

## Saul/Paul: From Murderous Persecutor to Christ's Apostle

Read Acts 9.1-43

### INTRODUCTION / CONNECTIONS / CONTEXT

1/ As we said in our [last lesson](#), Luke is skillfully developing the spread of the Gospel by the churches of Christ's disciples here in the Book of Acts. He is using Christ's Gospel mandate in **ch 1.8** as his strategic narrative 'outline.' In **chs 1-7**, the disciples of Jesus are being His witnesses in Jerusalem. In **ch 8**, the Gospel goes to the regions of Judea and Samaria [see also **ch 9.31**]. Now, in **ch 9**, the trajectory of the Gospel outreach will begin pointing toward **'the end of the earth'** with the conversion and call of Saul, who will be later be known as Paul. [see **ch 13.9**]. We will be using his two names, Saul and Paul, interchangeably throughout this lesson since some of our references will be to later mentions of him.

2/ The Gospel outreach to **'the end of the earth,'** or that is, the Gentile nations, will commence in earnest in our next lesson from **ch 10** when Peter goes to the house of Cornelius – and then later on in **ch 13** when Saul and Barnabas depart from the church in Antioch on their first missionary journey. But since this lesson will relate how Paul was saved and called by Christ to be his apostle, **ch 9** here will at least be the 'starting block' for the marathon mission of world-wide evangelism from that day to this. So let's see how Christ enacted His grand plan to gather the nations of the world into His Gospel Kingdom...

#### I / vv 1-19 | The murderous Christ-persecutor was converted and called to be Christ's apostle

1/ vv 1-2 / **Saul continued and intensified his persecution of Christ's followers.** He had begun with an earnest passion to **'ravage the church'** back in **ch 8.3**. Here, he is **"still breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord."** This is not just harassment; he is committed to annihilating and exterminating them from the face of the earth – get rid of all of them and put a dead stop end to their 'movement.' We need to go back to Gamaliel's warning in **ch 5.39**: **"...but if it is of God, you will not be able to overthrow them. You might even be found opposing God!"** Saul was opposing God, and he was about to meet Him personally! He was commissioned by the leaders of the Jewish religious council to go to neighboring cities, ferret them out, and bring them back to Jerusalem to be tried for 'heresy' and even put to death – like they had done to Stephen. Paul referred back to this 'former life' numerous times in his testimonies he would give later on: **Acts 22.4-5 / 26.10-11; Galatians 1.13, 23; 1 Corinthians 15.9; Philippians 3.6; 1 Timothy 1.12-17.**

2/ vv 3-6 / **Jesus Christ Himself confronted and converted Saul to the faith he once sought to destroy.** Christ appeared to Him in a stunning and blinding **"light from Heaven."** This was not just a physical phenomenon – it was another display of Christ's Deity. This is the same 'light of the Glory of God in the Face of Jesus Christ' that appeared to Moses at the burning bush; on Sinai at the giving of the law; and on the mount of transfiguration when the Glory of Christ was revealed. Saul knew he was encountering God; and he was stunned to learn that this Glory of God was none other than the Jesus whom he was persecuting. Listen to this exchange, and see if you can feel some of the same shocking surprise Saul must have felt when the Voice identified Himself: **"Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting Me?" And he said, 'Who are you, Lord?' And He said, 'I am Jesus whom you are persecuting...'"** Jesus then instructed Saul to continue on, complete his journey to Damascus, and He would have further instructions for him there.

3/ vv 7-9 / **The men who were traveling with Saul to assist him were astounded also by what they were observing...** however, the appearance of Christ to Saul was an exchange between just the two of them. The companions witnessed the glorious light, they saw Saul struck to the ground, they could even discern the sound of a supernatural Heavenly Voice – but they couldn't understand the personal conversation that was transpiring between Christ and Saul in his soul and conscience. They were just observers of the physical phenomena in their presence. So Saul arose from the ground where Christ had struck him down, unable to see. He had to be led by the hand to make the rest of his way into Damascus.

For the next three days, he and Christ carried continued this life-transforming conversation as Saul fasted, prayed, and meditated on his conversion experience.

