

CHAPTER 9

GOD ARRESTS SAUL

Acts 9:1–31

The conversion of Saul of Tarsus, the leading persecutor of the Christians, was perhaps the greatest event in church history after the coming of the Spirit at Pentecost. The next great event would be the conversion of the Gentiles (Acts 10), and Saul (Paul) would become the apostle to the Gentiles.

God was continuing to work out His plan to bring the Gospel to the whole world.

“Paul was a great man, and I have no doubt that on the way to Damascus he rode a very high horse. But a few seconds sufficed to alter the man. How soon God brought him down!”

— Charles Spurgeon

The account of the conversion of Saul of Tarsus is given three times in Acts, in chapters 9, 22, and 26. According to the record before us, Saul experienced four meetings that together transformed his life.

1. He Met Jesus Christ (Acts 9:1–9)

When you look at Saul *on the road* (Acts 9:1–2), you see a very zealous man who actually thought he was doing God a service by persecuting the church. Had you stopped him and asked for his reasons, he might have said something like this.

“Jesus of Nazareth is dead. Do you expect me to believe that a crucified nobody is the promised Messiah? According to our Law, anybody who is hung on a tree is cursed [Deut. 21:23]. Would God take a cursed false prophet and make him the Messiah? No! His followers are preaching that Jesus is both alive and doing miracles through them. But their power comes from Satan, not God. This is a dangerous sect, and I intend to eliminate it before it destroys our historic Jewish faith!”

In spite of his great learning (Acts 26:24), Saul was spiritually blind (2 Cor. 3:12–18) and did not understand what the Old Testament really taught about the Messiah.

- He stumbled over the Cross (1 Cor. 1:23)
- He depended on his own righteousness and not on the righteousness of God (Rom. 9:30–10:13; Phil. 3:1–10).

Many self-righteous religious people today do not see their need for a Savior and resent it if you tell them they are sinners.

Acts 8:3 - Saul's attitude was that of an angry animal whose very breath was dangerous!

- He believed that the Law had to be obeyed before Messiah could come

Acts 6:11–13 - These “heretics” were preaching against the Law, the temple, and the traditions of the fathers

Gal. 1:23 - Saul wasted the churches in Judea and then got authority from the high priest to go as far as Damascus to hunt down the disciples of Jesus.

Acts 22:5 - This was no insignificant enterprise, for the authority of the highest Jewish council was behind him.

Damascus had a large Jewish population, and it has been estimated that there could well have been thirty to forty synagogues in the city.

The fact that there were already believers there indicates how effective the church had been in getting out the message. Some of the believers may have fled the persecution in Jerusalem, which explains why Saul wanted authority to bring them back. Believers were still identified with the Jewish synagogues, for the break with Judaism would not come for a few years.

James 2:2 –

For example, suppose someone comes into your meeting* dressed in fancy clothes and expensive jewelry, and another comes in who is poor and dressed in dirty clothes

A. Paul's Conversion

Acts 9:4 – Saul suddenly found himself *on the ground!*

It was not a heat stroke or an attack of epilepsy that put him there, but a personal meeting with Jesus Christ.

Acts 22:6–11:

- At midday
- He saw a bright light from heaven
- He heard a voice speaking his name
- The men with him also fell to the earth and heard the sound, but they could not understand the words spoken from heaven (Acts 26:14)

Acts 9:7

- They stood to their feet in bewilderment hearing Saul address someone, but not knowing what was happening.

Saul of Tarsus made some wonderful discoveries that day.

1. He discovered to his surprise that Jesus of Nazareth was actually *alive!*
 - The believers had been constantly affirming this (Acts 2:32; 3:15; 5:30–32)
 - Saul had refused to accept their testimony
 - **If Jesus was alive**, then Saul had to change his mind about Jesus and His message. He had to repent, a difficult thing for a self-righteous Pharisee to do.

* Greek *your synagogue*.

2. Saul also discovered that he was a lost sinner who was in danger of the judgment of God.

- Acts 9:5 - "I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting"
- Saul thought he had been serving God
- In reality he had been persecuting the Messiah!

Isa. 64:6; Phil. 3:6-8 - When measured by the holiness of Jesus Christ, Saul's good works and legalistic

self-righteousness looked like filthy rags.

