

CONCERNING THE WAY

March 23, 2010

LESSON 95: THE ACTS OF THE APOSTLES



Chapter 9

In this chapter we have a famous example of God grabbing hold of a man who was going the wrong way and turning him around. This man thought he was doing the will of God, but He was actually fighting against Him. Well, the apostle Paul has been described by far better writers than me, so I won't even attempt it. Here's a good quote by Steve Ger:

"Like Peter, Saul was a very human colossus, a man characterized by a singular mixture of admirable qualities, remarkable abilities and idiosyncratic foibles whom God chose and the Holy Spirit sanctified for His purposes."

Saul, his Hebrew name (which means "to be asked for"), was born in Tarsus about 5-6 AD to a wealthy family that had emigrated there from Israel and had attained Roman citizenship. Saul inherited Roman citizenship from his family. Like his famous namesake King Saul, he was from the tribe of Benjamin. He was also given a Roman Latin name, Paulus, which means "little man". Considering his upbringing, his education, and his writings, Paul was comfortable using Greek, Hebrew, Aramaic, and possibly even the Latin languages.

Saul was studying to be a Pharisee, the strictest sect of Judaism. We know from the Mishnah what these studies were like. A boy who was trained to be a Pharisee started at the age of five their formal study of the Hebrew Scriptures – not only in the content but in the rules of interpretation. When the boy reached the age of ten, he also began studying rabbinic legal traditions. This is probably when Saul was sent to Jerusalem to study "at the feet of" Gamaliel (Acts 22:3). His family was apparently politically well connected in Jerusalem, and he may have stayed with his sister, who lived there.

When he turned 13, Saul would have become Bar Mitzvah, a "son of the commandment", a formal recognition that Saul was a full-fledged, responsible member of the Jewish community. Saul also would have learned a trade in Jerusalem, like all rabbinic students. The trade Saul learned was tentmaking. By the time of the events of this chapter, he would have been approaching thirty years old.

Although church tradition says that Saul was "unimpressive" physically, we don't have any description of what Paul looks like in the Bible. Other than the Latin meaning of his name, the only thing we know is that through the severe punishment he received in his ministry, his body became terribly scarred:

Galatians 6:17 From now on let no one cause me trouble, for I bear the marks of Jesus on my body.

Remember in chapter 7 while Stephen was being stoned, Saul was standing there watching, holding the men's coats. He heard Stephen's speech to the Sanhedrin and agreed with the decision to stone him. Then in chapter 8 we're told that Saul went from house church to house church, looking for Christians and dragging them off to prison, as he says later on in Acts:

Acts 22:3-4 "I am a Jew, born in Tarsus in Cilicia, but brought up in this city, educated with strictness under Gamaliel according to the law of our ancestors, and was zealous for God just as all of you are today. (4) I persecuted this Way even to the point of death, tying up both men and women and putting them in prison,

This caused the believers in Jerusalem to scatter to surrounding towns all over Israel and even beyond. Now he hears that there are a group of Christians that have escaped all the way to Damascus in Syria. You would think he would just let them go, but Saul is making it his life's mission to destroy this heretical movement, no matter where they go.

Acts 9:1-2 Meanwhile Saul, still breathing out threats to murder the Lord's disciples, went to the high priest (2) and requested letters from him to the synagogues in Damascus, so that if he found any who belonged to the Way, either men or women, he could bring them as prisoners to Jerusalem.

Saul was not just trying to persecute disciples by putting them in prison, but actually wanting to kill them. Even though Damascus was in Syria, outside Israel, the Romans had given the High Priest of Israel jurisdiction over all Jewish communities in the Empire. So Saul went to the High Priest to get extradition papers. The believers that he caught would be brought back to Jerusalem and indicted for heresy against Judaism. It is assumed that, because they were causing such an uproar and were therefore considered a threat to Roman rule, Pilate, the Roman governor, would allow them to be executed, either by stoning, the Jews method, or by crucifixion. So Paul got permission to find these believers and bring them back to be killed.

Here in verse 2 we see again what Christians were called, and where the name of this study came from – The Way. The title actually has its roots in Judaism, where the idea is that there are two ways, the true and the false, and "The Way" is the true one, and is probably short for "The Way of the Messiah".

