

THE CONVERSION OF SAUL OF TARSUS

A. Saul on the road to Damascus.

1. ([Acts 9:1-2](#)) Saul's purpose in traveling to Damascus.

Then Saul, still breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord, went to the high priest and asked letters from him to the synagogues of Damascus, so that if he found any who were of the Way, whether men or women, he might bring them bound to Jerusalem.

a. **Then Saul:** We last saw Saul in [Acts 8:3](#), where it says that *he made havoc of the church, entering every house, and dragging off men and women, committing them to prison*. Here he continued and expanded this work to the city of **Damascus** (about 130 miles or 210 kilometers northeast of Jerusalem; a six-day journey altogether).

i. **Still breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord:** The picture is of an angry, violent man absolutely convinced of his own righteousness. Saul *hated* the **disciples of the Lord**. He wasn't seeking Jesus when Jesus sought him. We might say that Saul was decided *against* Jesus when Jesus decided *for* Saul.

ii. Of course, we don't know what **Saul** looked like. An old apocryphal book, dating to the end of the first century, described Paul like this: "A man of moderate stature, with crisp hair, crooked legs, blue eyes, large knit brows, and long nose, at times looking like a man, at times like an angel."

b. **Went to the high priest:** Saul did his persecuting work under the direct approval of the highest religious authorities. He **asked** and received **letters from** the high priest authorizing his mission.

i. The high priest mentioned here was Caiaphas. In December 1990 an ossuary (something like a burial urn; essentially a bone box) was discovered in Jerusalem. The ossuary was inscribed with the name of this Caiaphas and positively dated to this period. Inside were discovered some of the remains of a 60-year-old man, whom many researchers believe was this same Caiaphas. If true, these are the first physical remains (such as bones or ashes) of a specific person mentioned in the New Testament.

c. **Still breathing threats and murder:** Even after Saul became a Christian, he remembered his days as a persecutor. In [Philippians 3](#), he made mention of this background, saying he was *circumcised the eighth day, of the stock of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of*

the Hebrews; concerning the law, a Pharisee; concerning zeal, persecuting the church; concerning the righteousness which is in the law, blameless.

i. In [Galatians 1:13-14](#), Paul added more regarding his background: *For you have heard of my former conduct in Judaism, how I persecuted the church of God beyond measure and tried to destroy it. And I advanced in Judaism beyond many of my contemporaries in my own nation, being exceedingly zealous for the traditions of my fathers.*

ii. Saul of Tarsus — this highly educated man — thought that Christianity was both wrong and deceptive. Perhaps he took his example from Phinehas, who in the Book of Numbers killed an immoral man and woman with a spear, and God honored his action by halting a plague. Maybe Saul thought he was trying to stop a plague of false religion.

d. **If he found any who were of the Way**: Here, Christianity is referred to as **the Way**. This seems to be the earliest name for the Christian movement, and a fitting one — used five times in Acts.

- i. The name **the Way** means that Christianity is more than a belief or a set of opinions or doctrines. Following Jesus is a way of living as well as believing.
- ii. It is significant to see that there was a Christian community large enough in Damascus for Saul to be concerned about. Christianity — **the Way** — was spreading everywhere.

2. ([Acts 9:3-6](#)) God meets Paul on the road to Damascus.

As he journeyed he came near Damascus, and suddenly a light shone around him from heaven. Then he fell to the ground, and heard a voice saying to him, “Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting Me?” And he said, “Who are You, Lord?” Then the Lord said, “I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting. It is hard for you to kick against the goads.” So he, trembling and astonished, said, “Lord, what do You want me to do?” Then the Lord said to him, “Arise and go into the city, and you will be told what you must do.”

- a. **Suddenly a light shone around him from heaven... and heard a voice:** Somewhere outside of Damascus, this **suddenly** happened. This spectacular event must be regarded as unusual. God does not *normally* confront sinners with a heavenly light and an audible voice from heaven.

i. In [Acts 22:6](#) Paul revealed that this happened at mid-day, when the sun shines at its brightest. Yet Paul said that this light was *brighter than the sun* ([Acts 26:13](#)).

b. **Then he fell to the ground:** Saul's reaction was simply to fall **to the ground**. This wasn't because of honor or reverence for God, it was simply a reaction of survival — he was terrified at the heavenly light.

i. In the minds of many or most people, Saul fell from a horse that he rode. Yet this account in [Acts 8](#), nor the telling in [Acts 22:3-11](#), nor the account of [Acts 26:12-20](#) make any mention of a horse or of Saul riding any kind of animal. It *may be* that he rode, but the text does not specifically say so.

ii. "Many persons suppose he was on horseback, and painters thus represent him; but this is utterly without foundation. Painters are, in almost every case, wretched commentators."

