

The Acts of the Holy Spirit

Gloria Dei Lutheran Church

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The Holy Spirit Converts Saul the Persecutor

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The Road to Damascus ([9:1-6](#))

We last saw Saul in Acts 8:3, where he was busy “making havoc” with the church, entering every house, dragging off both men and women, and sending them to prison. Now he continues and expanded this work to the city of Damascus, about 130 miles northeast of Jerusalem, which would be a six-day or so journey.

...Breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord: Saul is presented as zealous, angry, and even violent, convinced of his own righteousness. Saul hated Jesus' disciples.

In Philippians 3, Saul/Paul writes about his background, saying he was “...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.” In Galatians 1, he says: “For you have heard of my former conduct in Judaism, how I persecuted the church of God beyond measure and tried to destroy it. And I advanced in Judaism beyond many of my contemporaries in my own nation, being exceedingly zealous for the traditions of my fathers.”

Went to the high priest: Saul carried out this persecution under the direct approval of the highest religious authorities. He asked and received letters from the high priest authorizing this mission. The high priest mentioned here was Caiaphas. In late 1990 an ossuary (read: “bone box”) was discovered in Jerusalem. It was positively dated to this period, and inscribed with the name Caiaphas. Inside were some of the remains of a 60 year-old man, and many researchers

believe was this indeed Caiaphas. If so, these are the first physical remains (such as bones or ashes) of a specific person mentioned in the New Testament!

If he found any who were of the Way: Christianity here is referred to as “the Way.” This is the earliest recorded name for the Christian movement, and is used five times in Acts.

It’s interesting in this period following the stoning of Stephen and the persecution and scattering that resulted, the church had grown large enough in Damascus for Saul to be concerned about it. Christianity – the Way – was spreading everywhere.

Suddenly a light shone around him from heaven... and heard a voice: This happened somewhere outside of Damascus. In chapter 22 Paul tells us that it happened at mid-day, when the sun is shining brightest. In chapter 26 he refers to this light from Heaven as even brighter than the sun. This is highly unusual. Not that God confronts sinners, but that He chooses to do so in this way.

...He fell to the ground: Saul’s reaction was not because of honor or reverence for God, it was probably more a reaction of survival – he was terrified at the heavenly light! It’s assumed that he was mounted on a horse or a donkey, but the text does not give us this detail. It’s a reasonable assumption given Saul’s status and mission. As often happens, this assumption finds its groundings in artistic renderings of the scene. Horses make for good paintings, but for the most part painters are pretty unreliable when it comes to historical Biblical accuracy!

And heard a voice saying to him: According to F.F. Bruce, the rabbis of Saul’s day mostly believed that God no longer spoke to man directly, as He did in the days of the prophets. However, they believed that one could hear the “echo” of God’s voice, what they called “the daughter of the voice of God.” Here, Saul learned that one can hear God directly!

Saul, Saul: When God repeats a name twice, it is to display deep emotion, but not necessarily anger (think “Martha, Martha” in Luke 10:41, and “Jerusalem, Jerusalem” in Matthew 23:37).

Why are you persecuting Me? Saul thought he was attacking a cult of fanatics, that he was *servicing* God in attacking Christians. But he discovers here that he was actually persecuting God Himself when he persecuted God’s people.

Who are You, Lord? I am Jesus....: Jesus was a fairly common name in that day, and Saul certainly knew he had been working full time to jail the followers of a certain Jesus from Nazareth. And it's likely that Saul heard Jesus teach in Jerusalem; and as a likely member of the Sanhedrin, Saul may have even sat in judgment of Jesus in the trial before His crucifixion. And of course, he would have heard the testimony of Stephen and no doubt others.

But up this point Saul didn't *believe* in Jesus Christ. The notion that he was persecuting The Divine was not anywhere in Saul's mindset. Quite the opposite, for the Jesus he had heard of was not a god of any kind, but only a zealous leader of zealots and rebels.

It seems God's intention in confronting Saul in such an astonishing way was to break through that otherwise-impenetrable wall of un-faith around Saul's heart.

This revelation must've been both terrifying and mind-bending for Saul!

Some translations insert additional words of both Jesus and Saul as recorded in Acts 22 and 26 here, but those sentences were likely added later by scribes; there's no reliable proof that these were in Luke's original text. We'll deal with those when we get to those chapters. Paul also says a bit more about the experience in 1 Corinthians 9 and 15. But here in chapter 9, we are given a brief account of what happened.

The men who journeyed with him stood speechless: The experience was literally incomprehensible to Saul's companions, but as Saul opened his eyes (probably shut tight out of terror from the appearing of the heavenly light), he could not see.

It's as if God is telling Saul "You've been shutting your eyes to My light and My Son. Fine! Spend a few days as blind physically as you have been spiritually! Got your attention now, don't I?!"

What we do know is that Saul was so affected by the experience that he was unable to eat or drink for three days. All Saul could do was simply sit in a blind silence, a drastically humbling experience. Saul needed this time to challenge all his previous ideas about who God was, what God's will was, and what pleased God.

