

Saul's Conversion



Ice-Breaker

What is the longest you have been without food or drink: Three days? Three meals? Three hours? Why? How did you feel?



Scripture Passage

Acts 9:1-19

9 Meanwhile, Saul was still breathing out murderous threats against the Lord's disciples. He went to the high priest² and asked him for letters to the synagogues in Damascus, so that if he found any there who belonged to the Way, whether men or women, he might take them as prisoners to Jerusalem. ³As he neared Damascus on his journey, suddenly a light from heaven flashed around him. ⁴He fell to the ground and heard a voice say to him, "Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?"

⁵"Who are you, Lord?" Saul asked.

"I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting," he replied. ⁶"Now get up and go into the city, and you will be told what you must do."

⁷The men traveling with Saul stood there speechless; they heard the sound but did not see anyone. ⁸Saul got up from the ground, but when he opened his eyes he could see nothing. So they led him by the hand into Damascus. ⁹For three days he was blind, and did not eat or drink anything.

¹⁰In Damascus there was a disciple named Ananias. The Lord called to him in a vision, "Ananias!"

"Yes, Lord," he answered.

¹¹The Lord told him, "Go to the house of Judas on Straight Street and ask for a man from Tarsus named Saul, for he is praying. ¹²In a vision he has seen a man named Ananias come and place his hands on him to restore his sight."

¹³"Lord," Ananias answered, "I have heard many reports about this man and all the harm he has done to your saints in Jerusalem. ¹⁴And he has come here with authority from the chief priests to arrest all who call on your name."

¹⁵But the Lord said to Ananias, "Go! This man is my chosen instrument to carry my name before the Gentiles and their kings and before the people of Israel. ¹⁶I will show him how much he must suffer for my name."

¹⁷Then Ananias went to the house and entered it. Placing his hands on Saul, he said, "Brother Saul, the Lord--Jesus, who appeared to you on the road as you were coming here--has sent me so that you may see again and be filled with the Holy Spirit." ¹⁸Immediately, something like scales fell from Saul's eyes, and he could see again. He got up and was baptized, ¹⁹and after taking some food, he regained his strength.

Saul spent several days with the disciples in Damascus.



Bible Study

1. What do you know about Saul to this point?
2. Saul's former teacher was Gamaliel (see 22:3). What had Gamaliel advised the Sanhedrin regarding Christians in 5:34-39? How is Saul responding to this advice? What does this show about him?
3. Describe what happened in verses 3-9 from the viewpoint of one of Saul's companions?

4. Was Saul's heart open to Jesus' arrival? Why or why not?
5. How do you think Saul felt when confronted by Jesus (vv. 4-6)? Given his previous activities, what would he be thinking about during those three days of blindness and fasting (v. 9)?
6. How would you feel in Ananias' place? Since Jesus had already appeared to Saul directly, why this time would he want a person to go to him? What is significant about the way Ananias addresses Saul (v. 17)?

Reference Notes

9:1 Saul. This man, who was to become the great apostle to the Gentiles, was also known as Paul. See note on Acts 13:9. breathing out murderous threats. This reflects the depth of Paul's obsessive hatred toward the Christians. After hearing Stephen's speech (7:1-53), he undoubtedly viewed the Christians as an anti-establishment, heretical sect determined to undermine the Law of God and the worship of the temple. His ability to carry out his threats of murder would certainly have been proscribed by Roman law, but apparently he and the Sanhedrin had some success in their program (26:10).

9:2 letters. While the Sanhedrin had no formal authority outside of Judea, its prestige could influence elders in synagogues far from Jerusalem. In this case, the Sanhedrin asked the elders in Damascus to cooperate with Paul by allowing him to arrest as blasphemers those Christians who had fled from Jerusalem to Damascus and bring them for trial in Jerusalem. The Book of Maccabees speaks of the Sanhedrin requesting officials in Egypt to give them extradition rights over Palestinian law-breakers who had fled there. **Damascus.** About 150 miles from Jerusalem. Luke has not told us how the church began among the sizable Jewish community in this important city, but Paul desired to expand his persecution there so that it might not spread any further. This incident reveals how central Paul was to the carrying out of this first wave of persecution: once he was converted, this persecution dissipated (9:31). **the Way.** Unique to Acts as a name for Christianity (19:9,23; 22:4; 24:14,22). It may stem from Jesus' claim in John 14:6.