Remember that most of the believers had scattered from Jerusalem after Stephen's death, and apparently Saul found that some had gone to Damascus. Damascus is in Syria, 150 miles north of Jerusalem, and was a six day journey on horseback, longer on foot. Damascus is one of the oldest continuously populated cities in the world. It is first mentioned in the Bible at the time of Abraham (Genesis 14:15) and is still thriving today as the capital of modern Syria. However, Isaiah 17 prophesies that at some point in the future Damascus will be completely destroyed.

Acts 9:3 As he was going along, approaching Damascus, suddenly a light from heaven flashed around him.

"flashed around him" in the Greek means it completely encircled him. According to Acts 26:13 it was brighter than the sun. This had to be a manifestation of God's Shekinah glory. It must have been more intense around Saul, because he was blinded by it and his travelling companions were not.

Acts 9:4 He fell to the ground and heard a voice saying to him, "Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?"

He heard Jesus actually speaking to him, and the fact that he called his name twice tells us that Jesus was speaking with emotion, and it was a rebuke. To persecute the church is the same as persecuting Jesus, which shows us the union of Christ with His Church. We are His Body, and when His Body is hurt, He hurts.

Although it doesn't say here that Paul actually saw Jesus, we know Saul did see Him here, because he tells us in Acts 9:17, 27; 22:14; 26:16; 1 Corinthians 9:1; and 15:8. Read those verses. It is important that Saul saw Jesus, because it confirmed his apostleship.

Acts 9:5-6 So he said, "Who are you, Lord?" He replied, "I am Jesus whom you are persecuting! (6) But stand up and enter the city and you will be told what you must do."

This rebuke from the Lord had to be shocking and confusing to Saul, who had spent all of his life a perfect Jew, a great example of godly zeal and Pharisaic piety. That's why he asked "Who are you?" He didn't know of anyone he had been persecuting, and probably thought this was an angel of some kind. When Jesus identified Himself, Saul's sin must have overwhelmed him.

This wasn't something Saul imagined. It wasn't a psychological disturbance of some kind or an epileptic fit. This was a real encounter with the living Christ. We know that because it turned Saul's life completely around.

This is one of the most dramatic conversions in history. Saul went from being the staunchest denier of Jesus to one of the strongest believers in Jesus. When he fell to the ground he was heading one direction, and when he stood up he was 180 degrees in the other direction – that is repentance. I imagine it wasn't just the bright light and the voice of Jesus, but also an instant awareness that he had been fighting against God.

Notice that it was God who chose Saul. Jesus didn't ask him to accept Him as Messiah, and Saul didn't really have a say in the matter. God decided he was going to use this zealous young man, and that was it. We can wonder all we want to about why He chose Saul, and why He doesn't reveal Himself to more people like this, but this is how He did it with Saul. God wanted Saul to serve Him, and maybe He knew this was the only way to get that hard headed son of a gun to turn around.

In his own writings, Paul refers to it (his conversion) only a few times. He related it to the supernatural purposes of God (Galatians 1:15); he spoke of its suddenness (1 Corinthians 15:8; Philemon 3:12); he called it an act of new creation by God (2 Corinthians 4:6); he acknowledged the merciful character of it (1 Timothy 1:13); and he claimed that during it he saw the Lord (1 Corinthians 9:1). He was, therefore, just as qualified as the other apostles, for his conversion experience was just as objective a reality as their meetings with the risen Christ before the Ascension. Charles Ryrie

Acts 9:7-9 (Now the men who were traveling with him stood there speechless, because they heard the voice but saw no one.) (8) So Saul got up from the ground, but although his eyes were open, he could see nothing. Leading him by the hand, his companions brought him into Damascus. (9) For three days he could not see, and he neither ate nor drank anything.

The men travelling with him knew something happened, but they didn't know what it was, and they were too scared to even say anything. In chapter 22 Paul says they heard the voice but didn't understand the words. This blindness was like the temporary blinding of Zechariah in Luke 1. It gave Saul some time to reflect on what had happened without being distracted. The fasting for three days also helped with that.

Some think that Paul never fully regained his eyesight that he had before this. In 2 Corinthians 12:6-9 he speaks of a thorn in his flesh that had been given him so he would not become arrogant. He even asked three times to remove it from him, but God said no. God brought him low so he would not have

pride. So some think that this “thorn” was continued eye problems from when he was first blinded.

