

Acts 9:1-22: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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[0 : 00] Acts chapter 9 verses 1 to 22 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. 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.

[1 : 24] 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. 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?

[2 : 30] 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.

Today is the feast of the conversion of St. Paul the Apostle. And so we're taking a break from our study of Genesis to look for one day at Luke's account of Paul's conversion in Acts chapter 9 verses 1 to 22.

Having a yearly commemoration of such events is not designed to bind people's consciences, but rather to give us the opportunity to reflect and recall the fact that these are historical occurrences of deep importance to the history of the church.

Our faith is based not upon abstract ideas, but upon historical occurrences. And this story is so important for the book of Acts that it is told in various forms on three separate occasions.

On this occasion it's directly narrated as an event within the story, whereas on later occasions it's recalled as an event in testimony before leaders and rulers.

[3 : 38] The call and conversion of Saul precedes Peter's instigation of the Gentile mission in the chapter that follows. It's one of the pieces that's being put in place for that mission.

Acts chapters 8 and 9 involve missions initiated by people other than the apostles. Philip goes to Samaria and later Saul will go to Damascus. These are then verified by the apostles.

In chapters 8, 9 and 10 of the book of Acts, Philip, Saul and Peter are all sent on missions and involve the conversions of unexpected persons.

Philip and the conversion of the Samaritans, the story of Saul being converted himself, and Peter going to Cornelius. Philip also goes to the Ethiopian eunuch.

In these cases we could perhaps see the three families of humanity being reached in some way.

The Ethiopian eunuch is a descendant of Ham, Saul a descendant of Shem, and then Cornelius a descendant of Japheth.

[4 : 37] The story of the conversion of Saul involves a number of details that stand out to us.

Ananias is an important character within it. The story is told from two perspectives.

From the perspectives of two characters who must be joined together, both of whom have things that need to be overcome. Saul needs to overcome his opposition to the church, and Ananias needs to overcome his fear of the persecutor Saul.

The church struggles to keep up with God's action. Ananias is an example of someone who, though a faithful Christian, fails to initially believe that God could convert this persecutor of the church.

But yet God has done just that, and God is going to use this particular character to be the one who pioneers the next stage of the mission. Saul is described as a key character.

He is someone who is a chosen instrument. He will perform a special mission. He will bring light to the Gentiles. And he is someone who is specifically set apart for a purpose that's not just the average calling of the disciple of Christ.

[5 : 43] He is someone who has to perform something that is unique. Like the Apostle Peter, he is someone who will open key doors that will bring the mission of Christ into the realm of the Gentiles.

His mission is declared in advance to give us some anticipation of the importance of what's taking place here. The conversion of Saul is also told in a way that brings back various other parts of scriptural memory.

We may think originally of the story of Jesus' own baptism. The heavens are opened and light comes down. There is a voice coming from heaven. In both of these cases, there are similarities with the story of Jesus and his baptism.

He is then praying in the house. He is fasting for three days, going without food and drink. Maybe themes connected with Christ's death and resurrection here as well.

He is appointed to a particular mission. The Holy Spirit comes upon him. He is baptised. He takes food and is strengthened. And then immediately he goes and speaks in the synagogue, declaring Christ to be the Son of God.

[6 : 53] The same thing that Christ was tested about in the story of Luke. And people are amazed and say, Is not this the man who made havoc in Jerusalem of all those who called upon this name?

In the same way as they are astonished at Jesus' teaching and say, Is not this the carpenter's son? In both of these cases, there are similarities that can be observed. There are questions about this person's identity.

In both cases, there is an attempt to kill this person. And in the story of Christ, they try and cast him down off the steep cliff. And then in the story of Saul, the people in Damascus try to kill him.

So he has to be lowered down over the walls of the city. These stories then have similarities. And the similarities, I think, point to a deeper resemblance between these two characters.

