

Study 13: Acts chapter 9

After introducing Saul in Chapters 7 and 8, Luke now spends some time describing the events of his conversion.

Introduction

Timing: *When did these events occur?*

Content: *What are the major events?*

Cast: *Who are the major players?*

Body of the Study

Why is Saul going to Damascus?

What did Saul see?

What is Saul's response to the light and Jesus' revelation?

What happens to Saul in Damascus?

What did Saul do after his conversion?

The "many days" of 9:23

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Why did the churches now have peace? (vs 31)

And now,... Back to Peter!

Peter is called to Joppa...

Homework:

Read the notes as a review of the study.

- *If you were Ananias, how would you have reacted to what Jesus said?*
- *How would Saul have known that Ananias had in fact been sent from God?*
- *What lessons do we learn from this chapter about accepting people who come to church claiming to be disciples?*

Read chapters 10 and 11 in preparation for next week.

Notes for study 13: Acts chapter 9

Introduction

After introducing Saul in Chapters 7 and 8, Luke described the events of his conversion. This is somewhat of an interlude in the work of Peter, however it should be remembered that after Saul's conversion, he spent three years in Arabia (Gal 1:17-18). Luke puts these events into a chronological order, rather than "finishing the story of Peter" and then "starting the story of Paul". Luke again shows the extent to which he acts as an historian in presenting to us the facts of the spread of the gospel.

The dispersion has had a dramatic effect on the church, and Saul goes out of Jerusalem, rounding up the disciples who had scattered.

Timing: *When did these events occur?*

The timing of these events is dated at AD 34, although some commentators dispute this date and place Paul's conversion at AD 36.

Content: *What are the major events?*

Saul is given authority by High Priest to persecute disciples, Saul's conversion – immediately preached Christ in Synagogue. Saul joins disciples at Jerusalem. Peter raises Dorcas from the dead at Joppa.

Cast: *Who are the major players?*

Saul, Ananias, Barnabas, Peter, Aeneas, Dorcas.

Body of the Study

Why is Saul going to Damascus?

Saul moved from consent (7:58; 8:1) to havoc (8:3), and then to slaughter (9:1). He showed his frustration towards those who were (in his eyes) perverting the Jewish religion, and he was absolutely convinced of the Jews position as God's people. He probably believed the dispersion would have stopped the development of christianity (although it was not yet called this). However when it had the contrary effect, Saul became determined to stamp it out wherever it had spread. This of course, is a very good example of how a person can believe that what he is doing is right – but he may in fact be wrong! Paul was not passive in his belief (such as just believing out of "family tradition"), but was extremely well schooled in the Jewish religion and zealously acting on what he knew to be right. *But he was still wrong.*

Saul went to the High Priest – not just the members of the Sanhedrin, nor the "chief priests" of the Jewish religion – but to the very top. Joseph Caiaphas was (almost certainly) still the High Priest. He remained High Priest until his death in AD 36, so unless there is a late date for Paul's conversion he was still High Priest. He authorised this zealous member of the conservative Pharisee sect to "round up" the members of "the way", bring them back to Jerusalem under bondage where they would face trial for blasphemy and most likely (like Stephen) be put to death.

Saul's thinking is that there can be no escape – we will find you wherever you run (a bit like the pursuit of Osama Bin Ladin and Saddam Hussain, or the rounding up of Nazi war criminals after the Second World War), and as a result the new converts would give up their foolishness and blasphemous practices.

It was not only the men who were being rounded up, but the women also. Until recent times (after the Second World War) women were generally regarded as being "immune" from acts of war. Saul shows his extreme zeal by rounding them up too, as well as his thorough distain to those who had (in his view) perverted God's religion.

We should note that this was not the first trip that Saul had made “rounding up” the disciples:

“...I too was convinced that I ought to do all that was possible to oppose the name of Jesus of Nazareth. And that is just what I did in Jerusalem. On the authority of the chief priests I put many of the saints in prison, and when they were put to death, I cast my vote against them. Many a time I went from one synagogue to another to have them punished, and I tried to force them to blaspheme. In my obsession against them, I even went to foreign cities to persecute them. On one of these journeys I was going to Damascus with the authority and commission of the chief priests...” (Acts 26:9-12 NIV).

This tells us quite a bit about Saul, and also helps to “fill in” some of the gaps from Luke’s direct narrative. Whilst Stephen was the first martyr, he was not the only one, since Paul uses the plural “*many* of the saints in prison”, “when *they* were put to death”, “cast my vote against *them*”. Further, Saul had gone to several cities, and his trip to Damascus was only one of them – “...*On one of these journeys...*”. It must then have taken several months of “rounding up” the disciples, and that interlude would be put between chapters 8 and 9.

What did Saul see?