iii. "It is significant in so short a book attempting to cover the expansion of Christianity from its small beginnings in Jerusalem to a religion that filled whole empire that the tale of one man's conversion should be so greatly emphasized."

c. **And heard a voice saying to him:** According to F.F. Bruce, the rabbis of Saul's day mostly believed that God no longer spoke to man directly, as He did in the days of the prophets. However, they believed that one could hear the "echo" of God's voice, what they called "the daughter of the voice of God." Here, Saul learned that one can hear God directly.

d. **Saul, Saul:** When God repeats a name twice, it is to display deep emotion, but not necessarily anger (as in the *Martha, Martha* of [Luke 10:41](#) and the *Jerusalem, Jerusalem* of [Matthew 23:37](#)).

e. **Why are you persecuting Me?** As the heavenly light overwhelmed him, Saul was confronted by the true nature of his crime: He persecuted *God*, not *man*.

i. Saul thought that he was serving God in viciously attacking Christians, but he discovered that he was fighting God.

ii. This has been sadly true through history. Often those who are convinced they are doing God a favor do much of the worst persecution and torture ever practiced.

iii. We shouldn't only emphasize the "**Me**" in the phrase "**why are you persecuting Me?**". We should also notice the "**why**" and see

that Jesus asked “**why are you persecuting Me?**”. That is, “Saul, why are you doing such a futile thing?”

f. **I am Jesus:** Though Jesus was a fairly common name in that day, the ascended Jesus of Nazareth needed no further identification.

When He said, “**I am Jesus,**” Saul knew *exactly* which Jesus spoke. In all probability, Saul heard Jesus teach in Jerusalem; and as a likely member of the Sanhedrin, Saul sat in judgment of Jesus in the trial before His crucifixion.

i. “Unless Saul was hallucinating, the appearance of Jesus proved that Jesus was alive and that Jesus was God.”

g. **Who are You, Lord?... Lord, what do You want me to do?:** Saul responded with two of the most important questions anyone can (and must) ask.

i. Most everyone has questions they would like to ask God. A Gallup Survey from the 1990s asked people to choose three questions they would most like to ask God. The top five responses were:

- “Will there ever be lasting world peace?”
- “How can I be a better person?”
- “What does the future hold for my family and me?”

- “Will there ever be a cure for all diseases?”
- “Why is there suffering in the world?”

It is strange that people would want to ask God these questions when they are already answered in the Bible. But they really aren't the most important questions for us to ask. Saul asked the *right* questions.

ii. **Who are You, Lord?** We must ask this question with a humble heart, and ask it to God. Jesus showed us exactly who God is, and He can answer this question. Paul spent the rest of his life wanting to know more completely the answer to this question ([Philippians 3:10](#)).

iii. **What do You want me to do?** Few dare to really ask God this question, but when we ask it, we must ask it with submission and determined obedience.

iv. Saul's question was *personal*. He asked the question with a “**me**”: “**Lord, what do You want me to do?**” We often are quite interested in what God wants others to do. But the surrendered heart asks, “**Lord, what do You want me to do?**”

h. **It is hard for you to kick against the goads:** This statement from Jesus was actually a small parable regarding Saul and his life.

i. The insertion of **it is hard for you to kick against the goads** and **Lord, what do You want me to do?** in [Acts 9:5-6](#) is accurate, but not in Luke's original text. They were added by scribes, based on [Acts 22:10](#) and [26:14](#), who thought they were doing God a favor by putting it in here.

ii. A goad was a long, extremely sharp stick used to get an ox going the way you wanted when plowing. One jabbed the hind legs of the ox with the goad until the ox cooperated.

iii. Essentially, Saul was the ox; Jesus was the farmer. Saul was stupid and stubborn — yet valuable, and potentially extremely useful to the Master's service. Jesus goaded Saul into the right direction, and the goading caused Saul pain. Yet instead of submitting to Jesus, Saul kicked against the goad — and only increased his pain.

iv. It is not too much to say that if we will not ask these two great questions and obediently listen to God's answers to these questions, then we are acting like stupid oxen.

v. We may complain that God compares us to oxen, and indeed it is an unfair comparison. After all, what ox has ever rebelled against God as we have? God almost owes an apology to oxen!

vi. Something was goading his conscience. Despite all his outward confidence, there was something bothering him inside. He kicked against it to be sure, but it was still there. The unease may have started with Stephen's prayer ([Acts 7:57-60](#)).

i. **It is hard for you:** This shows the great love of Jesus. He was the persecuted one, yet His concern was for the effect it had on Saul.

