

## 16. The Conversion of Saul and Peter's Continued Work in Judea: Acts 9

Luke had paid his first attention to Saul at the stoning of Stephen, where Saul was complicit in Stephen's death. Luke recorded in Acts 7:57-58:

57 At this they covered their ears and, yelling at the top of their voices, they all rushed at him, 58 dragged him out of the city and began to stone him. Meanwhile, the witnesses laid their clothes at the feet of a young man named Saul.

In Acts 8:3, Luke tells how Saul had begun to persecute the church: "3 But Saul began to destroy the church. Going from house to house, he dragged off men and women and put them in prison. Now once again in Chapter 9, Luke finds Saul setting out to persecute the church.

Acts 9 is one of three chapters that deal with the conversion of Saul, who was later known as Paul. Paul told his story of conversion in Jerusalem where he was arrested in Acts 22. In Acts 26, Paul again told his conversion story in his defense before Agrippa. 1 Cor 15:7-9 describes how he was called and how he had persecuted the church:

7 Then he appeared to James, then to all the apostles, 8 and last of all he appeared to me also, as to one abnormally born.

9 For I am the least of the apostles and do not even deserve to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God.

Luke begins with Paul still "breathing murderous threats against the disciples."

### ***Paul's Trip to Damascus***

Acts 9:1-4

*9 Meanwhile, Saul was still breathing out murderous threats against the Lord's disciples. He went to the high priest 2 and asked him for letters to the synagogues in Damascus, so that if he found any there who belonged to the Way, whether men or women, he might take them as prisoners to Jerusalem. 3 As he neared Damascus on his journey, suddenly a light from heaven flashed around him. 4 He fell to the ground and heard a voice say to him, "Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?"*

Saul had become more and more dangerous to the church and the disciples, breathing murderous threats and taking them prisoners. All of this was with the permission and authority of the high priest. Here the disciples are referred to as any "who belonged to the Way." In verse 31, they are called the church, making the Way and the church synonymous. In Acts 19:8-9, Luke again uses the words *the Way* to describe the kingdom of God, making the church, the kingdom of God, and the Way synonymous. When Paul was at Corinth, Acts 19:8-9 uses the words *the Way* to describe Paul's efforts:

8 Paul entered the synagogue and spoke boldly there for three months, arguing persuasively about the kingdom of God. 9 But some of them became obstinate; they refused to believe and publicly maligned the Way.

The disturbance that arose was against the Way in Acts 19:23: "23 About that time there arose a great disturbance about the Way.

Paul used the expression twice in Acts 24. First in Acts 24:14, Paul said, "However, I admit that I worship the God of our fathers as a follower of the Way, which they call a sect." By implication, Paul denies the church is a sect. Second, in Acts 24:22, Luke uses the term with Felix: "22 Then Felix, who was well acquainted with the Way, adjourned the proceedings." By

the 9<sup>th</sup> chapter of Acts, the terms *church* and *Christians* had become distinctive, including both Jews and Gentile.

Suddenly, a light flashed, Saul fell to the ground, and the voice said: "Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?"

### ***The Appearance of the Lord***

Acts 9:5-9

5 *"Who are you, Lord?" Saul asked.*

*"I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting," he replied. 6 "Now get up and go into the city, and you will be told what you must do."*

*7 The men traveling with Saul stood there speechless; they heard the sound but did not see anyone. 8 Saul got up from the ground, but when he opened his eyes he could see nothing. So they led him by the hand into Damascus. 9 For three days he was blind, and did not eat or drink anything.*

In his narrative, Luke records many questions posed by those who are confronting the Lord's demands and their own frail and human needs. Those converted on the Day of Pentecost cried out, "Brothers, what shall we do?" In Acts 16:30, the Philippian jailor repeated their plaintive cry: "Sirs, what must I do to be saved?" The questions progress toward the need to obey. In Acts 8:37, the eunuch asked: "Look, here is water. Why shouldn't I be baptized?" Here, Paul is in the dark, spiritually and physically, and asks the fundamental question at the dawn of his belief: "Who are you, Lord?" Ananias will put the last question in the conversion process to Paul in Acts 22:16: "And now what are you waiting for? Get up, be baptized and wash your sins away, calling on his name."

The miracle assaulted Saul's senses: He was speechless and blind. The miracle was evident and powerful. There was no doubt that the Lord was demonstrating his power and confirming his word.

### ***Saul, a Chosen Instrument***

Acts 9:10-16

10 *In Damascus there was a disciple named Ananias. The Lord called to him in a vision, "Ananias!"*

*"Yes, Lord," he answered.*

11 *The Lord told him, "Go to the house of Judas on Straight Street and ask for a man from Tarsus named Saul, for he is praying. 12 In a vision he has seen a man named Ananias come and place his hands on him to restore his sight."*

13 *"Lord," Ananias answered, "I have heard many reports about this man and all the harm he has done to your saints in Jerusalem. 14 And he has come here with authority from the chief priests to arrest all who call on your name."*

15 *But the Lord said to Ananias, "Go! This man is my chosen instrument to carry my name before the Gentiles and their kings and before the people of Israel. 16 I will show him how much he must suffer for my name."*

In Damascus, the Lord also appeared to Ananias and told him about Saul and where he could be found. Ananias was frightened, for he knew that Saul had persecuted the church in Jerusalem and had come to Damascus to seize "all who call on your name."