All of his values changed. He was a new person because he trusted Jesus Christ.

Acts 26:16-18 - The Lord had a special work for Saul to do.

- The Hebrew of the Hebrews would become the apostle to the Gentiles
- The persecutor would become a preacher
- The legalistic Pharisee would become the great proclaimer of the grace of God.

Up to now, Saul had been like a wild animal, fighting against the provokers; but now he would become a vessel of honor, the Lord's "tool," to preach the Gospel in the regions beyond. What a transformation!

Phil. 3:12 - Some thirty years later, Paul wrote that Christ had "apprehended him" on the Damascus road

Saul was out to arrest others when the Lord arrested him. He had to lose his religion before he could gain the righteousness of Christ.

His salvation is certainly a great encouragement to any lost sinner, for if "the chief of sinners" could be saved, surely anybody can be saved!

It is worth noting that the men who were with Saul saw the light, but did not see the Lord; and they heard the sound, but did not hear the voice speaking the words (note John 12:27-29).

We wonder if any of them later trusted in Christ because of Saul's testimony. He definitely saw the glorified Lord Jesus Christ (1 Cor. 15:7–10).

Acts 9:8–9 – The men led Saul *into the city*

Acts 9:1–19 – For the angry bull had now become a docile lamb!

- The leader had to be led because the vision had left him blind.
- His spiritual eyes had been opened
- His physical eyes were closed.

God was thoroughly humbling Saul and preparing him for the ministry of Ananias.

Acts 9:11 – He fasted and prayed for three days

- During which time he no doubt started to “sort out” what he believed.
- He had been saved by grace, not by Law, through faith in the living Christ.
- God began to instruct Saul and show him the relationship between the Gospel of the grace of God and the traditional Mosaic religion that he had practiced all his life.

2. He Met Ananias (Acts 9:10–19)

Acts 22:12 – Ananias was a devout Jew who was a believer in Jesus Christ.

He knew what kind of reputation Saul had and that he was coming to Damascus to arrest believers. It was up to a week's journey from Jerusalem to Damascus, but some of the Jerusalem Christians had gotten to the city first in order to warn the saints.

NOTE In Acts 9 the different names used for God's people:

- Disciples (Acts 9:1, 10, 19, 25–26, 36, 38)
- Those of the way (Acts 9:2)
- Saints (Acts 9:13, 32, 41)
- All that call on God's name (Acts 9:14, 21)
- Brethren (Acts 9:17, 30)

** We use the word *Christian* most frequently, and yet that name did not appear on the scene until later (Acts 11:26).

“Disciples” is the name that is used most in the Book of Acts, but you do not find it used in the epistles. There the name “saints” is the most frequently used title for God’s people.

– Ananias was available to do God’s will, but he certainly was not anxious to obey!

– The fact that Saul was “praying” instead of “preying” should have encouraged Ananias.

“Prayer is the autograph of the Holy Ghost upon the renewed heart” -- Charles Spurgeon

Romans 8:9, 14–16:

⁹ But you are not controlled by your sinful nature. You are controlled by the Spirit if you have the Spirit of God living in you. (And remember that those who do not have the Spirit of Christ living in them do not belong to him at all.) ⁴ For all who are led by the Spirit of God are children* of God.¹⁵ So you have not received a spirit that makes you fearful slaves. Instead, you received God’s Spirit when he adopted you as his own children.* Now we call him, “Abba, Father.”¹⁶ For his Spirit joins with our spirit to affirm that we are God’s children.

Instead of trusting himself, Saul was now trusting the Lord and waiting for Him to show him what to do.

– Saul had already seen a vision of a man named Ananias (Hananiah = “the Lord is gracious”) coming to minister to him; so, how could Ananias refuse to obey?

Acts 9:15 – is a good summary of Paul’s life and ministry.

1 Tim. 1:14 – It was all of grace, for he did not choose God; it was God who chose him.

2 Tim. 2:20–21 – He was God’s vessel

Eph. 2:10; Phil. 2:12–13 – God would work in and through him to accomplish His purposes.

* Greek *sons*; also in 8:19.

* Greek *you received a spirit of sonship*.

* *Abba* is an Aramaic term for “father.”

God's name would be glorified as His servant would take the Gospel to Jews and Gentiles, kings and commoners, and as he would suffer for Christ's sake.

