

- A Study in Acts -

Chapter Nine – The Conversion of Saul

ACTS 9:1-2:

In this chapter, Luke is going to leave Peter and the other Apostles, as well as those who have joined them in the work of the spread of the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Luke is now going to focus on Saul (who is also called Paul – **13:9**). We will use this chapter to establish the biography of Saul, and the importance of the work that he would be charged with from the Lord.

Text #1:

Acts 9:1-2 “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.”

Saul: This is the same Saul, that Luke has already introduced at the end of **chapter seven (7:58)**, and mentioned again at the beginning of **chapter eight (8:1)**. In both cases, he was tied to the persecution of the “**Body of Christ**” (which is made up of Christians or saints).

We can develop the biography of Saul of Tarsus, by looking at his own words:

First, we have Paul’s words as he defends himself to the mob in Jerusalem, having falsely accused him of bringing a Gentile into the temple (**21:26-36**).

Acts 22:3-4 ““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. ⁴ I persecuted this Way to the death, binding and delivering into prisons both men and women”

Tarsus: this was the capital city of a province of eastern Asia Minor known as Cilicia, about ten miles inland from the Mediterranean Sea. Tarsus was home to a large Jewish order for almost two hundred years before the coming of the Lord. It was the chief city of the Roman Empire in this area. This provided many of the Jews born here a rare citizenship in the empire.

In This City: Paul was in Jerusalem, when he made this statement and is indicating that he was educated in Jerusalem by the renowned rabbi “**Gamaliel**” (we have already met Gamaliel in **Acts 5:33-39**).

I Persecuted this Way: Paul also openly admits that his pre-conversion existence was focused on the persecution of Christians.

Second, we learn from his activity in Corinth with Priscilla and Aquila, that he was also trained in the occupation of tent making, as was the custom of all the Jews to train their children in the family business or a trade, note:

Acts 18:3 “**So, because he was of the same trade, he stayed with them and worked; for by occupation they were tentmakers.**”

Third, as Paul continued his defense for the false charges levied against him; this time to the Sanhedrin council, he would give us more information, note:

Acts 23:6 “*But when Paul perceived that one part were Sadducees and the other Pharisees, he cried out in the council, “Men and brethren, I am a Pharisee, the son of a Pharisee; concerning the hope and resurrection of the dead I am being judged!”*”

In addition to a classical Jewish education, Paul was actively involved in the strictest party among his people. The Pharisees taught and held in high esteem the Law of Moses, and the traditions of their fathers. They taught of a general resurrection and the existence of angels (**Acts 23:8**); which was refuted by the opposing Sadducees. This was something that Paul would re-iterate to King Agrippa, note:

Acts 26:4-6 “*“My manner of life from my youth, which was spent from the beginning among my own nation at Jerusalem, all the Jews know. ⁵ They knew me from the first, if they were willing to testify, that according to the strictest sect of our religion I lived a Pharisee. ⁶ And now I stand and am judged for the hope of the promise made by God to our fathers.”*”

Fourth, Paul would write in his letter to Christians in Galatia, that he excelled in Judaism (we would say today that he was an up-and-comer!), note:

Galatians 1:13-14 “**For you have heard of my former conduct in Judaism, how I persecuted the church of God beyond measure and *tried to* destroy it. ¹⁴ And I advanced in Judaism beyond many of my contemporaries in my own nation, being more exceedingly zealous for the traditions of my fathers.**”

Fifth, as Paul would write to the Christians in Philippi to be on guard against Judaizing teachers, and to give all to Christ; he would use his own history as a demonstration of just that, note:

Philippians 3:4-7 “**though I also might have confidence in the flesh. If anyone else thinks he may have confidence in the flesh, I more so: ⁵ circumcised the eighth day, of the stock of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of the Hebrews; concerning the law, a Pharisee; ⁶ concerning zeal, persecuting the church; concerning the righteousness which is in the law, blameless.**

⁷ But what things were gain to me, these I have counted loss for Christ.”

Conclusion – there are a couple of things we should take away from this internal evidence that makes up Saul’s Biography; **first**, is the fact that Saul thought he was doing what was right in the sight of God in persecuting those who had become followers of Christ. He had a clean

conscience in his efforts (**Acts 24:16**); which also stands as testimony to the fact that conscience alone is not enough to establish righteousness, especially if our conscience is un-educated!

Second, is the fact that Saul had everything to live for; if, he remained a Jew and continued in the fast track to leadership. This will also stand as pure testimony of the power of an educated conscience to anyone with an honest heart! Keep this in mind as Saul encounters the Lord and remember these words after the fact, note:

Acts 26:19 *“Therefore, King Agrippa, I was not disobedient to the heavenly vision,”*

Letters: Saul breathing the threats against the disciples of Christ asked letters of the high priest to the synagogues in Damascus. We would refer to these letters today as warrants for their arrest. This request also shows the extent of the authority of the high priest and the Sanhedrin in synagogues outside of Judea.

Damascus: this is the chief city of the Roman province of Arabia (lower Syria, just under the province of Abilene), controlled at this time by Aretas (**2 Corinthians 11:32**). Damascus is an ancient city which has been tied to the Bible narrative from very early on.

The Way: Luke uses the earliest designation associated with the disciples of Christ, **“The Way”**. This is a term that would be used many times to describe the members of the **“Body of Christ”** by Luke, note:

The term is used by an evil source to describe a singular path to God, note:

Acts 16:17 **“This girl followed Paul and us, and cried out, saying, “These men are the servants of the Most High God, who proclaim to us the way of salvation.””**

Luke used this same descriptive term to describe the work of Aquila and Priscilla as they worked with Apollos; note:

Acts 18:26 **“So he began to speak boldly in the synagogue. When Aquila and Priscilla heard him, they took him aside and explained to him the way of God more accurately.”**

These first two, describe the significance of the singular path to God, which then becomes an important understanding for why they were not referred to as ‘The Ways’. The Gospel of Christ only produces those of **“The Way”**!

As the Apostle Paul (Saul of Tarsus) would come to Ephesus, Luke would use this term twice concerning the disciples of Christ, note:

Acts 19:9 **“But when some were hardened and did not believe, but spoke evil of the Way before the multitude, he departed from them and withdrew the disciples, reasoning daily in the school of Tyrannus.”**

Acts 19:23 “And about that time there arose a great commotion about the Way.”

Then, Paul himself will use the term to describe those whom he persecuted, note:

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

The words of the Lord to His disciples before His death, ties all this together, note:

John 14:6 “Jesus said to him, “I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through Me.”

The synonymous terms of “**Christian**”; first used in **Acts 11:26** (then in: **Acts 26:28; 1 Peter 4:16**), describes ‘those who pertain to Christ’, and “**Saints**” (**1 Corinthians 1:2; Ephesians 3:8; 1 Thessalonians 3:13; 2 Thessalonians 1:10**; etc.), describes those set apart to Him.

Now that we know the purpose for Saul’s trip to Damascus, in the next lesson we will discuss the actual journey!