

"Saul of Tarsus"

Background Scripture: Acts 9:1-31

Devotional Reading: Philippians 3:1-14

Acts 9:9-17 (NIV)

⁹ For three days he was blind, and did not eat or drink anything.

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

"Yes, Lord," he answered.

¹¹ The 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." ¹² In 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 holy people in Jerusalem. ¹⁴ And he has come here with authority from the chief priests to arrest all who call on your name."

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

¹⁷ Then 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."

LESSON AIMS

- **Learning Fact:** To summarize Ananias' objection to God's directive.
- **Biblical Principle:** To know that God can redirect anyone's life for His service.
- **Daily Application:** To be openminded (ready to entertain new ideas) in obeying God's directives.

INTRODUCTION

"I Once Was Blind ..."

John Newton was an eighteenth-century Englishman who served as captain for ships that transported captured Africans to North America as slaves. The horrendous nature of that occupation included not only the acceptance of slavery but also the imposition of inhuman conditions on the ships. To do this, one needed a callous soul.

In 1748, Newton was in a terrifying storm in a ship off the coast of Ireland. Fearing for his life, he began praying in a way that led to his conversion to Christ, eventually becoming a minister in 1764. He began writing about his faith, and in 1772 he published the words to "Amazing Grace," a semi-autobiographical account of how God "saved a wretch like me."

One of the most memorable lines in the hymn is "[I] was blind, but now I see." While this phrase is drawn from the story of Jesus' healing of the blind man in John 9:25, it also fits the story of Saul in Damascus.

LESSON CONTEXT: Damascus

Even during Paul's day, Damascus was an ancient city, having been inhabited for at least 3,000 years (see Genesis 14:15). It figures prominently in Old Testament narratives, mentioned there 44 times in Hebrew. It lies about 150 miles north of Jerusalem.

As for the New Testament era, the book of Acts mentions the city of Damascus 13 times. It was a city of many ethnicities. It had become part of the Greek world after the conquest by the forces of Alexander the Great (356-323 B.C.). Under later Roman influence, Damascus was designated as one of the cities of the Decapolis, meaning "10 cities" (see Matthew 4:25; Mark 5:20; 7:31). Jesus performed miracles near those cities (Matthew 8:28-33; Mark 5:1-17; 7:31-37), although not in Damascus itself. Greco-Roman ruins are existent in Damascus today. These include a section of an impressive boulevard that is likely "the street which is called Straight" of Acts 9:11.

Damascus had many Jewish residents and synagogues in the first century A.D. The historian Josephus (A.D. 37–100) records that thousands of Jews were killed by the Romans in Damascus during the first Jewish Revolt (about A.D. 66). This testifies to a large presence with many houses of worship in that city. It is no wonder that Saul would travel there, expecting to find synagogues where Jews had embraced Christianity.

We are not told how or when the gospel message reached Damascus. A reasonable speculation is that it occurred as a result of the Day of Pentecost, as people returned home (see Acts 2:5–11). By the time of the current lesson, at least a couple of years had passed since that event, the stoning of Stephen, and the beginning of Saul's persecution. Acts 8:1 records that the Jerusalem church was scattered at that time, although only the destinations of Judaea and Samaria are mentioned there.

LESSON CONTEXT: Saul

We first meet Saul—later known as Paul, beginning in Acts 13:9—when he acted as a witness to the stoning of Stephen in Acts 7:58; 8:1 (see also 22:20). He is presented elsewhere as an ambitious young man who was building a career in the rabbinic tradition of Jerusalem and as a trusted servant of the temple officials and religious leaders (Galatians 1:14; Philippians 3:4–6). He could never have been a priest because he was from the tribe of Benjamin rather than the priestly tribe of Levi (see Deuteronomy 18:1; Hebrews 7:5; etc.). But he could have become one of the greatest of the Pharisees, like his teacher Gamaliel (Acts 5:34; 22:3).

The climb up this career ladder accelerated when Saul oversaw a direct assault on the believers in Jerusalem, where he searched for them house to house and threw into prison those he found (Acts 8:3; 26:10). He apparently did effective work at that, for the high priest agreed to authorize him to go to Damascus to find Christians and bring them back to Jerusalem for trial and punishment (9:1–2; 22:19; 26:9–11). His ambitious trip to Damascus was the occasion of the resurrected Jesus appearing to Saul and asking, "Why do you persecute me?" (9:4).

This Damascus Road story is told three times in Acts: once as narrated by author Luke (Acts 9:1–19) and twice as told by Saul/Paul himself (22:3–16; 26:9–18). As the lesson opened, Saul had been struck blind by the Lord on that road. Subsequently, men led Saul by the hand into the city (9:1–8).

1. What disciple is introduced and how is he called into service to help Saul? (Acts 9:9–10)

Saul's Waiting: Acts 9:9–12

We certainly can imagine what Saul was thinking for the *three days he was blind* and went without food or drink! Acts 9:11 fills this in, but only in general terms.

Luke, the author of the Gospel of Luke and the book of Acts, uses the word *disciple* dozens of times in his two works. In Luke's Gospel, a disciple is a dedicated student of Jesus the teacher. In Acts, a disciple is a committed follower of the risen Lord. In that regard, *Ananias* may be much like many Christians today who serve the Lord faithfully in relative anonymity.

We gain a bit more information about this *disciple* in Acts 22:12. There Paul (formerly the Saul of the lesson) described Ananias as "a devout observer of the law and highly respected by all the Jews living there." We take care, of course, not to confuse this Ananias with two others by the same name in Acts 5:1 and 24:1.