Damascus is about 200 km north of Jerusalem – the journey would have taken 3 or 4 days on foot. Paul must have been close to Damascus when a sudden event took place when a great light appeared and shone around him. It was midday, and the light was brighter than the sun and blinded him. But this was not just a bright light. Jesus appeared to Paul, and he actually saw Jesus.

“...Now get up and stand on your feet. I have appeared to you to appoint you as a servant and as a witness of what you have seen of me and what I will show you...” (Acts 26:16 NIV)

“...Then he appeared to James, then to all the apostles, and last of all he appeared to me also, as to one abnormally born...” (1 Cor 15:7-8 NIV)

“...Am I not free? Am I not an apostle? Have I not seen Jesus our Lord? Are you not the result of my work in the Lord?...” (1 Cor 9:1 NIV)

Saul recognised that the source of the light was a greater power than himself, but he did not recognise it as being Jesus. He had to ask who it was that was speaking to him, and Jesus revealed that it was He, the one whom Saul was persecuting.

What is Saul’s response to the light and Jesus’ revelation?

Saul’s immediate response was “...*What is it that you want me to do, Lord?...*” He immediately submitted himself to the will of God. This was a significant moment in Saul’s life. He had immediately come to the realisation that Jesus was indeed the Christ – whom He had claimed to be. God’s self revelation to Saul brought about a perfect confirmation of that Messiahship in such a way that there was absolutely no doubt in Saul’s mind. Saul had a great zeal towards God, and his faith in God was not the problem. Nor was it his response in putting his faith into action. Saul’s problem was not having recognised Jesus as the Messiah. Once he “saw the light”, his recognition of Jesus was put into place, and his zeal directed in the right place.

Many people regard Saul’s “road to Damascus experience” as the point at which he “invited Jesus into his heart” and was saved. But this is **NOT WHAT THE TEXT SAYS!** Saul is told to “...*arise and go into the city, and you will be told what you must do...*” (9:6). Its purpose was to qualify him to be an apostle (as a witness), and to “choose him” (select him) for the office of an apostle “...*he is a chosen vessel unto me...to bear my name before the Gentiles, Kings, and the children of Israel...*” (Acts 9:15). We will look at this in some more detail in another study.

What happens to Saul in Damascus?

Saul comes to the house of Judas in the street called straight (9:11) and is *praying*. The image portrayed is Saul *continuing* in prayer – and it is the prayer of a condemned man, rather than that of a joyful man. On the road, Saul had been told to go to Damascus and there he would be *told what to do*. Saul was still blind, and unable to see, and spent three days without eating and drinking. (The three days are likely to have been counted as the remainder of the day of his arrival, the entire day following, and some of the following day until Ananias arrived). This is not the image of a man who has just become a christian (like the Eunuch – who went on his way rejoicing). Rather, it is the image of a man who now realises his state in God’s sight, and is repentant at having persecuted God’s Son and His followers – even although he did it in ignorance and thought that he was doing the right thing for God in the process.

He is now in Damascus, has been there for three days, but still hasn’t been told what to do – but he knows that what he has done was not right!

During this time, Saul sees a vision (9:12). In the vision, a man named Ananias comes to him, and puts his hands on him, so that he might regain his sight. There is an (unstated) implication here that Ananias had miraculous gifts – and would have received this gift through the laying on of the apostles hands – and was to exercise his gift in healing Saul. However, we need to be very careful in making generic examples from the conversion of Saul (and of Cornelius in the next chapter) as they were “special cases”. However we will note some similarities in the cases in a separate study.



There is in Damascus today, still a street called straight!



Ananias is told that Saul was “*a chosen vessel*” (which is one of the qualifications required for an apostle), and that he would take the gospel to the Gentiles. Paul often referred to himself as the apostle to the Gentiles (Rom 1:13, 15:18, Gal 1:16, 2:2, **2:7-9**, Eph 3:8, 1 Tim 2:7, 2 Tim 4:17), and it came to be just as the Lord had said to Ananias. Paul also spoke

about the gospel to Kings, and certainly suffered great things because of the gospel (2 Cor 11:23-28).

Ananias came to Saul and laid his hands on him (9:17), and he immediately received his sight back again (22:13). Ananias told him all that the Lord had said about his ministry (22:14-15), and then commanded Saul to “...*arise and be baptised and wash away your sins...*” (22:16). It was not until he was baptised that his sins were taken away, and the command to Saul was exactly the same as that given by Peter on the day of Pentecost “...*repent and be baptised for the forgiveness of your sins...*” (2:38). The purist may argue that Saul is not told to repent like Peter had told those in Jerusalem, however Saul had been exhibiting repentance for 3 days. He demonstrated true repentance of his life and practices, and such a command was not needed! Saul took some food, received strength, and spent “*some days*” with the disciples in Damascus.

What did Saul do after his conversion?