Acts 9:15 – This is the first reference in the Book of Acts to the Gospel going to the Gentiles

Once convinced, Ananias lost no time going to the house of Judas and ministering to waiting Saul. The fact that he called him “brother” must have brought joy to the heart of the blinded Pharisee. Saul not only heard Ananias' voice, but he felt his hands (Acts 9:12, 17).

By the power of God:

1. His eyes were opened and he could see!
2. He was also filled with the Holy Spirit
3. Baptized
4. Then he ate some food

Acts 2:21; Rom. 10:13 – Saul washed away his sins by “calling on the Lord”

Saul tarried with the believers in Damascus and no doubt learned from them.

Imagine what it would be like to disciple the great Apostle Paul!

- He discovered that they were loving people
- Undeserving of the persecution he had inflicted on them
- They knew the truth of God's Word and only wanted to share it with others.

Before we leave this section, we should emphasize some practical lessons that all believers ought to learn.

1. *God can use even the most obscure saint.*

Were it not for the conversion of Saul, we would never have heard of Ananias; and yet Ananias had an important part to play in the ongoing work of the church. Behind many well-known servants of God are lesser-known believers who have influenced them. God keeps the books and will see to it that each servant will get a just reward. The important thing is not fame but faithfulness (1 Cor. 4:1–5).

2. *We should never be afraid to obey God's will.*

Ananias at first argued with the Lord and gave some good reasons why he should not visit Saul. But the Lord had everything under control, and Ananias obeyed by faith. When God commands, we must remember that He is working “at both ends of the line,” and that His perfect will is always the best.

3. *God's works are always balanced.*

God balanced a great public miracle with a quiet meeting in the house of Judas. The bright light and the voice from heaven were dramatic events, but the visit of Ananias was somewhat ordinary. The hand of God pushed Saul from his “high horse,” but God used the hand of a man to bring Saul what he most needed. God spoke from heaven, but He also spoke through an obedient disciple who gave the message to Saul. The “ordinary” events were just as much a part of the miracle as were the extraordinary.

4. *We must never underestimate the value of one person brought to Christ.*

Peter was ministering to thousands in Jerusalem, and Philip had seen a great harvest among the Samaritan people, but Ananias was sent to only one man. Yet what a man! Saul of Tarsus became Paul the apostle, and his life and ministry have influenced people and nations ever since. Even secular historians confess that Paul is one of the significant figures in world history.

On April 21, 1855, Edward Kimball led one of his Sunday School boys to faith in Christ. Little did he realize that Dwight L. Moody would one day become the world's leading evangelist. The ministry of Norman B. Harrison in an obscure Bible conference was used of God to bring Theodore Epp to faith in Christ, and God used Theodore Epp to build the Back to the Bible ministry around the world. Our task is to lead men and women to Christ; God's task is to use them for His glory; and every person is important to God.

3. He Met the Opposition (Acts 9:20–25)

Saul immediately began to proclaim the Christ that he had persecuted, declaring boldly that Jesus is the Son of God.

NOTE: This is the only place in Acts that you find this title, but Paul used it in his epistles at least fifteen times. It was a major emphasis in his ministry. The dramatic change in Saul's life was a source of wonder to the Jews at Damascus.

Acts 26:20 – Every new convert's witness for Christ ought to begin right where he is, so Saul began his ministry first in Damascus

Gal. 1:17 – It is likely that Saul's visit to Arabia took place about this time.

Had Luke included it in his account, he would have placed it between Acts 9:21 and 22. We do not know how long he remained in Arabia, but we do know that after three years, Saul was back in Jerusalem (Gal. 1:18).

Why did he go to Arabia?

Probably because the Lord instructed him to get alone so that He might teach Saul His Word.

The important thing about this Arabian sojourn is the fact that Saul did not “confer with flesh and blood” but received his message and mandate directly from the Lord (Gal. 1:10–24).

He did not borrow anything from the Apostles in Jerusalem, because he did not even meet them until three years after his conversion.

Throughout his life, the great apostle was hated, hunted, and plotted against by both Jews and Gentiles (“in perils of my own countrymen, in perils of the Gentiles”—2 Cor. 11:26, NKJV).

