

The Acts of the Apostles

LESSON 14

Saul's Encounter on the Damascus Road (Acts 9:1-9)

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.

There are three main chapters in the Book of Acts that give us insight into Paul's early life from his own testimony—Acts 9, Acts 22 and Acts 26.

Saul's early life was one of religious zeal (Acts 22:3; 26:5; Phil. 3:4b-6; Gal. 1:14).

I am indeed a Jew, born in Tarsus of Cilicia, but brought up in this city at the feet of Gamaliel, taught according to the strictness of our fathers' law, and was zealous toward God as you all are today. Acts 22:3

If anyone else thinks he may have confidence in the flesh, I more so: circumcised the eighth day of the stock of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of the Hebrews; concerning the law, a Pharisee; concerning zeal, persecuting the church; concerning the righteousness which is in the law, blameless. Philippians 3:4b-6

And I advanced in Judaism beyond many of my contemporaries in my own nation, being more exceedingly zealous for the traditions of my fathers. Galatians 1:14

Saul's zeal led him to persecute the People of the Way (Acts 9:2; 19:9, 23; 22:4, 22; 24:14; 26:9-11).

I persecuted this Way to the death, binding and delivering into prisons both men and women... Acts 22:4

Indeed, I myself thought I must do many things contrary to the name of Jesus of Nazareth. This I also did in Jerusalem, and many of the saints I shut up in prison, having received authority from the chief priests; and when they were put to death, I cast my vote against them. And I punished them often in every synagogue and compelled

them to blaspheme; and being exceedingly enraged against them, I persecuted them even to foreign cities. Acts 26:9-11

But this I confess to you, that according to the Way which they call a sect, so I worship the God of my fathers, believing all things which are written in the Law and in the Prophets. Acts 24:14

While doing so, Saul had a personal encounter from the Lord (Acts 22:6; 26:12-13). Saul was on his way to apprehend the followers of Christ and he was apprehended by Christ (Phil. 3:12). God did outwardly in Saul what He has done inwardly in all of us.

Not as though I had already attained, either were already perfect: but I follow after, if that I may apprehend that for which also, I am apprehended of Christ Jesus. –KJV

He saw a bright light (Acts 9:3; 22:6; 26:12-13). He and his companions fell to the ground (Acts 9:4; 22:7; 26:14). Notice that there is no mention of a “horse” in this account.

And when we all had fallen to the ground... Acts 26:14a

He heard a voice (Acts 9:4; 22:7; 26:14).

It should be noted that the men who were with him did not have the same experience. They heard a voice but did not see the vision that Saul did. He saw the Lord (I Cor. 15:8; Acts 9:7, implied).

Then last of all He was seen by me also, as by one born out of due time.

He asked the Lord who He was.

Jesus’ answer had to startle him... “I am Jesus who you are persecuting!”

In Acts 22:8 it says, “I am Jesus of Nazareth, whom you are persecuting.”

Jesus indicated that Paul had been resisting the work of the Holy Spirit in his life (Acts 9:5b).

It is hard for you to kick against the goads.

The expression to kick against the goad is derived from the action of a stubborn and unyielding ox that would kick at the sharp stick or goad that was being used to motivate it. The ox would only injure itself and gain nothing in the end. It often speaks of rebellion against rightful authority by attempting to oppose the clear commands of duty. Jesus was implying that Saul’s efforts were irrational, self- destructive and fruitless.

Jesus’ use of this expression also indicates that the Holy Spirit, as the goad of God, had been working on him internally for some time. Up to this time he had been resisting the work of the Holy Spirit not wanting to submit to something that would change the direction of his life

forever.

Saul responded with the right question (Acts 9:5-6; 22:8-10; 26:15). Note the three significant questions from the unsaved to this point...

- What must I do to be saved?
- What hinders me from being baptized?
- What would you have me to do?

Saul's natural eyesight was lost while his spiritual eyesight was being restored (Acts 9:8; 22:11).

While Saul dwelt three days in darkness he had something profound upon which to meditate. He was able to meditate on Jesus statement, "Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?"

Saul learned that when you persecute the church you persecute Jesus. He learned that Jesus and His church are inseparably linked. Perhaps this is when Paul received the seeds of his unique revelation of the church as the body of Christ.