Christ is anointed by the Spirit for mission. He's set apart. The heavens are opened. A voice comes from heaven. He's baptized. He is tested. He eats food.

[7 : 53] And he's strengthened, then speaks directly in the synagogue. People marvel at his teaching. They wonder who he is. And then there's an attempt to kill him. He's delivered from that.

And he goes out and continues his mission. The similarity then is suggesting that the disciple is like his master. Saul is like Christ.

And as he's set apart in this event, he's set apart to be one who bears the name of Christ. Not just in teaching about Christ, but someone who suffers with Christ.

He must suffer for Christ's name. And that suffering for Christ's name connects Saul with Christ.

This mission that he has to undertake is one that he will find himself filling up the measure of Christ's suffering for his church.

And so from the very outset of it, he is cast in the mold of Christ. In his baptism, in his calling, in all these other events that associate with it.

[8 : 53] A further set of comparisons can be found in the Old Testament story of David being pursued by Saul. This story is one that offers a number of fertile connections with the story of Saul in the New Testament.

Saul is like his namesake in the Old Testament, a Benjamite. He is someone who pursues and seeks to attack the Davidic king, the man who's set apart from the tribe of Judah. He's someone who has many other similarities. We can see Christ's statement to Saul, Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me? Is similar to the sort of question that David asks of Jonathan concerning his father's actions.

What have I done? What is my guilt? And what is my sin before your father that he seeks my life? Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me? In a previous chapter, we see similarities between the two Saul's in the way that Saul goes to pursue David to Niath and Ramah, and the spirit of God comes upon him on the road, and he prophesies until he comes to Niath in Ramah, and he strips off his clothes, prophesies before Samuel, lies naked all that day and all that night, and people say is Saul also among the prophets.

There are similarities then between the way that God arrests these two persecutors, these two pursuers in their tracks, and puts his spirit upon them. In the case of King Saul, this is short-lived, but in the case of Saul the apostle, it ends up completely transforming his life and changing his directions.

[10 : 29] Other similarities can be seen in the way that David is pursued by Saul, and he's let down through a window by Michael and escapes, and a similar thing happens to Saul after his conversion.

He's let down through a gap in the wall of Damascus, in a basket, and escapes when they are guarding the gates. That pursuit of Saul can remind us of the pursuit of David and his escape from Saul, and there's a switch of the characters here.

The king who pursued the lion of the tribe of Judah is now changed to one who is converted and takes on the character of his new master. He's a true servant of the king, and as a result, he's trying to escape, as King David did, no longer the persecutor, but the one who is being pursued.

And as we go further in the book of Acts, we can see that this is a theme that's being explored in various ways. Shortly after his name is changed, in chapter 13, Saul, or now Paul, delivers a sermon in which he talks to the men of Israel and recounts the history.

All this took about 450 years, and after that he gave them judges and told Samuel the prophet. Then they asked for a king, and God gave them Saul, the son of Kish, a man of the tribe of Benjamin, for 40 years.

[11 : 42] And when he had removed him, he raised up David to be their king, of whom he testified and said, I have found in David, the son of Jesse, a man after my heart, who will do all my will. Of this man's offspring, God has brought to Israel a saviour, Jesus, as he promised.

And there seems to be a connection here. Saul is the king who is removed in order that David, from whom comes the Messiah, will come on the scene. So Saul being replaced by David, that is a theme that is at play within the book of Acts, and it might help us to understand why in that same passage, there's a shift from Saul to Paul, and that switch of names draws our mind back to that replacement, the changing of the character of Saul.

So in conclusion, I would like for you to reflect upon the question of the ways in which Luke explores the connection between these two characters named Saul, particularly in chapter 13, where there are a number of ways in which these things are worked together.

Think also about the parallels and the contrasts between the character of Bar-Jesus, or Elymas, the magician, in chapter 13, and the character of Saul, or now Paul, the apostle.

What are some of the things that we learn about Paul's identity through chapter 13, and his connection with Saul?