

The Conversion of Saul of Tarsus

Acts 9:1-28

Acts 9:1-28: *“Then Saul, still breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord, went to the high priest² and asked him for 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.”

Background Notes

Acts 9 is the record of probably the most dramatic conversion to Christianity in the history of the Church. Saul of Tarsus, the zealous young leader in Judaism and merciless persecutor of Christians, was converted - and became Paul the Christian, the great apostle of Jesus Christ and tireless missionary to both Jews and Gentiles!

We first read of Saul in Acts 7 at the martyrdom of Stephen. Acts 7:58: *“And they cast Stephen out of the city and stoned him, and the witnesses laid down their clothes at the feet of a young man named Saul.”* Then we read of Saul persecuting the early Church in Acts 8: *“As for Saul, he made havoc of the church, entering every house and dragging off men and women, committing them to prison.”*

In Acts 9, Saul was still breathing out threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord Jesus. Saul’s zealous persecution of the Jewish Christians extended beyond Jerusalem and Judea, and even as far as Damascus in Syria. But God stopped Saul dead in his tracks as he was on his way to Damascus: *“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?”*

Skeptics of the Bible and Christianity have tried to explain away the conversion of Saul as a “natural experience.” They can’t deny the evidence that there was a Jew named Saul of Tarsus who persecuted Christians, who then became Paul the great champion of Christianity. However, they try to explain away the dramatic event on the Damascus road as a natural experience. Some say that Saul was struck by lightning and was dazed for a while. Others suggest that he had sunstroke that caused him to hallucinate and think he had seen Jesus Christ. Some even suggest that he had an epileptic seizure, and he had a dream or vision while he was temporarily in a semi-comatose state.

Paul refuted all of these naturalistic explanations several times right here in the book of Acts, as well as in his Epistles. Paul claimed that this experience was **not** a dream or a vision. It was a supernatural event, in which he both heard and saw the risen Christ. In 1 Corinthians 15:8 Paul said that that the living Lord Jesus Christ had appeared to him, just as He had to the other apostles.

After Saul's conversion, he stayed in Damascus for some time. Then, according to Galatians 1:17, he went away to Arabia for a while before returning to Damascus. In that day, "Arabia" included territory east of Damascus. Saul probably went to Arabia to spend some time alone with the Lord, and to study, meditate and prepare for his future ministry. Paul's time in Arabia likely fits between Acts 9:21-22 or between verses 22-23.

Doctrinal Points

1. The conversion of Saul was a turning point in the spread of Christianity.

Notice what the Lord told Ananias about Saul: *"Go, for he is a chosen vessel of Mine to bear My name before Gentiles, kings, and the children of Israel"* (v15). Paul would become the apostle to the Gentile world. Up until now, the spread of Christianity had been limited to the Jews in Jerusalem, and Jews who had carried the message home from the feast of Pentecost to fellow Jews throughout the Roman Empire. Remember, it was primarily Jews who became Christians in Jerusalem on the Day of Pentecost. They carried the gospel back to their homes and their local synagogues.

In Acts 8, the gospel moved out of Jerusalem to the Samaritans and the Ethiopian eunuch. Now, with the conversion of Saul, the gospel would move out to the world of the Gentiles in a big way. In Galatians 2:7 Paul said he had been entrusted with the gospel to "the uncircumcised" – meaning the Gentiles. Paul would certainly preach to Jews as well, but God entrusted him with the responsibility of taking the gospel to the Gentile world.

The gospel would move out to the Gentile world under the ministry of the Apostle Paul, and further revelation would also be given to him – revelation that is now part of New Testament Scripture. The great doctrine that the Church is the body of Christ and is composed of all believers, both Jews and Gentiles, was given to the apostle Paul.

In fact, that revelation to Paul began right here in Acts 9:4-5, when the Lord said to Saul, *"Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting Me?"* And he said, *"Who are You, Lord?"* Then the Lord said, *"I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting."* Can you imagine the shock that this revelation must have been to Saul of Tarsus? Talk about an instantaneous change of theological mind!

Notice that the Lord did not say "Why are you persecuting Christians?" or "Why are you persecuting My people?" No, the Lord said, ***"Why are you persecuting Me?"*** Christians are the Church, which is the body of Christ on earth at the present time. Christ is our Head and He is in Heaven. We are His body on earth, and we are the means by which our Lord continues His work on this earth.

Further revelation of this great doctrine of the Church as the body of Christ would be given to the apostle Paul later (1 Corinthians and Ephesians), but it began right here Saul's conversion. God would use him to spread the gospel and the

great truth of the universal Church to the Gentile world. The conversion of Saul was a turning point in the spread of Christianity.

2. The conversion of Saul is a turning point in the book of Acts.

Until Saul's conversion, Peter held a prominent position in the book of Acts, but there was a turning point with the conversion of Saul. The apostle Paul would increasingly become the prominent person in the book of Acts. There is no record that Peter and the other apostles were jealous. They realized that the Lord had raised Paul up as a special apostle, and they were willing to submit to God's choice and direction. This was quite a big step in their walk of faith. After all, they had been the personal disciples of the Lord, and had been with Him for the three years of His public ministry. I wonder if we would have been as submissive to the will of the Lord?

Saul would probably have been in his early thirties at this time. He had been highly trained in the schools of Judaism, and he was already looked on as the leader of the Jews. But God brought about a 180-degree turn in this young man! The rest of the book of Acts will follow the apostle Paul and his missionary travels, and finally his arrest and imprisonment in Rome. The conversion of Saul is a turning point in the book of Acts.

Practical Application

Be willing to be an Ananias or a Barnabas!

Verse 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." Ananias was just "a certain disciple." He wasn't an upfront teacher or preacher like the apostle Paul would become. He was just "a certain disciple" – but he was willing to do what the Lord asked him to do!*

Probably many other Christians in Damascus would not have been willing to go and minister to Saul, the fierce persecutor of Christians. They would have been afraid. But Ananias went as the Lord directed, and laid his hands on Saul as a gesture of oneness and identification. He even called him "Brother Saul." Are you willing to be an Ananias?

When Saul came to Jerusalem, the Christians were afraid of him and wouldn't believe that this ruthless persecutor of Christians had become a Christian himself (v26). They probably thought it was some kind of trick – a way to further his persecutions. But Barnabas, whose name means "**encouragement**," came along and took Saul under his wing. Barnabas brought Saul to the apostles, and paved the way for Saul to be accepted as a believer. He also paved the way for Saul to preach boldly in Jerusalem.

Can God call on you to be a Barnabas - even though you have to step out in great faith? Be willing to be an Ananias or a Barnabas!