

Saul's Conversion

1. Observation and exposition of Acts 9:1-19
2. The take-away for us?

Possible upcoming lessons?

1. Timeline of Saul/Paul's life
2. Excursus on conversion in Acts
3. Excursus on the Holy Spirit in Acts
4. Excursus on baptism in Acts

Observation and exposition of Acts 9:1-19

1. Read **Acts 9:1-19**
2. General observations and background
 - a. This is the second of three notable(?) conversions that Luke includes in his account
 - i. The Ethiopian eunuch (**Acts 8**), Saul (**Acts 9**), and Cornelius (**Acts 10**)
 - b. While all three are different and unique, they all "required" divine intervention to happen. In other words, God is working specifically in directing the spread of the gospel.
 - c. Luke includes three versions of Saul's conversion: this one in Luke's words, and two more as told by Paul (**22:1-16**; **26:12-18**)
 - d. What authority did the high priest have in Damascus, which was a foreign city approximately 135 miles away from Jerusalem?
 - i. From at least 142 B.C. the Romans had granted to Judea the rights and privileges of a sovereign nation-state, including the right of extradition.
 - ii. In 47 B.C. Julius Caesar confirmed those rights even though Judea was no longer a sovereign nation.
 - e. Damascus
 - i. Possibly the oldest continuously populated city on the planet
 - ii. It was a city even in the days of Abraham (**Genesis 14:14-15**)
 - iii. Large population of Jews in Damascus during the time of Acts
 1. According to Josephus, there was a massacre of Jews in Damascus in A.D. 66 that numbered at least 10,500, and possibly up to 18,000 Jews killed. (Bruce, 181)
 - f. The Way
 - i. This is the first reference in Acts to Christianity as the Way, but not the last. What is the significance of this term?
 1. **John 14:6**

2. The way of life, the way of salvation.
3. Not just a momentary decision, but a way of life.

3. Saul - destroyer of the church (1-2)

- a. Notice how Luke is going to great lengths to help us understand what Saul was like before his conversion.
 - i. At Stephen's execution (7:58-8:1)
 - ii. Deeply involved in the first persecution of the church in Jerusalem (8:1-3)
 - iii. "...still breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord..." (9:1)
 - iv. Pursuing and persecuting the Lord's disciples even to foreign cities (9:2)
 - v. Saul's goal? Completely destroy the new church.
- b. In Paul's own words:
 - i. Acts 22:1-5
 - ii. Acts 26:9-12
 - iii. 1 Corinthians 15:9
 - iv. Galatians 1:13-14
 - v. Philippians 3:6
 - vi. 1 Timothy 1:12-15
- c. Saul did not "make a decision for Christ." It was and could only be the sovereign grace of God that initiated the process, made it possible, and made him spiritually alive.

4. Jesus appears to Saul (3-9)

- a. Time of day?
 - i. About noon (22:6), or midday (26:13)
- b. Light from heaven
 - i. Brighter than the sun (26:13)
 - ii. Compare Revelation 1:9-17 where Jesus appears to John
 - iii. Did Saul see Jesus, or just a bright light?
 1. Implied in 9:7?
 2. 9:17
 3. 1 Corinthians 15:3-8
- c. "Why are you persecuting me?"
 - i. Jesus identifies the church and his individual disciples with himself.
 - ii. Lesson for us? How we treat each other in the church is how we treat Jesus.
- d. "Who are you, Lord?"
 - i. Sir or the Lord? Which did Saul mean?
 - ii. Notice how Luke is referring to Jesus as Lord in this passage:
 1. 9:1

2. 9:5

3. 9:10-11,13, 15

4. 9:17

- iii. Surely Saul realized that this was not just anyone, but rather a divine intervention
- e. "I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting."
 - i. Saul was blinded by this light, but, in my opinion, he "saw" with perfect clarity at that same moment how wrong he had been up to this point.
 - ii. "...the risen Christ...from this time on, displaced the law as the centre of Paul's life and thought." Bruce, 76
- f. "But rise and enter the city, and you will be told what you are to do."
 - i. Saul's first act of faith and obedience.
- g. The one who came to Damascus to take disciples bound as prisoners back to Jerusalem, had to be led by the hand like a little child, or as the blind person that he now was.
- h. What did Saul do for the next three days?
 - i. Fasted
 - ii. Prayed (9:11)
 - 1. What do you think he was praying?
 - 2. Confessing to God his many sins against Jesus and the church?
 - 3. Asking God for wisdom.
 - iii. Thought through the Scriptures with the new revelation that Jesus was the Messiah (Christ), and all the implications of that truth.
 - 1. See 9:20
 - iv. Do you think he complained (to God) that he couldn't see?
- i. At what point was Saul converted?
 - i. On the road to Damascus? During the three days while he fasted and prayed? Can we know for sure? Does this matter?
 - ii. Some liberal scholars think he wasn't converted, but merely had his priorities realigned.

5. Jesus speaks to Ananias (10-16)

- a. The first and last mention of this Ananias in the story (though also in Paul's retelling in 22:12-16)
 - i. Compare him to the Ananias in Acts 5!
- b. He was, simply, a disciple (of Jesus).
- c. Saul's reputation and news of his mission had preceded him to Damascus.
- d. Was it wrong for Ananias to question Jesus' command at this point?
 - i. Jesus' response in 9:15-16 doesn't seem to indicate that is was.
 - ii. Understandable considering who Saul was.

6. Ananias meets Saul (17-19)
 - a. With no further questions, Ananias obeys, as the obedient disciple that he is.
 - i. “obedient disciple” - is there another kind?
 - b. Straight Street still exists in Damascus, and there is now a mosque built over the ruins of an ancient church that was supposedly built at the site of the house of Judas.
 - c. First words Saul hears from a Christian after his conversion?
 - i. “Brother Saul”
 - ii. In other words, welcome to the family!
 - iii. Considering how just three days before Saul was determined to destroy this family, this must have been an incredible, heartwarming greeting.
 - d. Ananias was not an apostle, yet the Holy Spirit was given to Saul, or at least filled Saul, through the laying on of Ananias’s hands.
 - e. Saul’s sight was restored, he was baptized (by Ananias?), and he ate.
7. Keep in mind Saul’s hatred of the church and his conversion as background illumination to these passages:
 - a. **Philippians 3:12**
 - b. **Galatians 1:11-16**
 - c. **Ephesians 2:1-10**
 - d. **2 Corinthians 4:1-6**

The take-away for us

Resources

1. *The Acts of the Apostles*, F. F. Bruce
2. *The Book of the Acts*, F. F. Bruce
3. *The Acts of the Apostles*, David G. Peterson
4. *The Message of Acts*, John Stott
5. *The Acts of the Apostles*, Ben Witherington III
6. *Paul: Apostle of the Heart Set Free*, F. F. Bruce