What a tender heart Jesus has!

j. **So he, trembling and astonished:** The fact that Saul was **trembling and astonished** by all of this reminds us that it is not always pleasant to encounter heaven dramatically. Saul was terrified by this experience; not oozing with warm, gushy feelings.

i. In [Acts 9](#), we are only given the briefest account of what happened here. We know more from what Paul says about this experience in [Acts 22:3-11](#), [Acts 26:12-18](#), [1 Corinthians 9:1](#) and [15:8](#). We also know more from what Barnabas said about Saul's experience in [Acts 9:27](#) and from what Ananias said about

Saul's experience in [Acts 9:17](#). From these accounts, we learn that Jesus appeared to Saul *personally* in this blinding vision.

ii. In response to this light, Saul undoubtedly shut his eyes as tight as he could; yet, Jesus still appeared before him. After the same pattern, Jesus has often had to appear to us even though we shut our eyes.

iii. In this encounter with Jesus, Saul learned the gospel that he would preach his whole life. He insisted in [Galatians 1:11-12](#), *that the gospel which was preached by me is not according to man. For I neither received it from man, nor was I taught it, but it came through the revelation of Jesus Christ.*

k. **Lord, what do You want me to do?** When Saul asked this question, Jesus only told him what to do right at that moment.

i. This is often the character of God's direction in our lives. He directs us one step at a time instead of laying out the details of the grand plan all at once.

3. ([Acts 9:7-9](#)) Saul immediately after the Damascus road.

And the men who journeyed with him stood speechless, hearing a voice but seeing no one. Then Saul arose from the ground, and

when his eyes were opened he saw no one. But they led him by the hand and brought *him* into Damascus. And he was three days without sight, and neither ate nor drank.

a. **The men who journeyed with him stood speechless:** The experience was incomprehensible to Saul's companions, but as Saul opened his eyes (presumably shut tight in a terrified reaction to the heavenly light), he still could not see (**when his eyes were opened he saw no one**).

i. We can almost hear God saying to Saul, "You shut your eyes against My light and My Savior. Fine! Spend a few days as blind physically as you have been blind spiritually!"

b. **And he was three days without sight, and neither ate nor drank:**

It seems that Saul was so shaken by the experience that he was unable to eat or drink for three days. All Saul could do was simply sit in a blind silence. This was a humbling experience, and a time when Saul must have challenged all his previous ideas about who God was and what pleased God.

i. In the **three days** of blindness and deprivation, Saul was dying to himself. It would only be after the **three days** of dying that he would receive resurrection life from Jesus.

B. God ministers to Saul through Ananias.

1. ([Acts 9:10-12](#)) God's message to Ananias.

Now there was a certain disciple at Damascus named Ananias; and to him the Lord said in a vision, "Ananias." And he said, "Here I am, Lord." So the Lord *said* to him, "Arise and go to the street called Straight, and inquire at the house of Judas for *one* called Saul of Tarsus, for behold, he is praying. And in a vision he has seen a man named Ananias coming in and putting *his* hand on him, so that he might receive his sight."

a. **Now there was a certain disciple at Damascus named Ananias:**

We don't know anything about Ananias from either before or after this meeting with Saul. We don't know how he came to **Damascus**, or what happened to him afterward. From what we do know we can think of him as an average follower of Jesus — **a certain disciple**.

i. Ananias was an ordinary man — not an apostle, a prophet, a pastor, an evangelist, an elder, or a deacon. Yet God used him because he was an ordinary man. If an apostle or a prominent person had ministered to Saul, people might say Paul received his gospel from a man instead of Jesus. In the same way, God *needs* to use the **certain disciple** — there is a special work for them to do.

ii. In theory, it wasn't absolutely necessary that God use a man like Ananias for this work in Saul's life. Being simply **a certain disciple**, we can say that God simply used **Ananias** because God loves to use people, and Ananias was a willing servant. Ananias asked Saul's question, "*Lord, what do You want me to do?*" ([Acts 9:6](#)) by the way he lived his life.

b. **To him the Lord said in a vision**: God spoke to Ananias in a completely different way than He spoke to Saul. Saul had a bold, almost violent confrontation from God, but Ananias heard the voice of God sweetly in a vision, where God called and Ananias obediently responded. To say, "**Here I am, Lord**" is a perfect response to God.

i. We shouldn't be surprised if people like Saul receive God's Word with initial resistance and questioning. Yet we should expect disciples of Jesus to receive God's Word like Ananias did.

ii. In the case of Ananias, the vision from God was specific. God told him about:

- A specific street (**the street called Straight**).

A specific house (**the house of Judas**).

- A specific man (**one called Saul of Tarsus**).

- A specific thing the man was doing (**he is praying**).
- A specific vision the man had (**in a vision he has seen a man named Ananias**).