NOTE: As you read the Book of Acts, you see how the opposition and persecution increase, until the apostle ends up a prisoner in Rome (Acts 13:45, 50; 14:19; 17:5, 13; 18:12; 20:3, 19; 21:10–11, 27ff).

But he counted it a privilege to suffer for the sake of Christ

4. He Met the Jerusalem Believers (Acts 9:26–31)

There were two stages in Saul's experience with the church in Jerusalem.

1. *Saul rejected (v. 26).*

At first, the believers in the Jerusalem church were afraid of him. Saul “kept trying” (literal Greek) to get into their fellowship, but they would not accept him. For one thing, they were afraid of him and probably thought that his new attitude of friendliness was only a trick to get into their fellowship so he could have them arrested. They did not believe that he was even a disciple of Jesus Christ, let alone an apostle who had seen the risen Savior.

2. *Saul accepted (vv. 27–31).*

It was Barnabas who helped the Jerusalem church accept Saul. We met Joseph, the “son of encouragement,” in Acts 4:36–37, and we will meet him again as we continue to study Acts. Barnabas “took hold” of Saul, brought him to the church leaders, and convinced them that Saul was both a believer and a chosen apostle. He had indeed seen the risen Christ (1 Cor. 9:1). It is not necessary to invent some “hidden reason” why Barnabas befriended Saul. This was just the nature of the man: he was an encouragement to others.

Saul began to witness to the Greek-speaking Jews, the Hellenists that had engineered the trial and death of Stephen (Acts 6:9–15). Saul was one of them, having been born and raised in Tarsus; and no doubt he felt an obligation to take up the mantle left by Stephen (Acts 22:20). The Hellenistic Jews were not about to permit this kind of witness, so they plotted to kill him.

We will not meet Saul again until Acts 11:25, when once more it is Barnabas who finds him and brings him to the church at Antioch where they ministered together.

That took place about **seven** years after Saul left Jerusalem, about **ten** years after his conversion.

We have every reason to believe that Saul used Tarsus as his headquarters for taking the Gospel to the Gentiles in that part of the Roman Empire. He ministered “in the regions of Syria and Cilicia” (Gal. 1:21) and established churches there (Acts 15:41). Some Bible scholars believe that the Galatian churches were founded at this time.

- It is likely that some of the trials listed in 2 Corinthians 11:24–26 occurred during this period.
- Only one Roman beating is recorded in Acts (16:22), which leaves two not accounted for.
- The five Jewish beatings are not recorded either in Acts or the epistles.
- Luke tells us about only one shipwreck (Acts 27), but we have no record of the other two.

Anyone who thinks that the apostle was taking a vacation during those years is certainly in error!

Acts 9:31 – is another of Luke’s summaries that he regularly dropped into the book

NOTE: that the geographic locations parallel those given in Acts 1:8.

- Luke is telling us that the message was going out just as the Lord had commanded.

Soon, the center would be Antioch, not Jerusalem, and the key leader Paul, not Peter; and the Gospel would be taken to the uttermost part of the earth.

It was a time of “peace” for the churches, but not a time of complacency, for they grew both spiritually and numerically. They seized the opportunity to repair and strengthen their sails before the next storm began to blow! The door of faith had been opened to the Jews (Acts 2) and to the Samaritans (Acts 8), and soon it would be opened to the Gentiles (Acts 10).

Saul has moved off the scene, and Peter now returns. Soon, Peter will move off the scene (except for a brief mention in Acts 15) and Paul will fill the pages of the Book of Acts.

God changes His workmen, but His work goes on.

And you and I are privileged to be a part of that work today!

Home Work

1. The episode on the Damascus road was a profound learning experience for Saul. What did he learn about ...

a. Who is Jesus(9.4-5,20,22)?

b. What his own mission was going to be (9.15-16,20-30)?

2. How else did this encounter with Jesus affect him?

a. 9.8-9 :

b. 9.1-2, 20-30:

3. What Role did Stephen, Ananias, and Barnabas have in Saul's reconciliation with God and His people?

a. Stephen (Acts 7.60-8.1)

b. Ananias (9.10-17)

c. Barnabas(9.26-27)

4. How do these men's examples apply to us?

5. Why is it important for us to think about the early Christians' willingness to suffer for Jesus' name (5.40-42, 7.59-60, 9.15-16, 23-30)?

6. Can you add anything to Page 24-25 of your notes?