Instead of answering Saul's question, Jesus directed him to a member of the same body of Christ that he was trying to destroy (Acts 9:6). Saul the persecutor became a helpless, blind man who had to be led by the hand to be prayed for by the very people that he was attempting to exterminate. What a transformation!

Saul dwelt in darkness for three days before Ananias came to him (Acts 9:9). Perhaps this is how long it took God to talk Ananias into praying for a man who had done so much harm to the church. In these three days Saul identified with Jesus' three days in the grave. Think of what his mind saw in those three days. The last thing he saw with his physical eyes was Jesus. He had three days to think about all of those he had abused in the name of God. He thought about Stephen calling upon God for mercy. He thought about all the others that he had hauled off to prison and to their death.

Ananias' Ministry to Saul (Acts 9:10-19)

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.

Ananias came to pray for Saul—reluctantly (Acts 9:17). Ananias was as reluctant to stand before Saul as Moses was to stand before Pharaoh (Ex. 3:11). God persuaded him to go to Saul based on what He revealed to him about Saul’s future. He was a chosen vessel to minister to Gentiles and Israelites (Acts 9:15). He would suffer many things for the sake of Christ (Act 9:15).

Perhaps it was this reference to “suffering” that convinced Ananias to go to Saul. He might have thought, “Well, if you are sure that he is going to suffer many things, then I will go and pray for him.”

- Ananias administered prophecy and the laying on of hands (Acts 9:17).
- Saul’s eyesight was restored (Acts 9:18).
- Saul was baptized in water (Acts 9:18).
- Saul was filled with the Holy Spirit (Acts 9:17).
- Saul was cared for by some believers for several days (Acts 9:18).

Saul Preaches Christ in Damascus (Acts 9:20-25)

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.

Saul seemed to have had an immediate desire to preach or share his testimony in the synagogues (Acts 9:20). This is not the best thing for new converts to do. In our day we treat celebrity conversions much like this. We put them up to speak before they have really had a chance to be discipled and grounded in their faith.

The Christians in Damascus were very suspicious of Saul’s motivation (Acts 9:21). After a short time, Saul went to Arabia to begin his Holy Spirit training (Acts 9:23; Gal. 1:17).

Now after many days were past... Acts 9:23a

But when it pleased God, who separated me from my mother's womb and called me through His grace, to reveal His Son in me, that I might preach Him among the Gentiles, I did not immediately confer with flesh and blood, nor did I go up to Jerusalem to those who were apostles before me; but I went to Arabia, and returned again to Damascus. Galatians 1:15-17

This seems to be the only place where Saul's trip to Arabia can fit in the timeline of Saul's life. The phrase "after many days" is used in the Septuagint to describe a considerable length of time, even years (Ex. 2:11). The Jewish writers observe that the phrase, "many days", signifies at least three days; for by "days", in the plural number, two must be designed, and many signifies a third, or that one at least is added to them; but here it signifies three years, as it also does in reference to Elijah where it is said, "and it came to pass after many days, that the word of the Lord came to Elijah in the third year" (I Kgs. 18:1). It appears that this phrase could mean the same thing here (John Gill's Exposition of the Bible).

The Jews were not happy with his conversion and his return to Damascus and plotted to kill him (Acts 9:23). Saul had been the "Poster Boy" for the persecution of Christianity. Now he had gone over to the "other side." As a result, the Jewish emotion toward Saul had gone from love and admiration to extreme hatred. This animosity would end up being something that would follow him throughout his life. He had been a high-profile person prior to his conversion. That fame would set him up for great opposition from the Jews particularly those from Jerusalem. This opposition would undoubtedly be a major reason for Saul eventually changing his name to Paul.

Upon discovering the plot, Saul escaped from Damascus with the help of the local disciples (Acts 9:24-25; II Cor. 11:32-33).

In Damascus the governor, under Aretas the king, was guarding the city of the Damascenes with a garrison, desiring to arrest me; but I was let down in a basket through a window in the wall, and escaped from his hands.

This was Saul's first such escape, it would not be his last. This would be part of the story of his life, trying to say ahead of his persecutors. The persecutor would become the persecuted.

Saul's Experience at Jerusalem (Acts 9:26-30)

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.