God attends to Saul through Ananias (9:10-19)

Now there was a certain disciple at Damascus named Ananias: We don't know anything about Ananias from either before or after this meeting with Saul. We don't know how he came to Damascus, or what happened to him afterward. What we do know is that he was follower of Jesus a "certain disciple."

So, how would *you* like to have been given this calling by God? To minister to the man who had been terrorizing the faithful with impunity and cruelty? Yikes!

And we know that God loves to use people, and Ananias was a willing servant.

The Lord said to him in a vision: God spoke to Ananias in a completely different way than He spoke to Saul. Saul had a bold, almost violent confrontation from God, but Ananias heard the voice of God sweetly in a vision, where God called him by name. "Here I am, Lord" is a perfect response to God.

God gives very clear direction to Ananias here, with a lot of specificity:

- A specific street (the street called Straight)
- A specific house (the house of Judas)
- A specific man (the one called Saul of Tarsus)
- A specific thing the man was doing (he is praying)
- A specific vision the man had (in a vision he has seen a man named Ananias)

This specificity was necessary and important, because God was asking Ananias to do something that was both bold and dangerous. He would be meeting Saul, the great persecutor! Ananias knew all about Saul's mission; apparently it was widely known. So God gave him lots of ways to confirm that he was doing the right thing.

He is a chosen vessel of Mine to bear My name: God had not yet revealed that calling to Saul – He told Ananias first, because Ananias needed to hear it first.

Ananias went his way and entered the house: This is Ananias' first act of great courage! Which is nothing compared to...

Laying his hands on him he said, "Brother Saul": BROTHER? Here's where we know that Ananias believed God. "Brother" otherwise is the very last way a prospective persecute would have address his prospective persecutor!

The act of laying his hands and the words “Brother Saul” powerfully communicated the love of God. Saul, being blind, could not see any love in Ananias’ eyes, so God had him communicate God’s love through his touch and voice.

Be filled with the Holy Spirit: Here is where Saul received the Holy Spirit and was healed from his blindness, which was spiritual blindness as much as physical blindness. It is interesting that here again, like in Samaria, we see the laying on of hands by someone God sent being the vehicle for bestowing a special gifting to a new convert.

God had already done a remarkably effective job of breaking Saul, but it wasn’t His intention to leave him broken. God broke Saul so that He could save him, and fill him -- and keep him that way.

For a very Lutheran (and I think correct) take on all of this, R.C.H. Lenski says this in his commentary on Acts:

“It is often said that Saul was converted on the road to Damascus. Strictly speaking, this is not the fact. His conversion began in his encounter with the law but it was not accomplished until the gospel entered his heart by faith, and that did not occur on the road, but in Damascus.”

He received his sight at once; and he arose and was baptized: When Saul could see – both physically and spiritually – he immediately wanted to identify with Jesus and with the disciples of Jesus by being baptized.

We are not told that Ananias told Saul about baptism. Perhaps he did; but it is just as likely (or even more likely) that Saul had seen Christian baptisms, such as on Pentecost (Acts 2:41). And we know that God spoke directly to Saul about many things during his time waiting for Ananias, including even the name of the man who would come and pray for him and restore his sight (Acts 9:12).

f. Then Saul spent some days with the disciples at Damascus: Amazingly, from this time on, Saul is now numbered among the disciples of Jesus, and became friends with those he had previously tried to imprison or kill. This shows the remarkable, radical nature of his salvation.

Saul's conversion reminds us that at its core, salvation is something God does in us. What we do is only a response to His work in us.

It also reminds us that God finds some who, by all appearances, are not looking for Him at all. Seeing how God reached Saul encourages us to believe that God can reach the people in our life that we think are very far from Him. We often are tempted to give up on people, thinking they could never come to faith in Christ. The example of Saul, however, shows us clearly that God can reach anyone.

Saul's ministry in Damascus and Jerusalem ([9:20-25](#))

Immediately he proclaimed Jesus in the synagogues, saying "He is the Son of God": Saul was a skilled student of the "great rabbi" Gamaliel, and took advantage of the synagogue custom that invited any able Jewish man to speak from the Scriptures at synagogue meetings. And he took advantage of this opportunity *immediately*.

You might think he'd spend a lot of time talking about himself and the change in his life. Nope. Saul's message is God's message, and it's all about Jesus. He knew they needed to know Jesus in truth, that He is indeed the true Son of God.

When Jesus called Himself the Son of God, and when others called Him that as Saul does here, it was understood as a clear claim to Jesus' deity. In John 5 and Matthew 26, when Jesus called Himself the Son of God, He was accused of blasphemy, of calling Himself God. Everybody knew what Jesus meant in calling Himself Son of God, and in the same way everyone in the synagogues knew what Saul meant when he preached that Jesus is the Son of God.

