

ACTS 9

THE CONVERSION OF SAUL (9:1–19a)

The Conviction of Saul (9:1–9)

9:1a. The adverb **still** looks back to 8:3. While the gospel was reaching farther outside of Jerusalem, **Saul** was continuing his relentless persecution of the church.

9:1b–2. So great was Saul's hatred for the church that **he went to the high priest and asked him for letters to the synagogues in Damascus.**

The mention of "synagogues in Damascus" indicates that Christianity was still closely associated with Judaism (in James 2:2 the word "meeting" renders the Gr. *synagōgēn*, "synagogue"). Mention of Damascus shows that Christianity had spread rapidly.

Strangely, Saul referred to Christianity as **the Way**, a term used only in Acts (19:9, 23; 22:4; 24:14, 22).

9:3–4. **Saul** both **heard** the **voice** of the Lord Jesus and saw Him which is implicit in the reference to a **light from heaven**. (cf. 9:17, 27; 22:14; 26:16; 1 Cor. 9:1; 15:8). It was fundamental to Saul's apostleship that he saw the resurrected Lord (cf. 1 Cor. 9:1).

The question, **Why do you persecute Me?** (cf. Acts 9:5) is filled with significance for it shows the union of Christ with His church. The Lord did not ask, "Why do you persecute My church?" The reference to "Me" gave Saul his first glimpse into the great doctrine of Christians being in Christ.

9:5. Some interpret "Lord" in Saul's question, **Who are You, Lord?** (*kyrie*) as "Sir." It is possible for this noun to have this meaning, as it does in Matthew 13:27; 27:63; John 4:11; Acts 10:4; and elsewhere. However, there is too much that is supernatural in this passage to use the mere human vocative, "Sir." Even though **Saul** did not immediately recognize this One as Jesus, he must have acknowledged a supernatural being. Jesus then identified Himself to Saul: **I am Jesus** (cf. 9:17).

9:6. The resurrected Lord commanded Saul, **Go into the city and you will be told what you must do.** Saul was told he must proclaim the gospel, which would involve suffering (vv. 15–16; 22:10, 15; 26:16–20). The Lord Himself gave Saul the truth of justification by faith on the Damascus Road.

9:7. An apparent discrepancy stands between verse 7 and 22:9. In 9:7 Luke recorded that **the men** who traveled **with Saul ... heard the sound** (*phōnēs*), but in 22:9 Luke wrote that "they did not understand the voice" (*phōnēn*). The genitive case is employed in 9:7, and the accusative is used in 22:9. So the travelers with Saul heard the sound (9:7) but did not understand what Christ said (22:9).

9:8. If Saul's "thorn in the flesh" was eye trouble (cf. comments on 2 Cor. 12:7), this may have been the prelude of it. At any rate there is a sharp contrast between **Saul** in Acts 9:1 and 8. One moment he was storming up the road, determined to capture and imprison Christians. Soon thereafter he was **led** like a child **by the hand into Damascus.**

9:9. The **three days** of blindness, fasting, and praying (v. 11) were a time of waiting. Saul still had not received the message God had promised him (v. 6).

The Contrition of Saul (9:10–19a)

9:10–14. By means of a **vision** God instructed a reluctant **Ananias** to **restore** Saul's **sight**. He was to go to **Saul** where he was staying with a man named **Judas** whose **house was on Straight Street**. It was one of the two parallel streets that ran from the western to the eastern wall. The first reference to Saul's birthplace—**Tarsus**—is given in verse 11.

Interestingly believers were first called **saints** in the Book of Acts (v. 13). The church is comprised of "set-apart ones" (*hagiois*; cf. "saints" in Rom. 1:1; Eph. 1:1; Phil. 1:1). From Acts 9:14 it is evident that the news of Saul's coming to persecute believers in Damascus had preceded his arrival, and **Ananias** feared what Saul might do.

9:15. The Lord assured **Ananias ... This man is My chosen instrument to carry My name before the Gentiles and their kings and before the people of Israel.** Saul was to become Paul, the apostle to the uncircumcised (Rom. 11:13; Gal. 2:2, 7–8; Eph. 3:8), including kings (cf. Governor Felix [Acts 24:1–23], Governor Porcius Festus [24:27–25:12], King Herod Agrippa II [25:13–26:32], and possibly Emperor Nero

[25:11]). The apostle, of course, also ministered to “the people of Israel” (cf. 9:20; 13:5, 14; 14:1; 17:2, 10, 17; 18:4, 19; 19:8; 26:17–20; Rom. 1:16).

9:16. The partial fulfillment of this prediction is seen in Saul’s inventory of his suffering (2 Cor. 11:23–27).

9:17. **Brother Saul**—what words of encouragement these must have been to **Saul**! The first recorded man to call Saul a Christian brother was **Ananias**. A more complete statement of Ananias’ words is given in 22:14–16. Ananias’ apprehension of Saul was turned to love for Saul because of the Lord’s directive. Ananias identified with Saul by **placing his hands on** him.

Saul’s being **filled with the Holy Spirit** clearly followed his conversion (cf. 4:8, 31; Eph. 5:18).

9:18. In his healing from his blindness **something like scales fell from Saul’s eyes, and he could see again**. The word “scales” (*lepidēs*, from the verb *lepō*, “to peel”) was used of the scales of fish and crocodiles. As in several previous conversions recorded in Acts, water baptism followed conversion (8:12, 38).

After this event Ananias disappeared from the narrative and is not mentioned again except in chapter 22 where Paul recounted his own conversion.