**4/ vv 10-14 / Christ also appears to the disciple Ananias in a vision, instructing him to go to Saul and relay the instructions Christ had promised Saul He would give him.** Ananias would find Saul praying as an evidence of his true conversion to the faith of Christ. Furthermore, Christ told Ananias that He had also appeared to Saul in his own vision to alert him to Ananias's visit. We all can well understand Ananias's reservation and hesitation – because the disciples in Damascus had already received advance word and warning that Saul was on his way to them ... and what he was coming to do.

**5/ vv 15-16 / But Christ re-assured Ananias that it was indeed He who was doing this – and that He had future Gospel plans for Saul – except that from now on, Saul would be on the side of Christ and His disciples!** And it is here, in this Gospel commission that Christ told Ananias to give to Saul from Him, that Christ reveals His plan for Saul to **“carry my Name before the Gentiles and kings and the children of Israel.”** So note here: Christ had chosen and called Saul to be a very prominent, well-known, and well-heard **“instrument of mine”** to carry the Gospel not only to the Gentiles, but also to ruling dignitaries, and to the children of Israel as well. Paul would fulfill this calling before he also is martyred by appearing before even the Caesar of the Roman Empire. There would be many other rulers that Paul would witness to also, including many of the dignitaries of the Jewish nation and synagogues of the Jews.

**6/ vv 17-19 / Ananias obeys Christ's instructions.** He laid his hands on Saul as the designated human intermediary of Christ's commission. NOTE how he re-affirms that it was **“the Lord Jesus who appeared to you on the road by which you came”** just to confirm for Saul – and for us also – that by this experience Saul had been appointed by Christ to be His apostle. From now on, Saul would be ‘the servant of the Lord Jesus Christ’ and would carry His message to all to whom Christ would send him. When Ananias laid his hands on Saul, he regained his sight, he was **“filled with the Holy Spirit,”** and he was baptized. He also broke his 3-day fast and was physically strengthened.

## **II / vv 20-25 | Saul immediately began preaching Christ – and encountering persecution**

**1/ vv 20-22 / Saul's conversion was immediately spiritually transformative – both in his faith in the Christ he once persecuted and sought to destroy, and also in his fellowship with Christ's fellow believers.** He assimilated into the house churches where the followers of Christ were gathering to fellowship and worship ... and he also attended the synagogue services of Jewish worshipers and **“proclaimed Jesus...saying ‘He is the Son of God...proving that Jesus was the Christ!’”** There is no way for us, in our own context and experiences, to even begin to imagine how astounding [and unsettling] Saul was to both of these communities. Luke sums it up as best he could: **“And all who heard him were amazed and said, ‘Is not this the man who made havoc in Jerusalem of those who called upon this Name? And has he not come here for this purpose, to bring them bound before the chief priests?’”**

**2/ vv 23-25 / While the community of his fellow believers rejoiced in the work of God's Grace in him, the Jewish community in the synagogues saw him as a radical turncoat and traitor to their anti-Jesus cause.** If he had betrayed his mission to help them eradicate the followers of Jesus from among them, then they must get rid of him. They set watchers at all of the entrance/exit gates of the city, plotting to kill him. But his fellow disciples outwitted them by helping Saul escape – **“they took him by night and let him down through an opening in the wall, lowering him in a basket.”**

## **III / vv 26-31 | Saul goes to Jerusalem – after a three-year sojourn in Arabia**

**1/ v 26 / Saul made a visit to Jerusalem after spending three years in Arabia.** When we read v 26, we might get the impression that he went to Jerusalem immediately upon fleeing from the persecution and plots to kill him in Damascus. But, at this point, we need to consult with **Galatians 1.11-24** where Paul will help us untangle his timeline and itinerary immediately upon leaving Damascus. In the Galatians passage [ch 1.15-17], the main point Paul is making is that his radical turnaround conversion from opposing Christ to preaching Christ among the Gentiles was not the result of being ‘re-educated’ by the

apostles and believers in Jerusalem. To the contrary, he didn't even go to Jerusalem until three years after his Damascus-road experience. Rather, he says, **"I did not immediately consult with anyone; nor did I go up to Jerusalem to those who were apostles before me, but I went away into Arabia, and returned again to Damascus"** [v 17]. So, where is Arabia [see the map/graphic I have inserted on page 4]? It is a desert region somewhat adjoining Damascus in Syria. We assume that Jesus directed him there for the specific purpose of some intense 'one on one' Personal instruction from Him to reveal Himself more fully to Saul, to teach Saul His Gospel, and to prepare him more fully for the mission He chose Saul to fulfill.