How surprised *Ananias* must have been to experience a *vision* in which *the Lord* communicated with him personally! The word *vision* implies a supernatural origin. It involves seeing things not normally seen, but it may also consist of hearing things not normally heard, as in the calling of Samuel (1 Samuel 3:1–14). The same may be the case here. But unlike the calling of young Samuel, Ananias recognized what was happening immediately. So he answered *Yes, Lord*, implying that Ananias was listening.

What Do You Think?

How do you express your availability for God's unexpected ministry opportunities?

Digging Deeper

What responsibilities, fears, etc., prevent you from being fully available?

The Lord may refer to God in the general sense that does not distinguish among members of the Trinity. In this case, however, it refers to the risen Jesus in particular, as Acts 9:17b makes clear.

The instructions are detailed—there can be no doubt regarding where and to whom Ananias is to go. *Straight Street* is the grand boulevard of Damascus. This may indicate that this particular *Judas*, is the homeowner of the sort of place with whom a person like Saul might find lodging.

Saul's hometown of *Tarsus* was a well-known city about 250 miles north-northwest of Damascus and 355 miles due north of Jerusalem.

The escapades of the zealous Saul were well known in Damascus. For Ananias to receive a vision from the Lord asking him to seek out a man who made it his religious practice to throw Christian men and women into prison must have been almost too much for Ananias to take. Nevertheless, it was explained to him in the vision that Saul himself had a vision in which he saw a man named Ananias coming toward him, placing his hand upon him, and causing him to receive his sight.

2. What instructions did Ananias receive from the Lord? (Acts 9:11-12)

What Do You Think?

When have you been part of God's answer to someone else's prayers?

Digging Deeper

What scripture texts suggest that God frequently desires to work through His people and not more supernatural interventions?

Ananias' Objection: Acts 9:13-16

As expected, Ananias was quick to object to this request. Ananias had explained that he had heard of the evil this man had done to *your holy people in Jerusalem*, and knew all about the notorious persecutor of the church and his plans. And Ananias was exactly the type of person Saul had come to arrest and haul back to Jerusalem. His objections are overruled however, and his concerns alleviated by the Lord who said, "this man is my chosen instrument to proclaim my name to the Gentiles."

3. How did Ananias respond to God's request? (Acts 9:13-16)

What Do You Think?

When have you acted timidly because of your knowledge of the risk involved in acting boldly?

Digging Deeper

What fears still hold you back from bold obedience to God?

Paul later would make frequent references to the fact that he was called of God to be the apostle to the Gentiles (see Galatians 1:15-16), as well as try to convince his fellow Jews—*the people of Israel*—that Jesus was their promised Messiah (example: Acts 13:14-45). As Saul had been the minister of suffering to many believers, he himself would now be the recipient of much suffering, both at the hands of believers, and especially at the hands of his own kinsmen, the Jews.

We continue to be in awe of God's revealing His plans for Saul to Ananias, a revelation that God was certainly not obligated to provide.

The Lord's Healing: Acts 9:17

The actions of *Ananias* harmonize with actions required of him in Acts 9:11. Verse 17 ties things together and clarifies. *The Lord* of the visions had been none other than *Jesus* himself. It was none other than He who had *appeared* to *Saul* on the road (compare Acts 9:5; 22:8; 26:15) and who had spoken to Ananias in Damascus.

As Saul was just about to *see again*, Ananias also announced that Saul was to *be filled with the Holy Spirit*. What a difference three days can make in a man's life (9:9). 72 hours earlier the chances of a Jewish believer addressing the threatening Saul as "brother" would have been nil. The word brother must have brought joy to the heart of Saul. Now Saul and Ananias are all part of the same family.

Saul's first action after having his sight restored was to be baptized, even before he was strengthened in his body after not eating three days (vs. 18, 19, not in today's text). After being baptized, presumably at

the hands of Ananias, Saul then ate, received strength, and remained a number of days with the disciples at Damascus. Immediately Saul began to preach in the synagogues that Jesus is the Son of God!

4. What physical and spiritual healing resulted from Ananias obedience? (Acts 9:17)

CONCLUSION

Conversion, Call, or Both?

The story of Saul's experience on the way to Damascus is usually portrayed as his "conversion" and is a valid description in that the episode shows a life transformed from an unbeliever into a believer, one who was baptized and received the Holy Spirit. But was that Luke's intent in documenting this story? Is Saul's conversion experience, with its spectacular visions and drama, intended to be some sort of model or expectation for conversions today?

Certainly many conversions over the centuries have been dramatically sudden and powerful. I have heard the stories, and so have you. But I have never heard of an unbeliever being called in a vision to the sort of mission to which Saul was called. He was a young man (Acts 7:58) whom Jesus simply had to have as His servant. Jesus did not have to stir up passion in Saul; he was already passionate. Jesus did not have to infuse Saul with a great knowledge of Scripture; he already had it. Jesus did not have to put an obedient spirit in Saul; he already had one. Unbeknownst to Saul, he had been preparing his whole life to be redirected and used by Jesus!

Jesus can still redirect a person's life while using all that person's life experiences in kingdom service. We should be on the lookout for such people—people whose life experiences, education, etc., could result in their being massively influential in service to the risen Lord! Which would be easier: (1) to create zeal in an apathetic person or (2) to take an already zealous person and redirect that zeal for Christ? Think of people you know or have heard about whose lives were transformed by the gospel and redirected to do great things for Christ. How does your own story mesh with theirs? How might it?

What Do You Think?

What experiences illustrate the Holy Spirit's bringing you from spiritual blindness to sight?

Digging Deeper

What practices help you be aware of times when the Holy Spirit is at work further clarifying your vision?

PRAYER

Heavenly Father, it is sobering to think how well You know us. Thank You for the inspiring stories of Your zealous ones! Empower and guide us to have similar zeal in doing great things for You. We pray in the name of Jesus Christ. Amen.

THOUGHT TO REMEMBER

Christ calls us not only *to* Him but also *for* Him.