One moment Paul was storming up the road, determined to capture and imprison Christians. Soon after he was led like a child by the hand into Damascus.

Acts 9:10-12 Now there was a disciple in Damascus named Ananias. The Lord said to him in a vision, "Ananias," and he replied, "Here I am, Lord." (11) Then the Lord told him, "Get up and go to the street called 'Straight,' and at Judas' house look for a man from Tarsus named Saul. For he is praying, (12) and he has seen in a vision a man named Ananias come in and place his hands on him so that he may see again."

Ananias was apparently already a resident of Damascus, so we can see how far the gospel had already reached. It's possible that Ananias had been in Jerusalem at Pentecost and been converted, indwelt by the Holy Spirit, and baptized by an apostle along with thousands of other visitors that day. Acts 22:12 tells us that Ananias was a respected member of the Jewish community.

Straight Street was unique because it truly was straight, one of only two streets that ran east-west through the length of the city. Most ancient streets are very crooked. This street still exists in Damascus today, and is named “Darb al-Mustaqim”. We don't know anything about this man Judas, although he must not have been a believer, because Saul's associates surely would not have brought him to the house of a Christian. It is probably where Saul was originally headed when he got to Damascus.

Since Jesus had told Saul to go into the city and he would be told what to do, some people think it was Ananias who taught him the new doctrine of justification by faith. But Paul made it clear in Galatians 1:12 that Jesus Himself taught him.

Acts 9:13-14 But Ananias replied, "Lord, I have heard from many people about this man, how much harm he has done to your saints in Jerusalem, (14) and here he has authority from the chief priests to imprison all who call on your name!"

Ananias was understandably concerned. He knew Saul was there in Damascus to find people like him and bring them back to Jerusalem! God was sending him to the most dangerous person he could possibly find.

Believers are called “saints” here for the first time. It means “set-apart”, or “holy ones”, and refers to all believers.

Acts 9:15-16 But the Lord said to him, "Go, because this man is my chosen instrument to carry my name before Gentiles and kings and the people of Israel. (16) For I will show him how much he must suffer for the sake of my name."

Paul was chosen by God to be sent to preach the gospel to the Gentiles (Acts 22:21), and would even become “the apostle of the Gentiles” (Romans 11:13). Paul himself tells us some of what he suffered in 2 Corinthians 11:22-33.

2 Corinthians 11:22-33 Are they Hebrews? So am I. Are they Israelites? So am I. Are they the seed of Abraham? So am I. Are they servants of Christ? I'm talking like a madman—I'm a better one: with far more labors, many more imprisonments, far worse beatings, near death many times. Five times I received from the Jews 40 lashes minus

one. Three times I was beaten with rods. Once I was stoned. Three times I was shipwrecked. I have spent a night and a day in the depths of the sea. On frequent journeys, I faced dangers from rivers, dangers from robbers, dangers from my own people, dangers from the Gentiles, dangers in the city, dangers in the open country, dangers on the sea, and dangers among false brothers; labor and hardship, many sleepless nights, hunger and thirst, often without food, cold, and lacking clothing.

Not to mention other things, there is the daily pressure on me: my care for all the churches. Who is weak, and I am not weak? Who is made to stumble, and I do not burn with indignation? If boasting is necessary, I will boast about my weaknesses. The eternally blessed One, the God and Father of the Lord Jesus, knows I am not lying. In Damascus, the governor under King Aretas guarded the city of the Damascenes in order to arrest me, so I was let down in a basket through a window in the wall and escaped his hands.

Now back to Acts:

Acts 9:17-19 So Ananias departed and entered the house, placed his hands on Saul and said, "Brother Saul, the Lord Jesus, who appeared to you on the road as you came here, has sent me so that you may see again and be filled with the Holy Spirit." (18) Immediately something like scales fell from his eyes, and he could see again. He got up and was baptized, (19) and after taking some food, his strength returned.

Ananias is showing an amazing amount of faith even talking to this man, and calling him "brother"! God here uses someone who is not an apostle to heal Saul and commission him for his ministry by praying for him to be filled with the Holy Spirit. This undermines the idea of so-called "apostolic succession."

