

Paul's conversion and Peter's healing miracles

Acts Chapter 7 v 54 to Chapter 8 v 3, and Chapter 9 v 1 to 43

Paul's conversion as recorded in Acts 9 marks a crucial turning point in the history of the early church, and it is significant that the story is told three times in the Book of Acts – here as part of Luke's narrative, then later in Chapter 22 (v 6 to 16) as Paul relates the story to the Roman tribune and the Jewish Council after his arrest in Jerusalem, and finally in Chapter 26 (v 12 to 18) when Paul includes the story as part of his defence before King Agrippa in Caesarea...

The stoning of Stephen; Saul persecutes the church (Acts 7 v 54 to 8 v 3, 9 v 1 to 2)

- The background to Saul's conversion can be found in this passage. What were the immediate causes and consequences of Saul's actions?
- What do these verses tell us about Saul – his beliefs, his convictions, his zeal and his sincerity? How did Paul later view his behaviour? See 1 Timothy 1 v 13 to 16, Philippians 3 v 5 to 8.

“Still breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord” (v 1) – the picture is of an angry, violent man absolutely convinced of his own righteousness: Saul hated the ‘disciples of the Lord’. “Went to the high priest” – Saul carried out persecution under the direct approval of the highest religious authorities. He asked and received letters from the high priest authorizing his mission.

“If he found any belonging to the Way” (v 2) – here the Christian faith is referred to as ‘the Way’. This may be the earliest name for the Christian movement, and a fitting one – used five times in Acts. Following Jesus is a way of living, as well as believing (see John 14 v 6).

The conversion of Saul (Acts 9 v 3 to 19)

- How does this story display Jesus' power, majesty and glory – and also his compassion, mercy, love and grace? “Saul, Saul” (v 4): when Jesus repeats a name twice it indicates deep emotion (“Martha, Martha” Luke 10 v 41; “Simon, Simon” Luke 22 v 31; “Jerusalem, Jerusalem” Matthew 23 v 37)...
- What are the implications of Jesus' words in v 5? What do you think went through Paul's mind during his three days of blindness?
- Why did the Lord call Ananias in a vision? What task was he given to do? How did Ananias respond – initially, and finally? How did God deal with his initial hesitancy?
- “How much he must suffer for my name” (v 16) – for a catalogue of Paul's sufferings see 2 Corinthians 11 v 23 to 28. Are all Christ-followers called to suffer? Why? See Mark 13 v 13.
- In 1 Timothy 1 v 13 to 16 Paul refers to his conversion experience as “an example” to future believers. In what ways do you think his conversion is a ‘model’ or ‘pattern’ for all new Christians?

““Why are you persecuting me?”” (v 4) – as the heavenly light overwhelmed him, Saul was confronted by the true nature of his crime: he was persecuting God, not man. ““Who are You, Lord?”” (v 5) – like Paul, we must ask this question with a humble heart. Jesus showed us exactly who God is, and he always answers this question. Paul's overarching goal for the rest of his life was “that I may know him and the power of his resurrection, and may share his sufferings” (Philippians 3 v 10).

In these verses we are only given the briefest account of what happened. We know more from what Paul said about this experience in Acts 22 v 3 to 11; Acts 26 v 12 to 18; 1 Corinthians 9 v 1 and 15 v 8. We also know more from what Barnabas said about Saul's experience in Acts 9 v 27 and from what Ananias said about Saul's experience in Acts 9 v 17.

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“He is a chosen instrument of mine to carry my name before the Gentiles and kings and the children of Israel” (v 15) – this describes in broad outline the calling and future work of the broken, blind, afflicted man Ananias would soon meet. God called him to preach who he is and what he has done (‘my name’) to Gentiles, kings, and the children of Israel. “For I will show him how much he must suffer for the sake of my name” (v 16) – this was a sobering addition to the great call God put upon the life of Saul: he would leave a life of privilege to embrace a higher call, but a call with much suffering.

Saul preaches in Damascus (Acts 9 v 19 to 25)

- How did Paul prove his sincerity from the start of his Christian life? What was the key point of Saul’s message in v 20 and 22?

“When many days had passed...” (v 23) – in Galatians 1 v 13 to 18 Paul describes how he went to Arabia and then returned to Damascus, and then visited the apostles in Jerusalem after 3 years. Paul refers to his escape from Damascus in a basket in 2 Corinthians 11 v 32, 33, mentioning this occurred during the reign of King Aretas, i.e. between 37 and 39 AD. Paul then spent the next 6 to 7 years in Tarsus, his home town. Then Barnabas asked Paul to come to Antioch, and to work in a large church there (Acts 11 v 25, 26).

- Why do you think such a long period of time elapsed between his conversion and his taking up a leadership role in the church?

Saul in Jerusalem (Acts 9 v 26 to 31)

- Consider the opposition and fellowship Paul experienced in both Damascus and Jerusalem. How does choosing to follow Christ gain us new friends and new enemies?

Compare the picture of the church in v 31 enjoying a time of peace with the situation at the beginning of Chapter 8 (a time of ‘great persecution’). Notice also how much the church had expanded – to Judea, Galilee and Samaria, and refer (again) to Acts 1 v 8.

The healing of Aeneas and Dorcas restored to life (Acts 9 v 32 to 43)

The words of Peter, “‘Rise and make your bed’” (v 34) were perhaps consciously an imitation of Jesus’ healing of the paralytic man in Mark 2 v 10 to 12.

‘Tabitha’ and ‘Dorcas’ both mean ‘deer’. This woman was a beloved member of the Christian community in Joppa, because she was “full of good works and acts of charity” (v 36). “All the widows stood beside him weeping” (v 39) – perhaps it was expected that Peter would merely comfort these Christian widows and others in their grief over Dorcas’ death. Yet Peter sensed a specific leading to do what he had seen Jesus do as recorded in Mark 5 v 38 to 43: he “put them all outside” (v 40), in the anticipation that God would do for Tabitha what Jesus did for the daughter of the ruler of the synagogue. “‘Tabitha, arise’” – it was as if Peter seemed to remember what Jesus said and did as he healed Jairus’ daughter.

“Then, calling the saints and widows” (v 41) and “the saints who lived at Lydda” (v 32) – these verses mention the saints in Lydda and Joppa. This is the first time Christians are called ‘saints’ in the Book of Acts. When the Bible calls Christians saints, the idea is not of super-perfect people: the idea is of a people who are different. Saints are set apart from the world at large: they are distinctive.

Prayer –

Lord, thank you for the amazing story of Paul’s conversion and the events that followed. Thank you for Peter’s acts of faith and healing miracles. We praise you for your power, majesty, glory, compassion, mercy, love and grace. Help us to be encouraged by these stories.

Amen.