This specificity was necessary and important, because God asked Ananias to do something bold and dangerous in meeting Saul, the great persecutor. He needed confirmation along the way that God was guiding him, and God gave him ways to confirm this.

c. **Arise and go**: God's instructions to Ananias were clear, but curiously, God told Ananias about Saul's vision in Ananias' own vision.

d. **Behold, he is praying**: This indicated a true change of heart in this man famous for persecuting the disciples of Jesus. One might say that Saul had never *really* prayed before; he merely repeated formal prayers. Before this:

- His prayers were more mechanical than spiritual.
- He had never prayed with Jesus as mediator.
- He had never prayed in Jesus' name.
- He had not prayed with a humble heart, near to God.

Saul had said many prayers, but he had never truly *prayed*.

2. ([Acts 9:13-16](#)) God overcomes Ananias' objections.

Then Ananias answered, “Lord, I have heard from many about this man, how much harm he has done to Your saints in 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 vessel of Mine to bear My name before Gentiles, kings, and the children of Israel. For I will show him how many things he must suffer for My name’s sake.”

a. **Lord, I have heard from many about this man:** Certainly, Ananias had heard that this angry and violent persecutor named Saul of Tarsus was on his way from Jerusalem. The disciples in Damascus must have anxiously prepared for the coming persecution.

b. **I have heard from many about this man, how much harm he has done:** Ananias' objections were perfectly logical and well founded. However, they presumed that God needed instruction, or at best, counsel. Ananias almost asked, “God, do you know what kind of guy this Saul is?”

i. In fact, Ananias knew a great deal about the mission of Saul (**how much harm he has done to Your saints in Jerusalem...here he**

has authority from the chief priests to bind all who call on Your name). It was apparently widely known.

c. **He is a chosen vessel of Mine to bear My name**: God had a call upon the life of Saul. At this time, God had not yet revealed that calling to Saul. He seems to have told Ananias first.

i. God considered Saul His **chosen vessel** long before there appeared anything worthy in Saul to choose. God knew what He could make of Saul, even when Saul or Ananias didn't know.

d. **To bear My name before Gentiles, kings, and the children of Israel**: This describes in broad outline the calling and future work of the broken, blind, afflicted man Ananias would soon meet. God called him to bring who He is and what He has done (**My name**) to **Gentiles**, to **kings**, and to **the children of Israel**.

i. We would not blame Ananias for a measure of disbelief — such a great, big calling for such an unlikely man.

e. **For I will show him how many things he must suffer for My name's sake**: This was a sobering addition to the great call God put upon the life of Saul. Saul would leave a life of privilege to embrace a higher call, but a call with much suffering.

3. ([Acts 9:17-19](#)) Ananias prays and Saul is healed and receives the Holy Spirit.

And Ananias went his way and entered the house; and laying his hands on him he said, “Brother Saul, the Lord Jesus, who appeared to you on the road as you came, has sent me that you may receive your sight and be filled with the Holy Spirit.” Immediately there fell from his eyes *something* like scales, and he received his sight at once; and he arose and was baptized. So when he had received food, he was strengthened. Then Saul spent some days with the disciples at Damascus.

- a. **Ananias went his way and entered the house:** This took great courage. In the centuries since, Christians have had to deal with those who make pretended conversions to infiltrate the followers of Jesus. Ananias had to overcome this fear or suspicion.
- b. **Laying his hands on him he said, “Brother Saul”:** The act of **laying his hands** and the words “**Brother Saul**” powerfully communicated the love of God. Blind Saul could not see the love on Ananias’ face, so he communicated it through his touch and his voice.
- c. **Be filled with the Holy Spirit:** It seems that this is when Saul was actually born again. Here is where he received the Holy Spirit and was

healed from his blindness, which was spiritual blindness as much as physical blindness.

i. **Be filled:** God did an effective job of breaking Saul, but it wasn't His intention to leave him broken. God wanted to break Saul so He could fill him and leave him filled.

ii. "It is often said that Saul was converted on the road to Damascus. Strictly speaking, this is not the fact. His conversion began in his encounter with the law but it was not accomplished until the gospel entered his heart by faith, and that did not occur on the road, but in Damascus."

d. **He received his sight at once; and he arose and was baptized:**

When Saul could see — both physically and spiritually — he immediately wanted to identify with Jesus and with the disciples of Jesus by being **baptized**.

i. We are not told that Ananias told Saul about baptism. Perhaps he did; but it is just as likely (or even more likely) that Saul had seen Christian baptisms (such as on Pentecost, [Acts 2:41](#)).

Especially, *God spoke directly to Saul* about many things during his time waiting for Ananias, including even the name of the man who would come and pray for him and restore his sight ([Acts 9:12](#)).

e. **When he had received food, he was strengthened:** Saul

immediately began to be strengthened both physically and spiritually.

