

Acts 9:1-31: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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[0 : 0 0] Acts chapter 9 verses 1 to 31. But Saul, still breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord, went to the high priest and asked him for letters to the synagogues at Damascus, so that if he found any belonging to the way, men or women, he might bring them bound to Jerusalem.

Now as he went on his way he approached Damascus, and suddenly a light from heaven shone around him, and falling to the ground he heard a voice saying to him, Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?

And he said, Who are you, Lord? And he said, I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting. But rise and enter the city, and you will be told what you are to do.

The men who were travelling with him stood speechless, hearing the voice, but seeing no one. Saul rose from the ground, and although his eyes were opened, he saw nothing. So they led him by the hand and brought him into Damascus.

And for three days he was without sight, and neither ate nor drank. Now there was a disciple at Damascus named Ananias. The Lord said to him in a vision, Ananias.

[1 : 0 8] And he said, Here I am, Lord. And the Lord said to him, Rise and go to the street called Straight. And at the house of Judas look for a man of Tarsus named Saul. For behold, he is praying, and he has seen in a vision a man named Ananias come in and lay his hands on him, so that he might regain his sight.

But Ananias answered, Lord, I have heard from many about this man, how much evil he has done to your saints at Jerusalem. And here he has authority from the chief priests to bind all who call on your name.

But the Lord said to him, Go, for he is a chosen instrument of mine to carry my name before the Gentiles and kings and the children of Israel. For I will show him how much he must suffer for the sake of my name.

So Ananias departed and entered the house, and laying his hands on him, he said, Brother Saul, the Lord Jesus who appeared to you on the road by which you came, has sent me so that you may regain your sight and be filled with the Holy Spirit.

And immediately something like scales fell from his eyes, and he regained his sight. Then he rose and was baptized, and taking food he was strengthened. For some days he was with the disciples at Damascus, and immediately he proclaimed Jesus in the synagogue, saying, He is the Son of God.

[2 : 2 5] And all who heard him were amazed, and said, Is not this the man who made havoc in Jerusalem of those who called upon this name? And has he not come here for this purpose, to bring them bound before the chief priests?

But Saul increased all the more in strength, and confounded the Jews who lived in Damascus by proving that Jesus was the Christ. When many days had passed, the Jews plotted to kill him, but their plot became known to Saul.

They were watching the gates day and night in order to kill him. But his disciples took him by night, and let him down through an opening in the wall, lowering him in a basket. And when he had come to Jerusalem, he attempted to join the disciples.

And they were all afraid of him, for they did not believe that he was a disciple. But Barnabas took him, and brought him to the apostles, and declared to them how on the road he had seen the Lord, who spoke to him, and how at Damascus he had preached boldly in the name of Jesus.

So he went in and out among them at Jerusalem, preaching boldly in the name of the Lord. And he spoke and disputed against the hellenists, but they were seeking to kill him. And when the brothers learned this, they brought him down to Caesarea, and sent him off to Tarsus.

[3 : 37] So the church throughout all Judea and Galilee and Samaria had peace and was being built up, and walking in the fear of the Lord and in the comfort of the Holy Spirit, it multiplied.

The story of the conversion of Saul of Tarsus in chapter 9 of the book of Acts is a critical turning point in the narrative. Much of the rest of the book will be concerned with the missionary journeys of the apostle Paul.

While we are introduced to Saul at the martyrdom of Stephen back in chapter 7, here we read about his conversion. This story follows on from the story of the Ethiopian eunuch. Like that story, it's concerned with the conversion of a particular individual.

The Ethiopian eunuch might have represented the ends of the earth, but Saul represents an extreme of another kind. Saul is the leading persecutor of the church, as we see at the beginning of this chapter.

He's breathing out threats and murder, just as he was willingly involved in the stoning of Stephen. Here he is trying to pursue the Christians that have been scattered after Stephen, and bring them back to Jerusalem in chains.

[4 : 39] The very fact that he is undertaking this mission might give an indication of the counterproductive effects of the persecution of the early church in Jerusalem. The early Christians had been scattered from Jerusalem by the persecution, bringing the message wherever they went, and now they are trying to bring them back, because the message is spreading everywhere.

Like the story of the road to Emmaus, or the story of the Ethiopian eunuch, the story of the conversion of Saul takes place on a journey. There is an encounter with the risen Christ. There is an opening of the understanding.

Later on, there is an opening of the eyes, and the story is completed by receiving baptism. The story of the conversion of Saul is told on three different occasions within the book of Acts.

It is that important. There are slight differences between each of the accounts, which means that we need to harmonise them in some way or other. But as they are told for different ends, it is not surprising that different aspects of the story would be highlighted in different places.

The early Christian movement represents a significant threat in Saul's mind. Considering the rapid rise of the church in Jerusalem, and then its spread to many different parts following, not least the region of Samaria, it is not surprising that he was concerned.

[5 : 51] Here we meet him searching out Christians in Damascus, 135 miles north of Jerusalem. Considering the fact that this movement had risen from nothing, and had grown to such huge proportions in such a brief span of time, Saul recognises that this is not just a regular breakaway sect.

This represents something far more serious, and he is driven by a sort of zeal, a zeal that probably takes the model of Phinehas, or the Levites that rallied to the side of Moses in Exodus chapter 32, or maybe the example of the prophet Elijah.

All of these great figures of zeal probably lie behind Saul's self-conception as he fights off this new movement. At this point, the Christian movement is described as the way.

In John chapter 14, Jesus spoke of himself as the way, the truth, and the life. Throughout the Old Testament, there are various examples of two-way teachings. There's a way of wisdom, there's a way of folly, there's a way of righteousness, and there's a way of wickedness.

Speaking of Christianity as a way suggests that it is less a matter of teachings than a matter of life and practice. It's a matter of how you live in a particular mode of discipleship, following a master, Jesus the Messiah.

