

THE CONVERSION OF SAUL

Acts 9:1–31

Opening Thought

1) What is your conversion story? How did you meet Christ? What was your life like before? In what tangible ways has Jesus Christ transformed you?

Background of the Passage

Many Bible scholars have observed that 1:8 serves as a concise outline for the entire book. Chapters 1—7 describe the gospel being preached in Jerusalem. Chapter 8 shows believers, under threat of persecution, taking the good news of Jesus to Judea and Samaria.

Now as our study continues into chapter 9, Luke records a monumental event in the history of the church—the conversion of Saul of Tarsus. It was Saul (Paul) who would be God’s apostle to the Gentiles (Galatians 2:8; Ephesians 3:8). He would lead the church in spreading Christianity “to the ends of the earth.” Therefore it is Paul, more than any other person, who figures prominently in chapters 10 through 28.

No one else was better suited to the task than Paul: a “Hebrew of the Hebrews”; (Philippians 3:5; Galatians 1:14); a native of Tarsus, thus thoroughly acquainted with Greek culture (17:22–31); a citizen of Rome (16:37); trained in a trade so that he could support himself (18:3) as he traveled and ministered.

But before Christ could use this highly gifted man, He first had to transform him. And thus we have the record of his life-changing encounter with Christ on the Damascus Road! The change in Saul was instantaneous. In less than one week he went from “breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord” (9:1) to “[preaching] the Christ in the synagogues, that He is the Son of God” (9:20).

The church was understandably suspicious, but Saul’s powerful and persistent preaching, coupled with efforts by the Jewish authorities to kill him (9:23), finally convinced the apostles that Saul’s conversion was genuine. According to Galatians 1:17–18, Saul/Paul spent some three years in Arabia between the time of his conversion (9:3–6) and his journey to Jerusalem (9:26).

According to Luke, following Saul’s acceptance by the apostles, the church enjoyed another growth spurt and a time of peace.

Bible Passage

Read 9:1–31, noting the key words and definitions to the right of the passage.

Acts 9:1–31

- 1 *Then Saul, still breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord, went to the high priest*
- 2 *and asked letters from him to the synagogues of Damascus, so that if he found any who were of the Way, whether men or women, he might bring them bound to Jerusalem.*
- 3 *As he journeyed he came near Damascus, and suddenly a light shone around him from heaven.*
- 4 *Then he fell to the ground, and heard a voice saying to him, “Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting Me?”*
- 5 *And he said, “Who are You, Lord?” Then the Lord said, “I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting. It is hard for you to kick against the goads.”*
- 6 *So he, trembling and astonished, said, “Lord, what do You want me to do?” Then the Lord said to him, “Arise and go into the city, and you will be told what you must do.”*
- 7 *And the men who journeyed with him stood speechless, hearing a voice but seeing no one.*
- 8 *Then Saul arose from the ground, and when his eyes were opened he saw no one. But they led him by the hand and brought him into Damascus.*
- 9 *And he was three days without sight, and neither ate nor drank.*
- 10 *Now there was a certain disciple at Damascus named Ananias; and to him the Lord said in a vision, “Ananias.” And he said, “Here I am, Lord.”*
- 11 *So the Lord said to him, “Arise and go to the street called Straight, and inquire at the house of Judas for one called Saul of Tarsus, for behold, he is praying.*
- 12 *“And in a vision he has seen a man named Ananias coming in and putting his hand on him, so that he might receive his sight.”*
- 13 *Then Ananias answered, “Lord, I have heard from many 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 bind all who call on Your name.”*
- 15 *But the Lord said to him, “Go, for he is a chosen vessel of Mine to bear My name before Gentiles, kings, and the children of Israel.*
- 16 *“For I will show him how many things he must suffer for My name’s sake.”*
- 17 *And Ananias went his way and entered the house; and laying his hands on him he said, “Brother Saul, the Lord Jesus, who appeared to you on the road as you came, has sent me that you may receive your sight and be filled with the Holy Spirit.”*
- 18 *Immediately there fell from his eyes something like scales, and he received his sight at once; and he arose and was baptized.*
- 19 *So when he had received food, he was strengthened. Then Saul spent some days with the disciples at Damascus.*
- 20 *Immediately he preached the Christ in the synagogues, that He is the Son of God.*
- 21 *Then all who heard were amazed, and said, “Is this not he who destroyed those who called on this name in Jerusalem, and has come here for that purpose, so that he might bring them bound to the chief priests?”*
- 22 *But Saul increased all the more in strength, and confounded the Jews who dwelt in Damascus, proving that this Jesus is the Christ.*
- 23 *Now after many days were past, the Jews plotted to kill him.*
- 24 *But their plot became known to Saul. And they watched the gates day and night, to kill him.*
- 25 *Then the disciples took him by night and let him down through the wall in a large basket.*
- 26 *And when Saul had come to Jerusalem, he tried to join the disciples; but they were all afraid of him, and did not believe that he was a disciple.*
- 27 *But Barnabas took him and brought him to the apostles. And he declared to them how he had seen the Lord on the road, and that He had spoken to him, and how he had preached boldly at Damascus in the name of Jesus.*
- 28 *So he was with them at Jerusalem, coming in and going out.*

- ²⁹ *And he spoke boldly in the name of the Lord Jesus and disputed against the Hellenists, but they attempted to kill him.*
- ³⁰ *When the brethren found out, they brought him down to Caesarea and sent him out to Tarsus.*
- ³¹ *Then the churches throughout all Judea, Galilee, and Samaria had peace and were edified. And walking in the fear of the Lord and in the comfort of the Holy Spirit, they were multiplied.*

threats and murder (v. 1)—Saul was not a benign or passive opponent of the gospel, but a bitter enemy.