God was concerned about both areas of need.

f. **Then Saul spent some days with the disciples at Damascus:**

Saul was now numbered among the **disciples** of Jesus, and became

friends with those he had previously tried to imprison or kill. This

shows the remarkable, radical nature of his transformation.

i. Paul regarded his conversion experience as a pattern for all believers: *Although I was formerly a blasphemer, a persecutor, and an insolent man; but I obtained mercy because I did it ignorantly in unbelief... However, for this reason I obtained mercy, that in me first Jesus Christ might show all longsuffering, as a pattern to those who are going to believe on Him for everlasting life. ([1 Timothy 1:13,16](#)).*

ii. If Paul's conversion is a pattern, then we can share his experiences. First, Jesus must confront us with Himself, with our sin and rebellion against Him, even the sins done in ignorance. Then as we put our faith in Him, we must humbly wait for the work within us that only He can do.

iii. Saul's conversion reminds us that at its core, salvation is something God does in us. What we do is only a response to His work in us.

iv. Saul's conversion reminds us that God finds some who, by all appearance, are not looking for Him at all. Seeing how God reached Saul encourages us to believe that God can reach the people in our life that we think are very far from Him. We often give up on some people and think they will *never* come to Jesus; but the example of Saul shows God can reach *anyone*.

v. Saul's conversion reminds us that God looks for people to cooperate in the conversion of others, even when they are not really necessary, except as a demonstration of the importance of the *family* of God.

vi. Saul's conversion reminds us that it isn't enough that we be broken before God, though that is necessary. God wants to only use brokenness as a prelude to filling.

C. Saul's initial ministry in Damascus and Jerusalem.

1. ([Acts 9:20-22](#)) Saul preaches powerfully in Damascus.

Immediately he preached the Christ in the synagogues, that He is the Son of God. Then all who heard were amazed, and said, “Is this not he who destroyed those who called on this name in Jerusalem, and has come here for that purpose, so that he might bring them bound to the chief priests?” But Saul increased all the more in strength, and confounded the Jews who dwelt in Damascus, proving that this *Jesus* is the Christ.

a. **Immediately he preached the Christ in the synagogues:**

Because Saul was a skilled student of the great rabbi Gamaliel, he took advantage of the synagogue custom that invited any able Jewish man to speak from the Scriptures at synagogue meetings. He took advantage of this opportunity **immediately**.

b. **He preached the Christ:** The message of Saul was all about Jesus. He knew they needed to know Jesus in truth, **that He is the Son of God**.

i. Many people think when Jesus is called **the Son of God** it is a way of saying He is *not* God, but something less than God — only “the son of God.” But in Jesus’ day, everyone knew what this title meant. To be called the “son of” something meant you were totally identified with that thing or person, and their identity was your

identity. When Jesus called Himself *the Son of God*, and when others called Him that, it was understood as a clear claim to His deity.

ii. In fact, on two occasions when Jesus called Himself *the Son of God*, He was accused of blasphemy, of calling Himself God ([John 5:17-18](#), [Matthew 26:63-65](#)). Everybody knew what Jesus meant in calling Himself *Son of God*, and everyone knew what Saul meant when he preached that Jesus is the **Son of God**.

iii. To preach that Jesus **is the Son of God** is also to preach the perfection of His life, and especially His work for us on the cross. It is to preach how God saves us through the work of Jesus.

c. **Is this not he who destroyed those who called on this name:**

People were genuinely amazed at Saul's conversion; it was hard to believe just how powerfully Jesus could change a life. Years later, Paul himself would write: *Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; old things have passed away; behold, all things have become new.* ([2 Corinthians 5:17](#)) Paul *lived* that verse long before he *wrote* it.

d. **Saul increased all the more in strength:** Saul's early work for God so soon after his conversion should not surprise us. Often, that is

the *best* time to serve the Lord, and especially to tell others about Jesus. When we are newly converted, we still understand the way people who don't yet know Jesus think.

i. It is true that young Christians shouldn't hastily be put in positions of authority in the church ([1 Timothy 3:6](#)), but you don't need a position of authority to serve God and to tell others about Jesus.

ii. Saul's willingness to serve the Lord was a contributing factor in the fact he **increased all the more in strength**. As we seek to serve others, God brings more strength to us.

e. **Proving that this Jesus is the Christ**: Saul, an expert in the Old Testament, could easily see how Jesus was the Messiah promised in the Hebrew Scriptures.

2. ([Acts 9:23-25](#)) Saul's escape from Damascus.