Most likely Saul had received the baptism of the Holy Spirit on the road to Damascus, and so this filling was to empower him for ministry. The filling is repeatable, and we see it happen to Paul again in Acts 13:9. Paul will from now on be controlled and led by the Spirit to this place and that place and witness about Christ to "Gentiles and kings and the people of Israel".

After this brief story of Ananias' involvement with Paul's conversion, we don't hear anything more about this good man in the Bible. Ananias healed Saul's eyesight and baptized him, and then Saul ended his three day fast.

Acts 9:20 For several days he was with the disciples in Damascus, (20) and immediately he began to proclaim Jesus in the synagogues, saying, "This man is the Son of God."

Apparently he left the house of Judas and joined the Christian community for a few days there. He didn't wait around, but immediately started speaking about Jesus. Speaking in the synagogues would become his practice in every town he went through on his missionary journeys.

The message that Paul was preaching was that Jesus was the "Son of God." That's from Psalm 2 and is one of those terms that is only able to be understood if you look at it in a Jewish context. In our Western viewpoint we tend to think of it only as describing Jesus' physical birth or supernatural lineage. But it's more than that. It's about Jesus' unique relationship with God. It represents equality with the very nature of God the Father, and that's how Jews would have understood the term. That's

why the religious leaders got so upset whenever Jesus referred to Himself as “Son of Man”, or the apostles referred to Him as Son of God.

Jesus is equal in character and nature with the Father. It’s the same idea that Paul is conveying in Galatians 3:6-7 where he call Christians “sons of Abraham”:

Galatians 3:6-7 Just as Abraham believed God, and it was credited to him for righteousness, so understand that those who have faith are Abraham’s sons.

This is not talking about physical lineage. He’s not saying there that we instantly become physically descended from Abraham, but that because we have the same faith as Abraham, we are declared righteous just as he was. We have the same characteristics of Abraham.

Acts 9:21-22 All who heard him were amazed and were saying, "Is this not the man who in Jerusalem was ravaging those who call on this name, and who had come here to bring them as prisoners to the chief priests?" (22) But Saul became more and more capable, and was causing consternation among the Jews who lived in Damascus by proving that Jesus is the Christ.

This is what God had been training Saul for all his life. Saul already had an amazing ability, through the filling of the Spirit, to irrefutably demonstrate that Jesus was the Messiah. He had argued against the preaching of the gospel before from his knowledge of the Hebrew scriptures, but now he knew the one who the scriptures were truly about, and he was so good at teaching theology that it says he was “proving” that Jesus was Messiah. The word in the Greek literally means “to bind together”.

Like Stephen before him, Saul’s preaching was rocking the Jewish world. He was taking Stephen’s last message, which he was a witness to, and picking it up from there. He was taking a fact from one place in the OT, another fact from another place in the OT, combining it with facts about Jesus’ life that was public record and fulfilled those scriptures, and developing a systematic theology to pull it all together to prove that Jesus was the anointed One. That’s what systematic theology is, folks.

Why did God choose Paul? He already had twelve good men, and many other disciples. Wouldn’t they have been able to do the work that God wanted?

Paul was trained as a rabbi, a Pharisee, but yet he was also well versed in the philosophy of Gentiles, specifically Greek thought. He was raised from a wealthy family in Tarsus. He studied under some great rabbis, including Gamaliel. He was a great intellect, and understood how the great minds of the Greek and Roman world thought. And he had a great understanding of the scriptures. So God chose a man who could speak to kings, Gentiles, aristocrats, and Jews alike on the same level. He could relate to all. This is something the other apostles could not do. Paul ended up writing the majority of the books of the New Testament, and he is where we get all the doctrines of the Church.

Acts 9:23-25 Now after some days had passed, the Jews plotted together to kill him, (24) but Saul learned of their plot against him. They were also watching the city gates day and night so that they could kill him. (25) But his disciples took him at night and let him down through an opening in the wall by lowering him in a basket.

The “some days” was quite a while. During this time Saul went to Arabia (Galatians 1:17), so about three years elapsed between his conversion and his going to Jerusalem (9:26). He probably went to

Arabia to study and prepare for his ministry. By the time he had come back to Damascus, he had converted enough men that he now had his own “disciples”.

It's interesting that the persecutor now becomes the persecuted! Paul refers to this experience in 2 Corinthians 11:32-33. This continues a pattern of the Jews “plotting together” to kill God's messenger. They did it with Jesus and they did it with Stephen. But God won't be through with Paul for some time yet.