2/ vv 27-30 / **However, when Saul did later visit Jerusalem, they viewed him with the same understandable skepticism the Damascus believers did at the first.** I mean, how do you trust this man whose previous passion and purpose in life is to kill you? Good Barnabas, **"son of encouragement"** [ch 4.36], then interceded and served as an intermediary between Saul and the Jerusalem apostles and believers: **"But Barnabas took him and brought him to the apostles and declared to them how on the road he had seen the Lord, who spoke to him, and how at Damascus he had preached boldly in the Name of Jesus."** Barnabas not only witnessed to Saul's genuine truthfulness in his conversion testimony, but also how he had suffered intense persecution and death threats already in Damascus for his profession of faith in Christ. Also, Saul's former Jewish compatriots in Jerusalem, whose caused he had formerly espoused and served, turned on him; and they, too, **"were seeking to kill him."** So, again, Saul's fellow disciples spirited him out of Jerusalem for his own safety and preservation. This time, they brought him to the seaport city of Caesarea and sent him to his native hometown of Tarsus [see the map on page 4]. Saul would remain there until Barnabas once again will be dispatched from the church in Antioch to go to Tarsus to bring him to Antioch to help them in their Gospel outreach there [Acts 11.22-26]. So if you want an itemized timeline and itinerary, it might look something like this:

- From Jerusalem to Damascus, **Acts 9.1-22**
- From Damascus to Arabia for three years, **Galatians 1.1-17**
- From Arabia back to Damascus, **Galatians 1.17**
- From Damascus to Jerusalem, **Galatians 1.18 / Acts 9.26-29**
- From Jerusalem to Caesarea to sail to Tarsus, **Acts 9.30**
- From Tarsus back to Antioch, **Acts 11.22-26**

3/ v 31 / **So the church throughout all Judea and Galilee and Samaria had peace and was being built up. And walking in the fear of the Lord and in the comfort of the Holy Spirit, it multiplied.** One of the reasons the churches in these regions had 'peace' is because the primary instigator of their opposition and persecution had been converted to their faith in Christ – he had become 'one of them' and was one of their ablest and most passionate evangelists and advocates. As Paul says in **Galatians 1.23: "They only were hearing it said, 'He who used to persecute us is now preaching the faith he once tried to destroy.' And they glorified God because of me."**

#### IV / vv 32-43 | Peter continues his apostolic ministry in the regions around Jerusalem

1/ **"Now as Peter went here and there among them all..."** We will simply note and summarize these two events of Peter's continuing ministry in the regions around Jerusalem [healing Aeneas in Lydda and raising Tabitha/Dorcas from the dead in Joppa] – not because they are insignificant or unimportant; but rather because we have focused on the conversion of Saul and Christ's purposes to choose, convert, call, and prepare him for the future ministry He had called Him to fulfill.

2/ Both Lydda and Joppa were just a few miles to the NW from Jerusalem. As Peter was conducting a 'circuit rider' ministry among these cities, he was called both to Lydda and Joppa to both heal and raise the dead among them. These signs and wonders were performed for the same purpose as they all had been: to corroborate and illustrate the power of Christ and His Gospel and to 'pre-enact' the Glory of the Kingdom to come.

**"And they glorified God because of me!" ~Saul/Paul [Galatians 1.24]**

Credit: ESV Study Bible | Crossway

### Paul's (Saul's) Conversion and Early Travels

c. A.D. 35–39

As Paul approached Damascus to arrest followers of the Way, Jesus appeared to him (1). Galatians 1:17 makes it clear that soon after this Paul spent time in Arabia (2, 3) before going to meet church leaders in Jerusalem (4). When some believers learned of a plot to kill Paul in Jerusalem, they took him to Caesarea, and he returned to his hometown of Tarsus (5).

