



Acts of the Apostles
A DEEP DIVE INTO THE BOOK OF ACTS.

WEEK 6
 CLASS BY PASTOR GLYN NORMAN

The Conversion of Saul to Paul

- the repetition of the story is notable – there was a preference for variation in reporting in the rhetorical style of Luke’s day. “Heard it...tell it another way!”
- “Luke employs such repetitions only when he considers something to be extraordinarily important and wishes to impress it unforgettably on the reader. That is the case here.” (Haenchen, cited by Longenecker, Acts, p.367)

Discussion • the conversion of Saul of Tarsus is one of the most crucial events in the history of God’s dealings with humanity. Is this true?

9:1-2 The Anger of Saul

- “breathing out murderous threats”

Acts 26:11 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.

Galatians 1:13 For you have heard of my previous way of life in Judaism, how intensely I persecuted the church of God and tried to destroy it.

- contrast with the more lenient and passive attitude of Gamaliel.
 - “Stephen saw the logic of the situation more clearly than the apostles, Saul saw it more clearly than Gamaliel” (F.F. Bruce)
- The issue is that the old and the new are incompatible.
 Stephen argued: “The new has come therefore the old must go.”
 Saul argued: “The old must stay, therefore the new must go.”

- the church called “the Way”

9:3-9 Jesus appears to Paul in his last Post-Resurrection Appearance

- voice and bright light
 - voice, double calling of name like in OT (Gen 22:11, 46:2; Ex 3:4; 1 Sam 3:4)
 - bright light like that of God’s Shekinah glory

- response – “Who are you Lord?” – Saul probably did realize he was in the presence of God.
- a simple question; Why are you persecuting me? As the early church has suffered, Jesus has been feeling it. Shock factor: Saul thought he was defending God and his laws, now he is told that he is persecuting him. Five major new understandings need to take place:
 1. Despite his zeal and sense of doing God’s will, he begins to understand that his previous life and activities in Judaism, lay under God’s rebuke. A voice from heaven had corrected him.
 2. The Jesus, whose followers he had been persecuting was alive, exalted and in some manner to be associated with God the Father, whom Israel worshiped. He had to revise his whole understanding of the life, teaching and death of Jesus of Nazareth, because God himself was vindicating him. He has to agree that Jesus death on the cross, rather than discrediting Jesus, fulfilled prophecy and that Jesus was God’s answer to man’s sin, and his resurrection proved him to be the Messiah and mankind’s Lord.
 3. The hope for which Israel was waiting was not some distant future expectation – it had arrived now in the person of Jesus.
 4. Jesus and the church are in some mysterious way joined. Saul had been persecuting the church, yet Jesus says “Why are you persecuting **me**?”
 5. There was a mission Paul had to carry out for Christ. It has been revealed to Ananias in v15-16 and will be further revealed to Paul later.

Note the contrast between Saul as powerful persecutor, and now blind shattered man, needing to be led by the hand like a child.

- Not wanted – dead or alive!

Saul realizes that the Jesus who he has claimed has not been raised from the dead, is alive and speaking to him. This must have rocked his world. His disciples were right! The evidence was now too strong to resist.

- Saul was blinded by his previous wrong convictions until a greater light caused him to become spiritually enlightened though physically blind. (Ajith Fernando, *Acts*, NIV Application Commentary, p.297)

Question: In what ways is Saul’s conversion typical of biblical conversions, and in what way is it unique?

Would you describe your own coming to faith as a conversion, a process, a commitment, a decision or a surrender? Why?

Five features of biblical conversions

1. The result of a divine initiative. (See Eph 2:8)
2. A personal encounter with Christ.
3. A surrender to his Lordship
4. The importance of the body of Christ
5. Saved not just for himself, but to take the message to others.

9:10-16 The role of Ananias

- immediately recognizes Jesus Christ speaking to him in a vision (v10)

- “Straight Street” is still a main thoroughfare in Damascus (geographical reliability point); specific directions given
 - point of continuity between Pharisaism and Christianity – the devotion to prayer
 - Ananias’s hesitancy serves to contrast what a huge change this will be, if it is true:
 - instead of a persecutor, he is God’s chosen instrument
 - instead of being concerned for Israel alone, he will carry Jesus’ name to the Gentiles
 - instead of prominence and glory it is necessary for him to suffer for “Jesus name”
- These summary statements are a pretty accurate pattern of what happens to Paul in chapters 13-28.
- Ananias greets Saul as “Brother” – an amazing term of acceptance when you consider his reputation

Question: Who was the most helpful to you in your early days as a Christian, and what did they do that was good?

9:19b-25 Early attempts at Ministry

- preached in the synagogues of Damascus, proclaiming Jesus as the Messiah
- the people are baffled at the sudden change, but he grows in eloquence, proving that Jesus is the Christ
- to Arabia for three years (see Gal 1:17) somewhere during this period, then returned to Damascus, then on to Jerusalem, then Caesarea, Syria and Cilicia.

9:25-31 Finally to Jerusalem

- in Galatians 1 Paul stresses that he didn’t go to Jerusalem until after three years, pointing out that his authority to preach, and his apostleship was given to him directly by Christ, not by the other apostles.
- mixed feelings about returning to the city he loved, where he had grown up and become successful, but now his former associates would shun him, and the Christians were afraid of him (v26), an understandable reaction. It was a well-known strategy to infiltrate a group in order to bring it down, or report on it to the authorities.
- a big “but” – But Barnabas...takes him under his wing, and gives him credibility and acceptance into the Christian community there. Peter and Paul spent fifteen days together – I’m sure they had a lot to talk about, Peter perhaps filling Paul in on some of the details of Jesus’ life – and Paul telling about his vision and three years in Arabia.
- Paul gets busy in Jerusalem “speaking boldly” and debating for the Lord, but then some Jews try to kill him and he must flee to Tarsus via Caesarea. He next appears in Acts in Tarsus (11:25). The persecutor has become the persecuted.
- v31 the church remains healthy, enjoying a period of relative calm in-between periods of persecution.