Immediately he began preaching about Jesus in the Synagogues (9:20). News of Saul’s conversion would not have gone unannounced in Damascus. He was not the only one travelling on the road. The others saw the events (although they did not see Jesus – just the great light – and they did not hear the words – just that there was a voice speaking to Saul). But there were changes in Saul’s life that have an explanation, and that explanation was evident to those who were there! (Can you imagine the conversation over dinner that night with Saul’s companions in Damascus... “You will never guess what happened as we were coming here today...”). This news would have spread like wildfire throughout Damascus.

Further, it should be noted that Ananias was a Jew who was well regarded by all of the Jews in Damascus (22:12). That he was the one who was chosen as the person to convert Saul shows God’s providence in ensuring that this was not something of dubious hearsay.

“...*All who heard were amazed...*” (9:21). They were in disbelief that such a change could take place – but Saul “...*confounded the Jews...proving that Jesus is the very Christ...*” (9:22). The word “proving” means to unite or compare – and so Saul would *compare* the prophecies of the Old Testament concerning the Messiah, and the facts from the life of Jesus, to draw the inescapable conclusion that Jesus was the very Christ – the Messiah that had been promised to come!

The “many days” of 9:23

Saul had left Damascus “*immediately*” after his conversion (Gal 1:17-18). This was most likely 2 or 3 days (the “*some days*” of 9:19). He had been preaching in the Synagogues (plural) and proved to the Jews that Jesus was the Messiah. He then left Damascus and went to Arabia and stayed there for three years.

“... *But when God, who set me apart from birth and called me by his grace, was pleased to reveal his Son in me so that I might preach him among the Gentiles, I did not consult any man, nor did I go up to Jerusalem to see those who were apostles before I was, but I went immediately into Arabia and later returned to Damascus. Then after three years, I went up to Jerusalem to get acquainted with Peter and stayed with him fifteen days...*” (Gal 1:16-18 NIV).

His stay in Arabia (my guess is that he went to Petra) was not for the purposes of preaching, but rather that he would spend time with the Lord as he made a revelation to him. On the road to Damascus, Jesus told Saul that he would be a witness not only of what he had seen then, but also “...*of the things which I will later reveal to you...*” (26:16). It is interesting to note that the 12 had spent three years with the Lord in Judea, and that He spent the same period of time to give Saul the understanding of God’s revelation.

After that time he came back again to Damascus before he went to Jerusalem. It was at this return visit that he is taken out of the city in a basket. This places the “many days” as a period of three years. When Saul returned to Damascus, the Jews tried to kill him. The city had been fortified so that he could not escape, and so he was let down through the wall in a basket. Paul tells us (2 Cor 11:32-33) that it was “...*through a window in the wall...*” by a basket.

This occurred when Aretas was the King of Damascus. He became King about AD 37, near the time of Tiberius' death. This places the time of Saul / Paul's second visit at no earlier than AD 37, and is consistent with his conversion in AD 34, and the three intervening years spent in Arabia. Saul then went to Jerusalem, and tried to join the disciples.

The Jerusalem Disciples' response to Saul

Saul had a strong reputation and they were afraid of him. They did not believe that he was in fact a disciple, and were thinking that he was trying to infiltrate the church so that he might find out who they were, to persecute and have them put to death, just as he had with many others. Saul was so feared, that the disciples had continued to fear him even though he had been absent for three years, and they had no doubt heard about the story of his conversion!

Barnabas (who was given that name because it meant "encouragement" (4:36) is the one who mediated on behalf of Saul. He brought him to the apostles (Paul tells us that it was Peter and James (Gal 1:18-19)), and he explained the circumstances of his conversion. His stay in Jerusalem was brief – only 15 days – and during that time he was fully associated with the church in Jerusalem.

Saul preached boldly in Jerusalem, but the Jews there tried to kill him. Whilst there, he was praying in the Temple and the Lord appeared to him in a vision (Acts 22:17-21) and told him to get out of Jerusalem quickly, and go to the Gentiles. So Saul escaped to Caesarea, and then returned to Tarsus (his home town).

Why did the churches now have peace? (vs 31)

This was the first time since the death of Stephen that the persecutions had stopped. Their leaders had become tired and exhausted, and the predictions of Gamaliel (5:38) were coming to fruition. However, Josephus tells us of another reason – the Jews had become distracted by the actions of the Emperor:

Caligula ordered Petronius to go to Jerusalem with an army, and to set up his statue there in the Temple. He further ordered the army to kill any of the Jews who opposed his action¹.

Caligula became emperor in AD 37, and Petronius was appointed governor in Syria in AD 39 or 40. This timing is consistent with the account of Saul's conversion and his return to Jerusalem, as previously observed.

And now,... Back to Peter!