9:19a. The three days without food or drink, in addition to the shock of his “exposure” to the resurrected Christ, left Saul weak. However, several things helped him regain **his strength**: his encounter with Ananias, his healing, his filling with the Spirit, his water baptism, and his **taking some food**.

THE CONFLICTS OF SAUL (9:19B–31) *The Confession of Saul (9:19b–22)*

9:19b–20. After only a few **days with the Christians in Damascus** Saul **began to preach in the synagogues that Jesus is the Son of God**. Preaching to Jews in their synagogues was also his strategy on his missionary journeys (**the first journey—13:5, 14; 14:1; the second journey—17:2, 10, 17; 18:4; the third journey—18:19; 19:8**). Acts 9:20 includes the only occurrence of the phrase “Son of God” in Acts. On the Damascus Road the first thing Saul learned was who Jesus is.

9:21. The Jews **were astonished**. This response is understandable. The Greek verb *existanto* is literally, “they were beside themselves; they were struck out of their senses”; several other people had the same response to Jesus (Mark 2:12; 5:42; 6:51). This word is used in Acts five times (2:7; 8:13; 9:21; 10:45; 12:16). Saul’s intense persecution campaign had **raised havoc in Jerusalem** (cf. 8:3; 22:19; 26:11).

9:22. **Saul** used his theological training to good advantage in pressing home the truth that the Lord **Jesus is the Messiah**. He had gone to **Damascus** to persecute the church; he ended up preaching Jesus. What a contrast! What grace! No wonder the Damascus **Jews** were **baffled** (*synechynnen*, “bewildered, confused,” from *syncheō*, used in the NT only in 2:6; 9:22; 21:27, 31).

The Conspiracies Against Saul (9:23–31)

(1) In Damascus. 9:23–25 One of the themes in Acts, underscored in this paragraph, is the Jewish leaders’ opposition to the gospel. It is clear from 2 Corinthians 11:32–33 that this was a joint effort of the Jews and the governor under King Aretas (a Nabatean), though the Jews were the prime movers. Saul’s **followers**, aware that **the Jews conspired to kill him ... lowered him in a basket** outside **the wall** since **the city gates** were guarded. Saul’s plans for persecuting Christians in Damascus took a strange turn; he had entered the city blind and left in a basket! Ironically *he* became the object of persecution.

The reference to “followers” (*mathētai*, lit., “disciples”) shows that Saul was already having a fruitful ministry. He was a gifted leader.

Luke in compressing the narrative omits Saul’s brief sojourn into Arabia, mentioned by Paul in Galatians 1:17. Probably this occurred between Acts 9:22 and 23. The purpose of Paul’s time in Arabia is unknown.

In Jerusalem (9:26–30) 9:26–28. **Saul** had left **Jerusalem** an enemy of Christianity to persecute the church **in Damascus**; but in God’s sovereign grace he joined the believers and preached the gospel in Jerusalem, but the believers there refused to trust him. In Damascus Saul needed a friend, Ananias; in Jerusalem he needed another, **Barnabas**. He whose name means “Son of Encouragement” (4:36) proved to be that for Saul. Barnabas is seen in Acts on four other occasions. (a) 11:22–24; (b) 11:30; 12:25; (c) 13:1–2, 50; 14:12; (d) 15:2, 12, 22, 25, 37. The believers in Jerusalem, convinced by Barnabas that Saul had in fact been converted, allowed **Saul** to stay **with them**. In Damascus he **preached fearlessly in the name of Jesus**, and in **Jerusalem** he was **speaking boldly in the name of the Lord** (cf. comments on “boldly” in 4:31).

9:29. Saul **talked and debated with the Grecian Jews**, thus continuing the work of Stephen (cf. 6:8–10). Evidently Saul’s debating ability proved to be too much for the Grecian Jews as they attempted to assassinate him.

9:30. **The brothers** (cf. v. 17) at Jerusalem then escorted Saul to **Caesarea**, the seaport about 65 miles away by road, **and sent him** to his hometown, **Tarsus**. An ancient city, then over 4,000 years old, Tarsus was an intellectual city in the Roman Empire.

Saul’s movements in chapter 9 may be summarized as follows:

1. Jerusalem (vv. 1–2)
2. Damascus (vv. 3–22)
3. Arabia (Gal. 1:17)
4. Damascus (Acts 9:23–25; Gal. 1:17; 2 Cor. 11:32–33)
5. Jerusalem (Acts 9:26–29; Gal. 1:18–20)
6. Caesarea (Acts 9:30)
7. Tarsus (v. 30; Gal. 1:21–24)

(3) The conclusion. 9:31. In the phrase **the church throughout Judea, Galilee, and Samaria** the word “church” is singular. Luke was obviously speaking of the universal church as it was dispersed in the Holy Land.

So strong was Jewish antagonism to Saul and his ministry that after he left the area the church **enjoyed a time of peace**.

The church was still confined to Jews, half-Jews (the Samaritans), and proselytes to Judaism who became Christians. But all was in readiness for the extension of the church to a new segment of the world’s population.

With this third of seven progress reports on the spiritual and numerical growth of the church (cf. 2:47; 6:7; 12:24; 16:5; 19:20; 28:30–31), Luke brought this section of his book to a conclusion.¹



¹ Stanley D. Toussaint, “Acts,” in *The Bible Knowledge Commentary: An Exposition of the Scriptures*, ed. J. F. Walvoord and R. B. Zuck, vol. 2 (Wheaton, IL: Victor Books, 1985), 375–378.