Saul was making a habit of coming and going in interesting ways. He first came to Damascus blind and led by others, and now he was leaving in a basket lowered by others. Let's read what Paul himself said in Galatians about this time:

Galatians 1:11-24 Now I want you to know, brothers, that the gospel preached by me is not based on a human point of view. For I did not receive it from a human source and I was not taught it, but it came by a revelation from Jesus Christ. For you have heard about my former way of life in Judaism: I persecuted God's church to an extreme degree and tried to destroy it; and I advanced in Judaism beyond many contemporaries among my people, because I was extremely zealous for the traditions of my ancestors.

But when God, who from my mother's womb set me apart and called me by His grace, was pleased to reveal His Son in me, so that I could preach Him among the Gentiles, I did not immediately consult with anyone. I did not go up to Jerusalem to those who had become apostles before me; instead I went to Arabia and came back to Damascus. Then after three years I did go up to Jerusalem to get to know Cephas, and I stayed with him 15 days. But I didn't see any of the other apostles except James, the Lord's brother.

Now in what I write to you, I'm not lying. God is my witness. Afterwards, I went to the regions of Syria and Cilicia. I remained personally unknown to the Judean churches in Christ; they simply kept hearing: “He who formerly persecuted us now preaches the faith he once tried to destroy.” And they glorified God because of me.

Back to the Acts narrative:

Acts 9:26-27 When he arrived in Jerusalem, he attempted to associate with the disciples, and they were all afraid of him, because they did not believe that he was a disciple. (27) But Barnabas took Saul, brought him to the apostles, and related to them how he had seen the Lord on the road, that the Lord had spoken to him, and how in Damascus he had spoken out boldly in the name of Jesus.

In Galatians 1:18 Paul tells us that he went to Jerusalem so he could hear from Peter, learning from those who had known Jesus in His earthly life. It had been three years, but the apostles still apparently didn't trust that his conversion was for real, and probably thought he was a spy for the Sanhedrin. The name Barnabas means “son of encouragement”, and he certainly was that for Paul. This two week period that Saul stayed with the apostles was probably a wonderful time where his knowledge of Jesus was “fleshed out”.

Acts 9:28-30 So he was staying with them, associating openly with them in Jerusalem, speaking out boldly in the name of the Lord. (29) He was speaking and debating with the Greek-speaking Jews, but they were trying to kill him. (30) When the brothers found out about this, they brought him down to Caesarea and sent him away to Tarsus.

Paul is doing something the other apostles may not have been able to do. He could go toe to toe with people like this (The Greek Jews), because he was one of them. He understood their culture, and they would have accepted him as one of them.

Tarsus, the birthplace of Saul, was about three hundred miles north of Jerusalem and about ten miles inland from the Mediterranean Sea. Tarsus was a well-known university city, probably third in educational opportunities in the entire Roman Empire, behind only Athens and Alexandria. There had been a strong Jewish presence in the city since about 171 BC.

The disciples decided that it was too dangerous in Jerusalem for Paul, so they put him on a ship and sent him home to Tarsus. Tarsus would be Paul's home base for the next five to seven years, where he would study the scriptures and grow in the knowledge of the plan of God for the Church, and continue to witness to Jews and Gentiles alike.



Acts 9:31 Then the church throughout Judea, Galilee, and Samaria experienced peace and thus was strengthened. Living in the fear of the Lord and in the encouragement of the Holy Spirit, the church increased in numbers.

This was all of Israel that's being described. So the gospel has gone to the entire nation, and the church keeps on increasing in numbers. The word "church" is singular, so this does not refer to a particular group of believers, but the entire body of Christ.

This period of “rest” from persecution, after Paul left Jerusalem and returned to his home town of Tarsus, capital of the Roman province of Cilicia, lasted about ten years. This peace wasn't just because of Saul's conversion. Tiberius, the emperor of Rome, died around this time. He was replaced by Caligula, who wanted to erect a statue of himself in the temple at Jerusalem. So the leaders in Jerusalem had other things on their mind than persecuting Christians. We see God's sovereign hand at work, giving the early church a short time of peace.

Acts 9:32 Now as Peter was traveling around from place to place, he also came down to the saints who lived in Lydda.