Luke is directing his narrative towards the conversion of Cornelius, and he gives some background information on what Peter had been doing, and why he was there. Luke also gives us some "pictures" of what has been going on in some of the early churches. The apostles had not been "sitting on their hands" and doing nothing over the last few years. The "picture" of Samaria in chapter 8 was typical of what was happening in Samaria, and Luke now extends both the timeframe and the geography.

Peter came to the town of Lydda, where he finds a paralysed man named Aeneas, who had been paralysed for eight years. (It could possibly be read that he had been paralysed since he was eight years old).

Peter said to him "...*Jesus Christ heals you...*" (9:34). He makes it clear that the healing power does not come from himself, but comes totally from Jesus.

Like the account of the lame man in the Temple (chapter 3) his healing was immediate, and had the same effect on those in the city "...*So all who dwelt at Lydda and Sharon saw him and turned to the Lord...*" (9:35NKJV).

¹ Josephus, Antiq 18:8:7-9

Peter is called to Joppa...

Tabitha (also known as Dorcas) was a disciple, who was “...*full of good works and charitable deeds...*” (9:26 NKJV), but she became sick and died. So Peter was called to bring her back from the dead.

Peter came to Dorcas' house in Joppa, sent everyone out of the room, and then knelt down and prayed. The power to work this miracle (or any miracle) did not rest with Peter, but with God. We should recognise that we have no record of anyone (in previous New Testament times) other than Jesus raising anyone from the dead before – so Peter is now asked to do something that has (perhaps) never been done before by the apostles. He calls to her to arise, then lifts her up, and presents her alive to those who were there.

Because of her good deeds, Dorcas would be well recognised in the community, as well as in the church. Her death would have been likewise noted. She had died and was being prepared for burial, and probably had been dead for maybe a day or two.

The miracle became known all over Joppa, “...*and many believed on the Lord...*” (9:42).

Peter spent “*many days*” staying with Simon the tanner. This was an occupation that the stricter Jews would avoid, as it required working with dead carcasses and dead beasts (and probably graves of the animals). As a result, they would be ceremonially unclean.

It is interesting that Peter is now being prepared for his encounter with Gentiles in the next chapter.

Chapter 9

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?"

AC 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."

AC 9:7 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.

AC 9:10 In Damascus there was a disciple named Ananias. The Lord called to him in a vision, "Ananias!"

"Yes, Lord," he answered.

AC 9:11 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."

AC 9:13 "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."

AC 9:15 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."

AC 9:17 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

Chapter 22

AC 22:6 "About noon as I came near Damascus, suddenly a bright light from heaven flashed around me. ⁷ I fell to the ground and heard a voice say to me, 'Saul! Saul! Why do you persecute me?'

AC 22:8 " 'Who are you, Lord?' I asked.

" 'I am Jesus of Nazareth, whom you are persecuting,' he replied. ⁹ My companions saw the light, but they did not understand the voice of him who was speaking to me.

AC 22:10 " 'What shall I do, Lord?' I asked.

" 'Get up,' the Lord said, 'and go into Damascus. There you will be told all that you have been assigned to do.' ¹¹ My companions led me by the hand into Damascus, because the brilliance of the light had blinded me.

AC 22:12 "A man named Ananias came to see me. He was a devout observer of the law and highly respected by all the Jews living there. ¹³ He stood beside me and said, 'Brother Saul, receive your sight!' And at that very moment I was able to see him.

AC 22:14 "Then he said: 'The God of our fathers has chosen you to know his will and to see the Righteous One and to hear words from his mouth. ¹⁵ You will be his witness to all men of what you have seen and heard. ¹⁶ And now what are you waiting for? Get up, be baptized and wash your sins away, calling on his name.'

Chapter 26

AC 26:12 "On one of these journeys I was going to Damascus with the authority and commission of the chief priests. ¹³ About noon, O king, as I was on the road, I saw a light from heaven, brighter than the sun, blazing around me and my companions. ¹⁴ We all fell to the ground, and I heard a voice saying to me in Aramaic, 'Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me? It is hard for you to kick against the goads.'

AC 26:15 "Then I asked, 'Who are you, Lord?'

" 'I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting,' the Lord replied. ¹⁶ 'Now get up and stand on your feet. I have appeared to you to appoint you as a servant and as a witness of what you have seen of me and what I will show you. ¹⁷ I will rescue you from your own people and from the Gentiles. I am sending you to them ¹⁸ to open their eyes and turn them from darkness to light, and from the power of Satan to God, so that they may receive forgiveness of sins and a place among those who are sanctified by faith in me.'

AC 26:19 "So then, King Agrippa, I was not disobedient to the vision from heaven. ²⁰ First to those in Damascus, then to those in Jerusalem and in all Judea, and to the Gentiles also, I preached that they should repent and turn to God and prove their repentance by their deeds. ²¹

All quotes from NIV