9:3 a light from heaven flashed around him. This description is often used of lightning, indicating the brilliance of the light (see also Acts 26:13). Light (glory) is commonly connected with divine appearances (Luke 9:29; Revelation 1:14-16).

9:4 why do you persecute me. The opposition Paul created for the church was really directed against its Head, Jesus, demonstrating the identity between Jesus and the church, his body (see Lk 10:16). Paul is being brought face-to-face with the fact that by his activities he is not honoring God, but resisting the One glorified by God.

9:9 This profound experience shattered all of Paul's previous convictions. Humbled and blinded, he fasted as he awaited what Jesus would do next with him.

9:10 Apart from Paul's comment in Acts 22:12, nothing is known of Ananias.

9:11-12 The vision Ananias received was matched by one Paul had of his coming. This double-dream confirmation is also seen in the story of Peter and Cornelius (chapter 10).

9:11 Straight Street. "The Ôstreet that is called Straight' where Saul's host lived, is still one of the chief thoroughfares of Damascus. The house of Judas is traditionally located near its western end" (Bruce). Nothing is known of Judas.

9:13-14 Ananias is shocked at Jesus' command to him. Paul's reputation and the purpose of his mission in Damascus were well known.

9:13 Lord. This title for Jesus, highlighting his authority, is a common one in this account (9:5,11,13,15,17); and in Paul's writings. **saints.** Literally, "holy ones." This was a common term for Israel in the Old Testament. Ananias applies it to Christians as does Paul in his letters. It means those people who are separated out for God.

9:14 all who call on your name. Another way of referring to Christians which comes from Joel 2:32. In the book of Joel it was God's name (Yahweh) that was to be called upon: the fact that the early Christians transferred this to Jesus is a clear indication of their belief in his divinity.

9:15-16 The Lord overruled Ananias with a final command to "Go!" and a description of what the purpose of Paul's mission would be.

9:15 my chosen instrument. Literally, "a choice vessel." Some images for the Old Testament form the context here. Israel was compared to a vessel in the hand of a potter, formed to perform the task for which the potter created it (Jeremiah 18:1-6). The Servant of Isaiah was God's chosen (Isaiah 44:1): Paul would carry on the mission of the Servant in terms of bringing the light to the Gentiles (Isaiah 42:6; 49:6) and in sharing in his suffering.

9:17 Brother Saul. Without further question, Ananias affirms Paul as part of the family through the grace of Jesus. After laying hands on him, Paul's sight was restored, he was baptized (presumably by Ananias) and was filled with the Holy Spirit.

9:19 The chronology of events begun here needs to be read in light of Paul's account of his early days as a Christian in Galatians 1:16-24. Putting the two accounts together, the following order of events emerges. After his conversion, Paul initially preached in the synagogues of Damascus (Acts 9:19b-22). He then departed for an unknown period of time to Arabia, perhaps for meditation and study, and later returned to Damascus (Galatians 1:17). It was apparently at this time that the Jews in Damascus plotted to kill him for stirring up controversy in the synagogues there (Acts 9:23-24; 2 Corinthians 11:32-33). "After three years" from his return to Damascus, he finally returned to Jerusalem. Since the Jews often reckoned time in inclusive terms, "after three years" may mean as little as a bit over one full year had gone by. Upon coming to Jerusalem, he stayed only two weeks during which time he only had contact with one apostle (Peter) and James, Jesus' brother (Galatians 1:18-19). During this brief stay, Paul preached in the Greek-speaking synagogues. Some commentators suggest that Paul, as a native of Cilicia, may have belonged to the same synagogue Stephen had belonged to since residents of Cilicia made up that congregation (6:9). Whatever the case, Paul experienced the same opposition Stephen did. To keep him from being harmed, other believers in Jerusalem sent him off to Tarsus in Cilicia (Acts 9:30; Galatians 1:21) where he remained for the following 10 years or so until Barnabas asked him to join him in ministry at Antioch (Acts 11:25-26).

Caring Time

1. How did the Lord first get your attention? Was it in some dramatic event or something more subtle? Have you had a post-encounter experience like Saul did?

2. Do you assume some people are beyond God's reach? How does this story challenge those assumptions?

3. When have you, like Ananias, obeyed the Lord even when you had doubts? What happened?
4. Who has played the role of Ananias in your life? To whom does the Lord want you to play that part?