Now after many days were past, the Jews plotted to kill him. But their plot became known to Saul. And they watched the gates day and night, to kill him. Then the disciples took him by night and let *him* down through the wall in a large basket.

a. **After many days were past**: In [Galatians 1:13-18](#), Paul explained more about what happened during these **many days**. He described how he went to Arabia for a period of time, and then returned to

Damascus. After his return to Damascus, he went to Jerusalem. Paul spent a total of three years in Damascus and Arabia ([Galatians 1:18](#)); truly these were **many days**.

i. In [2 Corinthians 11:32-33](#), Paul referred to this incident and mentions it happened *under Aretas the king*. This means that this escape from Damascus happened between A.D. 37 and 39. So, taking into account the three years mentioned in [Galatians 1:18](#), and that this incident happened at the end of those three years, we can surmise that Paul was converted sometime between A.D. 34 and 36.

b. **The Jews plotted to kill him**: This essentially began the *many things he must suffer for My name's sake* the Lord spoke of in [Acts 9:16](#). Saul now was the *persecuted* instead of the *persecutor*.

c. **But their plot became known to Saul**: If Saul now knew what it was to be persecuted for his faith, he also knew the mighty deliverance of God. Saul enjoyed divine protection until his ministry was complete before God.

d. **The disciples took him by night and let him down through the wall in a large basket**: Saul indeed knew divine protection in the midst of persecution, but he also learned that God's deliverance often

comes in humble ways. There is nothing triumphant about sneaking out of a city **by night** hiding in **a large basket**.

i. “It was the beginning of many escapes for Paul, and sometimes he didn’t quite escape. Sometimes they caught him, imprisoned him, beat him. He did indeed have to suffer many things for Jesus’ sake.”

3. ([Acts 9:26-30](#)) Saul with the Christians at Jerusalem.

And when Saul had come to Jerusalem, he tried to join the disciples; but they were all afraid of him and did not believe that he was a disciple. But Barnabas took him and brought *him* to the apostles. And he declared to them how he had seen the Lord on the road, and that He had spoken to him, and how he had preached boldly at Damascus in the name of Jesus. So he was with them at Jerusalem, coming in and going out. And he spoke boldly in the name of the Lord Jesus and disputed against the Hellenists, but they attempted to kill him. When the brethren found out, they brought him down to Caesarea and sent him out to Tarsus.

a. **He tried to join the disciples; but they were all afraid of him:** It seems strange that Christians in Jerusalem were so suspicious of Saul even three years after his conversion. They perhaps thought that

Saul was part of an elaborate and extended plot; they perhaps wondered why he went off by himself for a while in Arabia; or just as likely, they probably were reluctant to embrace such a dramatic conversion without seeing it with their own eyes. Simply, they **did not believe that he was a disciple.**

i. At this point, some people might turn their back on Jesus Christ. They might say, "I've been serving the Lord for three years, preaching Jesus Christ, enduring assassination attempts and death threats. Now you don't want to accept me as a Christian? This is the love of Jesus? Forget it!"

ii. But Saul had a greater heart of love for Jesus and Jesus' followers. It no doubt hurt, but he understood that the disciples in Jerusalem remembered the Christians Saul killed and persecuted. If the disciples in Jerusalem lacked a little in love, Saul added a little more love to make up for it.

b. **But Barnabas took him and brought him to the apostles:** Thank God for people like Ananias and Barnabas, who will welcome people into the family of God with simple friendship.

i. Barnabas simply extended the love of Jesus to Saul, and as Paul would write later, *love believes all things* ([1 Corinthians 13:7](#)).

c. **He was with them at Jerusalem, coming in and going out:**

In [Galatians 1:18](#), Paul wrote that in this first trip to Jerusalem, he stayed with Peter for fifteen days. He also wrote that he never had an audience with *all* the apostles, seeing only Peter and James, Jesus' brother.

i. This time with the apostles in Jerusalem was important, because it finally and certainly welcomed Saul into the family of the followers of Jesus. But Paul made a point of the limited nature of his time with the apostles in Jerusalem to show clearly that he did not receive his gospel from the other apostles. Though he was no doubt blessed and benefited from that time, he received his message by direct revelation from Jesus on the road to Damascus. Luke alluded to this when he wrote that Saul, speaking to the apostles, **declared to them...what He had spoken to him**. The apostles no doubt rejoiced that they and Saul had the exact same message from Jesus.

d. **He spoke boldly in the name of the Lord Jesus... but they**

attempted to kill him: Saul again faced persecution and assassination attempts. This became a recurring pattern in his life.

i. The story of Saul's conversion begins with him leaving Jerusalem to persecute the followers of Jesus. It ends with him leaving Jerusalem as a persecuted follower of Jesus.

e. **They brought him down to Caesarea and sent him out to**

Tarsus: For his own protection, the Christians in Jerusalem **sent him out to Tarsus.** Somewhere between 8 and 12 years passed in the life of Saul before he again entered into prominent ministry, being sent out as a missionary from the church at Antioch. At that time, it would also be **Barnabas** who reached out to Saul, remembering him and loving him.

i. He was Saul of Tarsus, the young, successful, energetic rabbi.

