

Flannel Graph, Ropes, & 2 a.m. Friends (Don't Let Go of the Rope)

Introduction

Good evening! Please open your Bibles to [Acts 9](#). My name is Jim Fleming. I am a member at Stuart Heights Baptist Church here in Chattanooga and Joel O'Brien asked me a few weeks ago to speak to you this evening. I am excited, grateful, and honored to be able to do so.

Who is the most famous person you've ever met? (for me, it's Johnny Cash)

How well do you relate to famous people? (President, musician, athlete, etc.)

Who are the most famous people in the Bible? (Jesus, Adam & Eve, Abraham, Moses, Paul, Mary, David—these men and women have flannel graph status)

How do you relate to the famous people in the Bible?

We might like to think we do, but most of us relate much better to the unnamed people in the Bible—the others (I call them 'others' due to [Hebrews 11:35](#)). They litter the pages of the Bible—millions of them in the Bible—men and women, boys and girls that are behind the scenes that go unnamed.

Which category do we fall in to? Famous or others?

We are the others. I find I relate to the others far more than to the heroes. I came to the conclusion many years ago I would never be famous. When I die, CNN will most likely not report on it. I will be an 'other.' There is no Jim Fleming flannel graph. Because the Bible isn't about us or the others—it's about Jesus.

I find the others fascinating. This evening, I want to share one of their stories—a story you can relate to. Let's look at a small group of others.

Read/Explain (What does it mean?): Acts 9:23-25 (Author = Luke)

Here is a quick summary of [Acts 9:1-22](#):

- Saul (later better known as Paul) is converted on the Damascus Road ([Acts 9:1-9](#))—this is a man who is famous for genocide (that's what we today would call a government systematically killing people for their religious beliefs)
- Ananias befriends Saul and introduces him to other believers ([Acts 9:10-19](#))
- Saul preaches ([Acts 9:20-22](#))—no longer against Jesus, but now for Jesus

Most commentators think there is a three-year gap between [Acts 9:22](#) and [Acts 9:23](#) where Saul went to Arabia (see [Galatians 1:17-18](#)), but in any case, Saul has most likely been a believer for just a few years by the time [Acts 9:23-25](#) happens.

23 Now after many [sufficient] **days were past, the Jews** [at that time, enemies of Christianity] **plotted** [counseled together, deliberated] **to kill him** [Saul—because Saul was preaching Jesus and was no longer hunting Christians and this made the Jews mad].

24 But their plot became known to Saul. And they [the Jews] **watched** [to stand beside and watch carefully (get someone to help and follow him/her)] **the gates** [of Damascus—the city Saul was in] **day and night, to kill him** [they were watching the gates because this is how you came in and out of a city at that time—today it would be the rough equivalent of a roadblock]. **25 Then the disciples** [here are the others—we don't know their names—just 'the disciples'] **took him** [Saul] **by night and let him down** [send/let down from a higher place to a lower place by slackening or loosening something (a rope)] **through the wall in a large basket**. [In the parallel passage in [2 Corinthians 11:32-33](#) we learn that they let him down through a window in the wall]

A quick word about first century city walls: Houses were built on the outsides of the walls (or in the walls themselves if it was a casemate wall—parallel walls with a space between) and windows were up high (the Damascus walls were likely 30-40 feet high). Going over a wall got you out of a city without going using gates.

Lowering Saul down over the city walls was ingenious, but it wasn't original. It happened in [Joshua 2:15](#) (to the two spies Joshua sent to spy out Jericho) and in [1 Samuel 19:11-12](#) (to David who was spared by his wife Michal).

The scene

Let's picture the scene: Saul is trapped in a city and needs to get out. He's at the house of a believer. This house likely exists in the space between two rock walls. He's literally between a rock and a hard place. Somebody gets a bright idea and remembers the story of the spies at Jericho or the story of David escaping. They decide to put Saul in a basket, tie a rope around it, and lower him through a window and down the wall. This is a great idea, right?

NO! This is CRAZY. We would never put someone in a basket at night and lower him or her down a wall with armed guards looking for us. This is crazy. Think about how desperate you have to be to do this. This. Is. Crazy.

Role play

What was going through Saul's mind when they came up with this plan? When Saul got in the basket? When they covered the basket? When they were lowering him down to the ground? When he got to the bottom?

What was going through the minds of the rope holders? While they were lowering it down? When it got to the bottom and Saul crawled out and ran? Would they see him again? Would they ever hear how things turned out?

What was going through Saul's mind? "Don't let go of the rope! Hold on with everything you've got! Hold on! Don't let go of the rope!"

Tonight, I want to focus on the rope holders. Somebody had to have a hold of that rope. In fact, it was a group of somebodies. We don't even know their names—but I bet Saul knew. These others loved Saul enough to hold the rope.

What did it take from the rope holders to pull this off?