Saul made his first trip to Jerusalem about three years after his conversion (Acts 9:26). The Christians were still afraid of him (Acts 9:26). The Christian did not believe he was a true disciple

(Acts 9:26). However, Barnabas believed Saul, he befriended him and put in a good word for him (Acts 9:27). Saul preached among the same crowd that Stephen had—the Hellenists (Acts 6:9; 9:29). Saul aroused the venom of the Hellenists and again had to flee for his life (Acts 9:30).

Stephen was slain, but Saul escaped. He was ushered out to Caesarea and sent on to Tarsus, the place of his birth. This was his first sending out. However, he wasn't really sent out as much as he was sent away.

Paul's Early Life Journey (1-10)



Note: The numbers on the above map indicate the order of Paul's journey.

The Church Prospers (Acts 9:31)

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.

With Saul removed from the scene, there was a period of rest in the church. The Romans at the time were trying to erect statues of the emperor in the temple in Jerusalem. This took the Jews' focus off the Christians and onto their battle against Rome and the pollution of their temple.

Saul was to spend another ten years or so in Tarsus before his prophetic word would come forth.

Aeneas Healed (Acts 9:32-35)

Now it came to pass, as Peter went through all parts of the country, that he also came

down to the saints who dwelt in Lydda. 33 There he found a certain man named Aeneas, who had been bedridden eight years and was paralyzed. 34 And Peter said to him, “Aeneas, Jesus the Christ heals you. Arise and make your bed.” Then he arose immediately. 35 So all who dwelt at Lydda and Sharon saw him and turned to the Lord.

During this period of calm, Peter gets the chance to get away in ministry. Some believe that he was retracing the steps of Philip who had gone to these regions earlier. This whole trip was one of preparing the heart of Peter for one of the most significant acts of his life—the opening of the door of faith to the Gentiles.

Aeneas was most likely a Hellenist. He was the second lame man that Peter was used to heal.

Peter's Journeys in Acts 1-12



Note: The numbers on the above map indicate the order of Peter's journey.

Dorcus Restored to Life (Acts 9:36-43)

At Joppa there was a certain disciple named Tabitha, which is translated Dorcas. This woman was full of good works and charitable deeds which she did. 37 But it happened in those days that she became sick and died. When they had washed her, they laid her in an upper room. 38 And since Lydda was near Joppa, and the disciples had heard that Peter was there, they sent two men to him, imploring him not to delay in coming to them. 39 Then Peter arose and went with them. When he had come, they brought him to the upper room. And all the widows stood by him weeping, showing the tunics and garments which Dorcas had made while she was with them. 40 But Peter put them all out, and knelt down and prayed. And turning to the body he said, “Tabitha, arise.” And she opened her eyes, and when she saw Peter she sat up. 41 Then he gave her his hand and lifted her up; and when he had called the saints and widows, he presented her

***alive. 42 And it became known throughout all Joppa, and many believed on the Lord.
43 So it was that he stayed many days in Joppa with Simon, a tanner.***

Peter was summoned to Joppa. It appears that it was already his plan to go there, but the sudden death of a well- respected woman causes some to summon Peter to come in haste.

Peter ministered to a woman in Joppa by the name of Dorcas. Her Aramaic or Syrian name was Tabitha.

The most interesting thing about this miracle is how closely it resembles one of the miracles of Jesus. Peter learned by watching his master.

The Ministry of Jesus	The Ministry of Peter
Mark 5:24, 35-42	Acts 9:36-42
He put the unbelievers out of the room.	He put the unbelievers out of the room
He said, “Talitha cumi!” or “Little girl arise!”	He said, “Tabitha cumi!” or “Tabitha arise!”
He took the woman by the hand.	He took the woman by the hand.

Peter was positioned by God in the house of Simon the tanner. Simon is a Jewish name. This man was a tanner by trade. As far as most Jews were concerned this was an unclean trade because a tanner handled unclean animals and dealt with dead and defiled carcasses. Were he not a Christian, Peter never would have stayed with him. Peter was too much a Jew to do that. But that is precisely why Jesus wanted Peter at this house. He was preparing Peter for an unusual dream involving unclean animals. This whole journey was getting Peter ready for the next exciting event in the development of the Church.