The Lord also told Ananias that Saul was a chosen instrument to take his name before the Gentiles and the Jews. This forecast marks the beginning of the inclusion of the Gentiles in the spread of the gospel. However, to get the job done, the Lord will direct Peter in Acts 10 to go to Cornelius. The Lord also forecast that Saul would suffer mightily for the name of the Lord. Paul, as Saul was to be called, summarized the extent of his sufferings in the name of the Lord in 2 Cor 11:24-27:

24 Five times I received from the Jews the forty lashes minus one. 25 Three times I was beaten with rods, once I was stoned, three times I was shipwrecked, I spent a night and a day in the open sea, 26 I have been constantly on the move. I have been in danger from rivers, in danger from bandits, in danger from my own countrymen, in danger from Gentiles; in danger in the city, in danger in the country, in danger at sea; and in danger from false brothers. 27 I have labored and toiled and have often gone without sleep; I have known hunger and thirst and have often gone without food; I have been cold and naked.

### ***Paul, an Obedient Believer Who Begins to Preach the Gospel***

Acts 9:17-22

17 Then Ananias went to the house and entered it. Placing his hands on Saul, he said, "Brother Saul, the Lord-Jesus, who appeared to you on the road as you were coming here – has sent me so that you may see again and be filled with the Holy Spirit." 18 Immediately, something like scales fell from Saul's eyes, and he could see again. He got up and was baptized, 19 and after taking some food, he regained his strength.

Saul spent several days with the disciples in Damascus. 20 At once he began to preach in the synagogues that Jesus is the Son of God. 21 All those who heard him were astonished and asked, "Isn't he the man who raised havoc in Jerusalem among those who call on this name? And hasn't he come here to take them as prisoners to the chief priests?" 22 Yet Saul grew more and more powerful and baffled the Jews living in Damascus by proving that Jesus is the Christ.

The miracle on the road to Damascus is important for what it did not do. It did not give Paul the gift of the Holy Spirit, and it did not save him. When Ananias said that the Lord sent Paul to him to be filled with the Holy Spirit, and when Paul got up and was baptized, they fulfilled exactly the command of Peter on the Day of Pentecost in Acts 2:38:

Repent and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins. And you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.

The exact words of Ananias in his command to Saul show the culmination of belief that baptism washes away sins: "16 And now what are you waiting for? Get up, be baptized and wash your sins away, calling on his name (Acts 22:16).".

Paul began immediately to preach the gospel. The disciples were astonished: after all, Saul had "raised havoc" among the Christians and he had come to Damascus to take Christians prisoner. Saul grew more powerful in proving to the Jews that Jesus is the Christ. Paul's power was in the word he preached and not the miracle that happened to him or those miracles that he would do himself. He would write later in Rom 1:16-16:

I am not ashamed of the gospel, because it is the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes: first for the Jew, then for the Gentile.

### ***Paul's Trip to Jerusalem***

Acts 9:23-30

23 After many days had gone by, the Jews conspired to kill him, 24 but Saul learned of their plan. Day and night they kept close watch on the city gates in order to kill him. 25 But his followers took him by night and lowered him in a basket through an opening in the wall.

26 When he came to Jerusalem, he tried to join the disciples, but they were all afraid of him, not believing that he really was a disciple. 27 But Barnabas took him and brought him to 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. 28 So Saul stayed with them and moved about freely in Jerusalem, speaking boldly in the name of the Lord. 29 He talked and debated with the Grecian Jews, but they tried to kill him. 30 When the brothers learned of this, they took him down to Caesarea and sent him off to Tarsus.

Paul's work in Damascus was short lived as the Jews conspired to kill him. Paul adds more detail to this plot on his life and his subsequent escape in 2 Cor 11:32-33:

32 In Damascus the governor under King Aretas had the city of the Damascenes guarded in order to arrest me. 33 But I was lowered in a basket from a window in the wall and slipped through his hands.

In Jerusalem, Barnabas was the main person helping him. This is the Barnabas that Luke first described in Acts 4:36-37: "

36 Joseph, a Levite from Cyprus, whom the apostles called Barnabas (which means Son of Encouragement), 37 sold a field he owned and brought the money and put it at the apostles' feet.

Barnabas will be a constant companion for Paul during his missionary journeys. Luke mentions Barnabas 34 times in Acts. Most notably is the occasion where Barnabas went to Taurus and brought Paul back to preach in Antioch in Acts 11:25-26:

25 Then Barnabas went to Tarsus to look for Saul, 26 and when he found him, he brought him to Antioch. So for a whole year Barnabas and Saul met with the church and taught great numbers of people. The disciples were called Christians first at Antioch.

Luke closes this episode in Paul's life by reporting his flight from the Grecian Jews in Jerusalem to Tarsus.