Then he was Saul the Persecutor; then Saul the Blind. He became Saul the Convert and then Saul the Preacher. Yet before he became Paul the Apostle, he spent somewhere between 8 and 12 years as Saul the unknown. Those were not wasted years; they were good and necessary years.

ii. **Tarsus** was one of the great cities of the ancient world, with an excellent harbor and a strategic placement at trade routes. It was especially known as an university city, being one of the three great educational cities of the Mediterranean world. “Strabo speaks of the Tarsian university as even surpassing, in some respects, those of Athens and Alexandria.

4. ([Acts 9:31](#)) The health of the churches in the whole region.

Then the churches throughout all Judea, Galilee, and Samaria had peace and were edified. And walking in the fear of the Lord and in the comfort of the Holy Spirit, they were multiplied.

a. **The churches throughout all Judea, Galilee, and Samaria:** [Acts 9](#) began with a zealous man *breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord* ([Acts 9:1](#)). But God was more than able to turn this terrible threat into a great blessing. Now Luke shows that God’s work not only continued but it was *strong*, despite the great opposition that came against it.

b. **Galilee:** The Book of Acts tells us nothing about the planting of churches in Galilee. We don’t know who started these churches, how they did it, or all the great works of God which took place in these

young churches. This reminds us that Acts is only a *partial* history of God's work during this period.

c. **The churches... had peace:** This doesn't mean that all persecution had stopped; instead, it means that they had peace in the midst of persecution.

i. At the end of [Acts 9:31](#), we reach an important historical crossroads in Acts and the events of the Roman Empire. In A.D. 37, Caiaphas was replaced as high priest, first by Jonathan, then by Theophilus. In the same year, Caligula succeeded Tiberius as Roman Emperor. Caligula was bitterly hostile against the Jews and was assassinated four years later.

d. **The churches... were edified:** The word **edified** has the idea of *being built up*. The churches were growing in numbers and strength.

e. **And walking in the fear of the Lord and in the comfort of the Holy Spirit, they were multiplied:** Whenever God's people are **walking in the fear of the Lord and in the comfort of the Holy Spirit**, you may expect that they will also see their numbers **multiplied**.

i. **The fear of the Lord...the comfort of the Holy Spirit:** Each of these are needed in the Christian walk. At any given moment a

disciple of Jesus may more need **the fear of the Lord** or **the comfort of the Holy Spirit**. Often, God wants the comfortable to be afflicted (gaining **the fear of the Lord**) and the afflicted to be comforted (by **the comfort of the Holy Spirit**).

ii. **In the comfort of the Holy Spirit**: Pierson points out that the word translated **comfort** here is essentially the same word translated *Helper* or *Comforter* in [John 14:16](#) (*paraclesis*).

iii. “Is it not already but too evident that the church of our day has little or no conception of the pricelessness of blessing involved in this *paraclesis* of the Spirit? What if once more this lesson could be learned? What ‘rest’ would the church have from internal dissension and division, from heresy and schism! What edification, ‘being built up’ on the most holy faith! What holy ‘walking in the fear of the Lord,’ what rapid multiplication, and what world-wide evangelization! There is not an evil now cursing or threatening our church life which this ‘comfort of the Holy Ghost’ would not remedy and perhaps remove.”

D. God works miracles through the apostle Peter.

1. ([Acts 9:32-35](#)) Peter heals Aeneas at Lydda.

Now it came to pass, as Peter went through all *parts of the country*, that he also came down to the saints who dwelt in Lydda. There he found a certain man named Aeneas, who had been bedridden eight years and was paralyzed. And Peter said to him, “Aeneas, Jesus the Christ heals you. Arise and make your bed.” Then he arose immediately. So all who dwelt at Lydda and Sharon saw him and turned to the Lord.

a. **Peter went through all parts of the country**: The previous pattern of the apostles staying put in Jerusalem and those needing ministry coming from afar to them (as reflected in [Acts 5:16](#)) now shifted.

