Jesus personally?