[7 : 03] While doctrine was clearly not unimportant, it may not have been as prominent in the understanding of many early Christians as it is in the minds of Christians today. A good early example of teaching Christianity as the way can be found in the Didache, a very early Christian document dating from the first century AD.

That document begins as follows. There are two ways, one of life and one of death, but a great difference between the two ways. The way of life then is this. First, you shall love God who made you.

Second, your neighbour as yourself. And all things whatsoever you would should not occur to you. Do not also do to another. The text then goes on to elaborate upon these.

The first and the second great commandment that sum up the law and the golden rule at quite considerable length. As Saul is approaching Damascus, a light comes from heaven and shines all around him.

And he falls to the ground, hearing a voice saying to him, Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me? This sort of divine address is very similar to ones that we find in the Old Testament, as the Lord speaks to Abraham, or as the Lord speaks to Moses at the burning bush.

[8 : 11] Saul responds by asking who is speaking to him, and receives the answer that it is Jesus whom he is persecuting. Within this response is contained a great mystery of the Christian faith, which will become later a subject of considerable theological reflection for Paul himself.

The people of God are united to Christ, and Christ is united to his body. What is done to his body is done to Christ, and the blessings of Christ are enjoyed by his body.

Jesus asks Saul why he is persecuting him. Here we might consider the many similarities between Saul of Tarsus and King Saul. Both are Benjaminites. Both persecute the Davidic king.

When King Saul persecutes David, David responds in 1 Samuel 26, verse 18, and he said, Why does my Lord pursue after his servant? For what have I done?

What evil is on my hands? Christ's question as the Davidic Messiah to Saul of Tarsus is a very similar one. We will see further exploration of the relationship between Saul of Tarsus and King Saul in a few chapters' time.

[9 : 17] Jesus instructs Saul to go into the city and to wait there until he will be told what to do. The men who are with him recognise that something has gone on. They experience some aspect of the phenomena, but they do not truly understand what has taken place.

They seem to hear the sound of the voice, but they do not understand what was said. When Saul gets up from the ground, he is blind. Like Zechariah, the father of John the Baptist, at the beginning of the book of Luke, his loss of a faculty is an indication of something of his spiritual state.

Zechariah failed adequately to hear the word of the Lord, and Saul cannot see the truth of Jesus Christ. Saul spends three days without sight, neither eating nor drinking.

Perhaps we're supposed to see this as a sort of death of the old Saul, and then he's going to be raised from this state in a few days' time. The Lord then appears to a man named Ananias, a second Ananias.

The first Ananias was the negative example of Ananias, the husband of Sapphira, and here we have a positive Ananias, one who's a faithful disciple, who will be the means by which the church receives Saul for the first time.

[10 : 24] Ananias is instructed in a vision to come and to see this man, Saul of Tarsus, who is praying. Understandably, Ananias, having heard about Saul, is apprehensive about coming to meet him.

But yet the Lord reassures him. Saul is a chosen vessel of the Lord's to carry his name before the Gentiles and kings and the children of Israel. This is a summary of the later mission of Saul that will occupy the book of Acts.

In particular, this man who has inflicted much suffering upon the church needs to learn how much he must suffer for the sake of Christ's name. This might be seen as a negative thing, a sort of punishment of Saul, but quite the opposite.

It's a form of honour that he might share in the sufferings of Christ. Once again, this will be an important theme within the writings of Paul himself. He sees within his very own call something that indicates the importance and the value that the Lord places upon the sufferings that he experiences.

His apostleship finds its honour in suffering for and in Christ, not in some supposed victorious Christian life, free from all suffering and difficulty and hardship. Ananias, visiting Saul, places his hands upon him, informs him that he has been sent by Jesus Christ and that he will receive his sight and be filled with the Holy Spirit.

[11 : 39] Something like scales fall from his eyes, his sight is restored, he rises and he is baptised. There is a sort of paradigmatic conversion pattern here. A man who sees the light of Christ is convicted by it, his eyes are opened and he is enlightened and he rises up, not just physically but spiritually, and is baptised.

The change in Saul's character could not be more remarkable. He spends some time with the disciples at Damascus and immediately proclaims Jesus in the synagogues, declaring that he is the Son of God.

Those hearing him are astonished. They know that he was sent from Jerusalem to try and bring Christians back there in chains. And yet here he is, proclaiming the name of the one whose followers he once tried to destroy.

Perhaps we could see some similarities between this account and the story of Christ's baptism and the events after it in Luke chapter 3 and 4. In that account, the heavens are opened, there is a voice from heaven, there is a baptism and a time of fasting.

That's followed by going to the synagogue and preaching in the synagogue, where people are astonished, thinking that they had the measure of the person who was speaking, when clearly they had not. As there is an attempt to kill Saul in this chapter, there is an attempt to kill Jesus back in Luke chapter 4.

[12 : 53] And in both cases, the protagonist escapes. Part of what is happening here, which Luke wants us to see, is that Paul is being conformed to Christ. He is becoming like his saviour.

The Benjaminite Saul, who is like his Old Testament namesake earlier in the chapter, has now become more like David. As David was let down through a window by Michael, so Saul is let down over the wall by the people in Damascus.

Saul's escape here is also described by him in 2 Corinthians chapter 11, verses 32 to 33. In Galatians chapter 1, verse 17, he also describes going to Arabia before returning to Damascus.

Barnabas, to whom we were introduced back in chapter 4, introduces him to the apostles and tells them his story. And while the story of Saul began with the martyrdom of Stephen, at the end of this section there may be no one whom Saul more reminds us of than Stephen himself.

What are some of the ways in which Saul's vision of the risen Christ on the road to Damascus might have informed the later theology of the apostle Paul?