### ***Peter and the Churches of Judea, Galilee, and Samaria***

Acts 9:31

31 Then the church throughout Judea, Galilee and Samaria enjoyed a time of peace. It was strengthened; and encouraged by the Holy Spirit, it grew in numbers, living in the fear of the Lord.

Luke's narrative turns back to events in the life of Peter. With Paul now a Christian, persecution subsides and the church throughout Judea, Galilee, and Samaria experiences a time of peace. The church grew in strength and numbers as it was encouraged by the Holy Spirit. Through the Holy Spirit, God equipped the church to grow and by strong; and in the early church that came through the spiritual gifts bestowed by the laying on of an apostle's hands [see notes on chapter 8]. Paul describes this manifestation of the Spirit in the church in 1 Cor 12:27-28:

27 Now you are the body of Christ, and each one of you is a part of it. 28 And in the church God has appointed first of all apostles, second prophets, third teachers, then workers of miracles, also those having gifts of healing, those able to help others, those with gifts of administration, and those speaking in different kinds of tongues.

However, Paul also described how these gifts would cease with the complete revelation of the will of God in writing. In 1 Cor 13:8-10, he taught:

But where there are prophecies, they will cease; where there are tongues, they will be stilled; where there is knowledge, it will pass away. 9 For we know in part and we prophesy in part, 10 but when perfection comes, the imperfect disappears.

According to James and Paul, the scriptures are that perfect law. James spoke of the word of God as the perfect law in James 1:25:

25 But the man who looks intently into the perfect law that gives freedom, and continues to do this, not forgetting what he has heard, but doing it – he will be blessed in what he does.

Paul teaches that the scriptures are complete and thoroughly equip the man of God. 2 Tim 3:16-17 reads:

16 All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, 17 so that the man of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work.

If Christians today live in respect (fear) of God, and follow his word in the New Testament, they too will grow in spirit and numbers. God so constructed the church that it would be complete with the apostles and prophets before the written word was complete. The Church is complete in our time with evangelists, pastors, and teachers. Eph 4:11-13 speaks of the church when the apostles and those with spiritual gifts were active; and it also speaks of the church after the apostles and those on whom they laid their hands had passed away. Whether when the apostles were present or after their demise, the church, the body of Christ was complete:

11 It was he who gave some to be apostles, some to be prophets, some to be evangelists, and some to be pastors and teachers, 12 to prepare God's people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up 13 until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ.

Acts 9:32-35

*32 As Peter traveled about the country, he went to visit the saints in Lydda. 33 There he found a man named Aeneas, a paralytic who had been bedridden for eight years. 34 "Aeneas," Peter said to him, "Jesus Christ heals you. Get up and take care of your mat." Immediately Aeneas got up. 35 All those who lived in Lydda and Sharon saw him and turned to the Lord.*

Aeneas, a paralytic man who was healed is another example of the signs and miracles that followed the apostles, confirming the word that they taught. It still remained to those who heard to turn to the Lord, as in every other case of conversion.

Acts 9:36-42

*36 In Joppa there was a disciple named Tabitha (which, when translated, is Dorcas), who was always doing good and helping the poor. 37 About that time she became sick and died, and her body was washed and placed in an upstairs room. 38 Lydda was near Joppa; so when the disciples heard that Peter was in Lydda, they sent two men to him and urged him, "Please come at once!"*

*39 Peter went with them, and when he arrived he was taken upstairs to the room. All the widows stood around him, crying and showing him the robes and other clothing that Dorcas had made while she was still with them.*

*40 Peter sent them all out of the room; then he got down on his knees and prayed. Turning toward the dead woman, he said, "Tabitha, get up." She opened her eyes, and seeing Peter she sat up. 41 He took her by the hand and helped her to her feet. Then he called the believers and the widows and presented her to them alive. 42 This became known all over Joppa, and many people believed in the Lord. 43 Peter stayed in Joppa for some time with a tanner named Simon.*

Acts 9 closes with Peter, through the power of the Holy Spirit, healing Dorcas. In her own right, Dorcas was a wonderful example of a Christian doing good works. Indeed, all Christians are to so live, following her example. According to Paul in Gal 6:8-10, all Christians should nurture the proverbial Dorcas within us:

8 The one who sows to please his sinful nature, from that nature will reap destruction; the one who sows to please the Spirit, from the Spirit will reap eternal life. 9 Let us not become weary in doing good, for at the proper time we will reap a harvest if we do not give up. 10 Therefore, as we have opportunity, let us do good to all people, especially to those who belong to the family of believers.

Regardless of how good Dorcas was, the power of the Holy Spirit did not raise her from the dead to accommodate and reward her for her good works. Nor did the Spirit raise her to respond to the sadness and sorrow of her fellow Christians. The power of the Spirit came to bear on the case of Dorcas in order that the word might be confirmed as the word of God, so that when "This became known all over Joppa, . . . many people believed in the Lord."

Miracles in the New Testament were never to accommodate.

Peter, who stayed in Joppa, will be the one to take the gospel to Gentiles in Acts 10.