Damascus (v. 2)—The capital of Syria, some sixty miles inland from the Mediterranean and 160 miles northeast of Jerusalem; apparently a large number of Jews had fled there to escape the persecution mentioned in 8:2.

the Way (v. 2)—a designation for Christianity from Jesus’s description of Himself in John 14:6; used in Acts frequently (19:9, 23; 22:4; 24:14, 22)

a light shone around him (v. 3)—the first of six visions of Paul recorded in Acts (16:9; 18:9; 22:17; 23:11; 27:23); this was an appearance of Jesus Christ in glory, visible only to Saul

why are you persecuting Me? (v. 4)—Saul’s persecution of Christians was tantamount to a direct attack on Christ.

goads (v. 5)—sticks for prodding cattle

Ananias (v. 10)—one of the leaders of the Damascus church and thus one of Saul’s targets

Tarsus (v. 11)—birthplace of Saul; a key commercial and educational center near the border of Asia Minor and Syria

chosen vessel (v. 15)—literally, “a vessel of election”; God selected Paul to convey His grace to all men

be filled with the Holy Spirit (v. 17)—Saul was empowered for service; he received the Spirit without any apostles being present because Christ personally chose him and because he was a Jew (and the inclusion of Jews in the church had already been established at Pentecost).

He is the Son of God (v. 20)—the content of Paul’s lifelong message

after many days were past (v. 23)—Galatians 1:17–18 gives this number as three years, during which time Paul ministered in Nabatean Arabia.

gates (v. 24)—Damascus was a walled city, thus the gates were the only conventional avenue of escape.

a large basket (v. 25)—a woven hamper suitable for hay, straw, or bales of wool

Hellenists (v. 29)—the same group Stephen debated

Caesarea (v. 30)—an important port city on the Mediterranean, located thirty miles north of Joppa; the capital of the Roman province of Judea, home of the Roman procurator; site of the headquarters for a large Roman garrison

sent him to Tarsus (v. 30)—Paul stepped out of the limelight, in all likelihood to ponder, reflect, and prepare for a later public, worldwide mission; he may have founded some churches around Syria and Cilicia during this time (15:23; Galatians 1:21).

the churches ... had peace and were edified (v. 31)—Paul’s conversion contributed to this time of tranquillity.

Understanding the Text

2) What happened to Saul as he made his way to Damascus to round up more Christians?

(verses to consider: 22:14; 26:16; 1 Corinthians 9:1; 15:8)

3) Acts records that Christianity was often referred to as “the Way” in the first century (see 9:2; 19:9, 23; 22:4; 24:14, 22). What does this mean?

(verses to consider: 18:26; John 14:6; Hebrews 10:19–20; 2 Peter 2:2)

4) What specifically did God ask Ananias to do and why was this a troubling command?

Cross Reference

Read Philippians 3:1–14

Exploring the Meaning

5) How does Paul compare and contrast his life before and after meeting Christ?

6) Read Romans 3. Consider the way in which Paul met Christ. Is salvation initiated by God or by humanity? What are the implications of this for your prayer life?

7) What kinds of thoughts and feelings do you imagine Paul experienced during the three days he was without sight, while he fasted and waited for divine instructions (9:6–9)?

Summing Up ...

“The Spirit transformed Saul in two fundamental ways. First, He took Saul’s natural strengths and refined them. Saul was a gifted natural leader, with strong will power. He was a man of strong convictions, a self-starter, bold, a master at using his time and talents, a motivated individual, and a profoundly gifted thinker and speaker.

“The Holy Spirit also eliminated undesirable characteristics and replaced them with desirable ones. He replaced Paul’s cruel hatred with love; his restless, aggressive spirit with peace; his rough, hard-nosed treatment of people with gentleness; his pride with humility.

“Only the Spirit of God can so thoroughly sanctify a life.” —*John MacArthur*

Reflecting on the Text

8) What natural strengths does God want to strengthen and use in your life? What undesirable qualities do you think the Lord wants to replace? What is necessary on your part for this process of sanctification to proceed?

9) When has God used you to play an “Ananias” role in someone’s life? What was that like? Do you sense the Spirit of God prompting you to come alongside a new believer right now? What sort of encouraging things could you do?

10) Write down the names of several people you know (or know of) who are highly antagonistic to the gospel. Begin to pray for them faithfully. Watch what God will do!

Recording Your Thoughts

For further study, see the following passages:

Matthew 18:5-6

Acts 15:23

Acts 22:3

Acts 26:14

1 Timothy 1:12-13

Romans 9:21-23

Romans 11:13

Ephesians 5:16

Romans 15:16

1 Corinthians 15:9

Galatians 1:1, 21