1. **Choice:** They chose to show up. They chose to risk their lives. They chose to love Saul. They chose to serve when they were needed.
2. **Courage:** They risked their lives for Saul's sake. This would have been a heart-pounding escape. If they were caught, they would be killed. They were putting their lives at risk for this new believer. Saul wasn't the Christian legend yet. He had written no New Testament letters—he was just Saul.

3. **Strength:** These others were strong. I don't know the last time you picked up a grown man, but grown men are heavy. They had the strength to hold Saul's rope. Jesus wants our bodies, not just our souls. Let's ask Jesus to strengthen our hands to do the work He has called us to do.
4. **Cooperation:** This happened by night, so they had to have a set time to meet. It was at night, which means it was dark. Doing this in the dark accentuates the need for cooperation. They had to meet at a specific place. Someone had to get the supplies. Someone had to plan. They all had to coordinate lowering the rope—all of them working together. And when it was over, they kept their mouths shut. Sometimes we need cooperation in communication as well.

When I taught this at my church a few years ago, I brought some of my 2 a.m. friends with me—men who I could call at 2 a.m. to help. And do you know what they will do? They will answer the phone—and I will learn everything I need to know about them when they do.

5. **Stuff:** They brought simple, but effective things: rope and a basket. Probably things that could be found in one of their houses. Sometimes the simplest things are the best things. These others kept it simple.

Application (What is the point? Why should we hold ropes?)

1. We don't know who is in our baskets. We can't see the future. In **Acts 9**, the man in the basket was just a murderer named Saul who had recently trusted in Jesus. You might have a Saul in your basket. Don't let go of the rope.
2. We might be the only one holding someone's rope. If you are the only one holding on, and you let go, it makes it harder on everyone because letting go of the rope makes a mess. Don't let go of the rope.
3. Others are holding our ropes. Nobody does life alone. Think about who has held your rope: parents, siblings, children, grandchildren, teacher, church member, friends, spouse. Some ropes we are called to hold our entire lives. Don't let go of the rope.

Personalization (What do we do with that? Now what?)

1. Don't let go of the rope!

Rope holding is a way to physically show up and love. I love faithful hands. Faithful hands that loved those on the other end.

Faithful hands that were at risk of being caught themselves.

Faithful hands that often go unnamed.

Faithful hands that are not consumed with being famous.

Faithful hands that stayed true to the task until the job was done.

Don't let go of the rope.

I love faithful hands.

Faithful hands that prepare for those that come.

Faithful hands that serve those that arrive.

Faithful hands that clean up when all are gone.

Faithful hands that hold the ropes so men and women can serve Jesus in the roles to which they have been called.

We've all heard behind every good man is a good woman. Let me change that just a bit: Behind every faithful man and every faithful woman are others holding ropes.

Don't let go of the rope.

However, rope holding is not without pain.

Rope holding causes blisters.

Rope holding causes cramped hands.

Rope holding rarely is noticed and vastly underappreciated.

Rope holding is not glamorous, for the faint of heart, or the quick way to the top. But rope holding is critical for taking care of the body of Christ.

Everything Jesus calls us to show up and do is important—no matter how big or small we think the rope is. Don't let go of the rope.

Rope holding is worth it because of the people in the basket. **Who has Jesus put in our baskets? Who do we need to hold the ropes for?** Everybody needs help.

2. Be held by Jesus.

There will come a day when my wife and my 2 a.m. friends will let go of their ropes—either intentionally or unintentionally—but Jesus will never let go of the believer's rope. His promise to never leave us or forsake us is grand and glorious, but it is only for His children. If you are without Jesus, you are on your own and I invite you to fix that. I would love to talk to you after I finish.

Also, this is not a 'work hard and Jesus will save you' message. His choice to hold our ropes is His and His alone and is not due to us working for our salvation.

The truth is we can't hold our own ropes. It's not possible. You may have already figured this out, but when you're in the basket, you can't hold your own rope.

Jesus is the only one who will be eternally faithful. Jesus is the only one who will be eternally true. Trust Jesus to hold your rope. He can do it. His hands are strong. His arm is mighty to save. His shoulders are broad. His resolve will never waver. You can trust Him to do it.

Closing prayer

Pray with me. Father, thank you for your big, beautiful plan of redemption. Thank you for sending Jesus to be our Lord and Savior. Thank you for the protection of the Holy Spirit. Thank you for being a faithful Father. Thank you for speaking to our hearts. Convict us where we have been ungrateful to you for faithful rope holders in our lives. Convict us where we have not faithfully held the ropes of those you've put in our paths. Burden us with a strong desire to faithfully hold our brother's and sister's ropes. Strengthen the hands of those you've gathered here tonight to hold the ropes for the families the Tennessee Baptist Children's Homes supports. And help us to see what a beautiful savior Jesus is for eternal faithfulness in holding our ropes—and it is in Jesus' name we pray. Amen.

Hand off