Is this not he who destroyed those who called on this name?: People were genuinely amazed at Saul's conversion; it was hard to believe just how powerfully Jesus could change a life.

Proving that this Jesus is the Christ: Saul's early work for God so soon after his conversion should not surprise us; he knew the scriptures as well as anyone, and spoke with a credibility few would enjoy. Saul was an expert in the Old Testament, could easily see how Jesus was the Messiah promised in the Hebrew Scriptures. And so, of course, the leaders that Saul was formerly aligned with now plot to kill him.

But Barnabas took him and brought him to the apostles: Thank God for people like Ananias and Barnabas, who will welcome people into the family of God with

simple friendship! And fortunately, they were good at formulating escape plans, too!

Escape to (and from!) Jerusalem ([9:26-30](#))

We know from Galatians 1:18 that Saul stayed with Peter for fifteen days. He also wrote that he never had an audience with all the apostles, seeing only Peter and James, Jesus' brother.

This time with the apostles in Jerusalem was important, because it finally and certainly welcomed Saul into the family of the followers of Jesus. But not only that, Saul/Paul made a point of the limited nature of his time with the apostles in Jerusalem to show clearly that he did not receive "his" gospel from the other apostles. Though he was no doubt blessed and benefited from that time, he received his message by direct revelation from Jesus on the road to and in Damascus. Of course, they already knew of Jesus' audacious love and grace, and accepted this testimony from their new brother in the faith.

He spoke boldly in the name of the Lord Jesus... but they attempted to kill him:

Saul again faced persecution and assassination attempts. This became a recurring pattern in his life. Saul's conversion story begins with him leaving Jerusalem to persecute the followers of Jesus. It ends with him leaving Jerusalem as one of the persecuted followers of Jesus!

They brought him down to Caesarea and sent him out to Tarsus: For his own protection, the Christians in Jerusalem sent him out to Tarsus. Somewhere between 8 and 12 years passed in the life of Saul before he again entered into prominent ministry, being sent out as a missionary from the church at Antioch. At that time, it would also be Barnabas who reached out to Saul.

Tarsus was one of the great cities of the ancient world, with a busy harbor and a strategic placement at trade routes. It was especially known as an university city, being one of the three great educational cities of the Mediterranean world.

Ministry and miracles in the entire region ([9:31-43](#))

The churches throughout all Judea, Galilee, and Samaria: This chapter began with a zealous Saul breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord. But God was more than able to turn this terrible threat into a great blessing. Now

Luke shows that God's work not only continued, but it was strong, despite the tremendous pressure and opposition that came against it.

The churches...had peace: This doesn't mean that all persecution had stopped; rather, they had peace in the midst of persecution.

This was a time of change all around the Christians' world. Per Josephus, In 36-37, Caiaphas was replaced as high priest, first by Jonathan, then by Theophilus (see Acts 1!). That same year, Caligula succeeded Tiberius as Emperor of Rome. Caligula was bitterly hostile to the Jews. He was assassinated just four years later.

But...

The churches...were edified: The word edified has the idea of being built up. The churches were growing in numbers and strength.

And walking in the fear of the Lord and in the comfort of the Holy Spirit, they were multiplied: Whenever God's people are walking in the fear of the Lord and in the comfort of the Holy Spirit, you may expect that they will also see their numbers multiplied. "Comfort" here is the same root word used for the Holy Spirit in John 14 ("paraclete").

ii. In the comfort of the Holy Spirit: Pierson points out that the word translated "comfort" here is from the root of the word translated Helper or Comforter in John 14:16 (παράκλητος, or Paraclete).

Peter went through all parts of the country: The previous pattern of the apostles staying put in Jerusalem and those needing ministry coming from afar to them now shifts. Peter went through all parts of the country to do ministry, traveling the 35 miles from Jerusalem to Lydda.

Aeneas, Jesus the Christ heals you: Peter clearly identified who healed – "Jesus the Christ." Peter was only His instrument. Jesus healed with the power of Jesus, but Peter did not heal with the power of Peter. Peter relied solely on the power of Jesus. Peter's words here, "Arise and make your bed", were strikingly similar to Jesus' words to the paralytic man in Mark 2.

Tabitha, arise: Peter seemed to clearly remember what Jesus did in Mark 5:38-43 (also Luke 8:50-56). But Peter isn't trying to lead Jesus here, as he did when he told Jesus not to go to the cross in Matthew 16:22. Now Peter is letting Jesus lead him.

He stayed many days in Joppa with Simon, a tanner: This sentence would be somewhat shocking to an observant Jew of that time. According to their understanding of the law, it was strictly forbidden to associate with anyone who routinely worked with dead animals. According to the laws of that time, a tanner had to live at least 75 feet (25 meters) outside a village because of his constant ritual uncleanness.

So why does it matter? Because here we see Peter becoming less concerned about Jewish traditions and ceremonial rites than he had been before. This work of God in Peter's heart laid groundwork for what God would do in Peter in the near future.