It's now about 40 AD and Luke's history narrative switches focus back to Peter, who was travelling around visiting the churches in Judea, Samaria, and Galilee, encouraging and building up the believers.

Lydda was a city northwest of Jerusalem on the way to Joppa. It was about 10.5 miles (17 km) southeast of Joppa. Today it is called Lod; Israel's international airport is just north of the city.

Acts 9:33-35 He found there a man named Aeneas who had been confined to a mattress for eight years because he was paralyzed. (34) Peter said to him, "Aeneas, Jesus the Christ heals you. Get up and make your own bed!" And immediately he got up. (35) All those who lived in Lydda and Sharon saw him, and they turned to the Lord.

Notice Peter tells the man who is doing the healing – it is not Peter, but Jesus. And similar to how Jesus healed lame men (Matthew 9:6, Mark 2:11, Luke 5:24, John 5:8), he tells him to get up and make his own bed! Sharon refers to the fertile plain along the coast of Palestine, about 10 miles wide and 50 miles long.

Acts 9:36-38 Now in Joppa there was a disciple named Tabitha (which in translation means Dorcas). She was continually doing good deeds and acts of charity. (37) At that time she became sick and died. When they had washed her body, they placed it in an upstairs room. (38) Because Lydda was near Joppa, when the disciples heard that Peter was there, they sent two men to him and urged him, "Come to us without delay."

Joppa was eleven miles northwest of Lydda on the Mediterranean Sea, right next to what is now Tel Aviv. The believers there thought so much of this dear sister that, when they heard Peter was nearby, they sent for him in hopes he could bring her back from the dead. That was a pretty big request! No one had been raised from the dead in the early church so far as we know from the book of Acts, but the faith of the believers was so great they hoped the Lord would use Peter to resurrect Tabitha.

This is unmistakable confirmation that in the first decades of the church age only the apostles and men that they had personally commissioned were able to perform signs and wonders. The communities of believers in most towns were just not equipped by God to do miracles. It wasn't that they didn't have enough faith to do it themselves, but they recognized that this kind of ministry was in the apostle's domain. They recognized that if Tabitha could be raised, they would need an apostle. The ability to perform signs and wonders was the validation of those with authority from God, they were signs of a true apostle (2 Corinthians 12:12).

Acts 9:39-41 So Peter got up and went with them, and when he arrived they brought him to the upper room. All the widows stood beside him, crying and showing him the

tunics and other clothing Dorcas used to make while she was with them. (40) But Peter sent them all outside, knelt down, and prayed. Turning to the body, he said, "Tabitha, get up." Then she opened her eyes, and when she saw Peter, she sat up. (41) He gave her his hand and helped her get up. Then he called the saints and widows and presented her alive.

The widows probably showed Peter all the clothing Tabitha had made to prove to him that if anyone was worthy to be raised from the dead, it would be Tabitha.

This event is told much like Luke 8:49-56 and Mark 5:35-43. Peter followed the example of Jesus. Notice that Peter got on his knees to pray here. And he was still a Jew through and through. He did not want to be ceremonially defiled (Leviticus 21:1; Numbers 5:2; 9:6-10; 19:11), so he did not touch her until after God restored her to life.

Acts 9:42-43 This became known throughout all Joppa, and many believed in the Lord. (43) So Peter stayed many days in Joppa with a man named Simon, a tanner.

This miracle, like all the others we've seen in Acts, led many to believe in the Lord Jesus.

It is possible that the word "tanner" ("berseus" in the Greek) is actually Simon's surname ("Simon Berseus" or "Simon Tanner"), not his profession. But if he was a tanner, it is interesting. To be a tanner was not socially acceptable in Israel. A tanner had to deal with dead animals, which was against Jewish ceremonial practices, not to mention the unpleasantness of the work itself and its odor. The fact that this house was by the sea (10:6) is evidence that he was a tanner, because the smell of a tanner's house would permeate the neighborhood. They often lived by a seafront or out in the country.

It's interesting that Peter was willing to stay with this man. Just staying in his house could have made him ceremonially unclean. So he was already starting to change his mind about some of the Jewish traditions that had been considered to be so important for so long. God is preparing Peter for something tremendous He is going to do through him in the next chapter. He is going to be faced with the question of whether to obey his cherished traditions or to obey God. Stay tuned!