Peter **went through all parts of the country** to do ministry, traveling the 35 miles (55 kilometers) from Jerusalem to **Lydda**.

i. Lydda is near modern day Lod, the site of Ben Gurion Airport outside of Tel Aviv.

b. **There he found a certain man**: Peter found a needy man God wanted to miraculously heal, and Peter found him as he was out ministering to others in the name of Jesus. If we will be like Peter, who **went through all parts of the country**, then we will also find opportunities for the miraculous power of God.

c. **Aeneas, Jesus the Christ heals you:** Peter clearly identified who healed — **Jesus the Christ**. Peter was only His instrument. Jesus healed with the power of Jesus, but Peter did not heal with the power of Peter. Peter relied solely on the power of Jesus.

i. The words of Peter — “**Arise and make your bed**” — were perhaps consciously an imitation of Jesus’ healing of the paralytic man in [Mark 2:10-12](#).

d. **So all who dwelt at Lydda and Sharon saw him and turned to the Lord:** The miraculous healing of Aeneas made many people turn **to the Lord** — presumably, with Peter preaching the gospel to them.

2. ([Acts 9:36-38](#)) Dorcas from Joppa dies.

At Joppa there was a certain disciple named Tabitha, which is translated Dorcas. This woman was full of good works and charitable deeds which she did. But it happened in those days that she became sick and died. When they had washed her, they laid *her* in an upper room. And since Lydda was near Joppa, and the disciples had heard that Peter was there, they sent two men to him, imploring *him* not to delay in coming to them.

a. **Named Tabitha, which is translated Dorcas:** Both the names **Dorcas** and **Tabitha** mean “deer.” This woman was a beloved member of the Christian community in Joppa, because she **was full of good works and charitable deeds.**

i. Luke noted that Tabitha **was full of good works and charitable deeds which she did.** Some people are **full of good works and charitable deeds**, but they are only full of them in their minds and hearts. They don’t actually do them as Tabitha did. This is why Luke added, **which she did.**

b. **Imploring him not to delay in coming to them:** Peter wasn’t in Joppa when Tabitha died. Yet he wasn’t far away, and the Christians in Joppa had heard that God was doing miraculous things through Peter in nearby Lydda. They begged Peter to come, perhaps asking when Dorcas was still alive or had just died.

3. **(Acts 9:39-42) Dorcas is raised from the dead.**

Then Peter arose and went with them. When he had come, they brought *him* to the upper room. And all the widows stood by him weeping, showing the tunics and garments which Dorcas had made while she was with them. But Peter put them all out, and knelt down and prayed. And turning to the body he said, “Tabitha, arise.” And

she opened her eyes, and when she saw Peter she sat up. Then he gave her *his* hand and lifted her up; and when he had called the saints and widows, he presented her alive. And it became known throughout all Joppa, and many believed on the Lord.

a. **Peter arose and went with them:** When the disciples from Joppa came to Peter in Lydda, they came with the hope that Peter would help her, or at least help the Christian community at that place work through their grief.

i. There is no indication in the Book of Acts that it was *common* or *popularly expected* that dead Christians would be resuscitated to life again. This miracle (and a few similar in Acts) is listed just because they were unusual and remarkable.

b. **All the widows stood by him weeping:** It may very well be that the expectation was that Peter would merely comfort these Christian widows and others in their grief over Dorcas' death. Yet Peter sensed a specific leading to do just as he had seen Jesus do as recorded in [Mark 5:38-43](#) — he **put them all out**, in the anticipation that God would do for Tabitha what He did for the daughter of the ruler of the synagogue.

c. **Tabitha, arise:** Peter seemed to clearly remember what Jesus did in [Mark 5:38-43](#) (or [Luke 8:50-56](#)). In that healing, Jesus said, “*Talitha, cumi.*” Peter said here (in the original language) “Tabitha cumi.” Peter could hear Jesus’ words in his head as he ministered.

i. Peter simply tried to do as Jesus did. Jesus was his leader. He wasn’t trying to lead Jesus anymore, as he did when he told Jesus not to go the way of the cross in [Matthew 16:22](#). Now Peter was letting Jesus lead him.

d. **And she opened her eyes, and when she saw Peter she sat up:** By all appearances, Tabitha was raised from the dead. She was dead and came back to life. These are remarkable, unusual miracles — yet things that have happened and still do (though one is wise to not gullibly accept every reported instance of such).

i. We should remind ourselves that Dorcas was not *resurrected*; she was *resuscitated* to her old life, where she would die again.

ii. The fact that the Lord raised Dorcas, yet Stephen (and later, James in [Acts 12:2](#)) remained dead, reflects on God’s unknowable ways. After all, it certainly seemed that Stephen and James were more important to the church than Dorcas. Yet we must always trust God’s greater wisdom and knowledge in all such things.

iii. Dorcas wasn't raised for her own sake. She would have enjoyed heaven better! She was raised for the sake of her ministry to others, which is the same reason we have *passed from death into life* ([John 5:24](#)).

e. **When he had called the saints and widows:** [Acts](#)

[9:32](#) and [41](#) mention the **saints** in Lydda and Joppa. This is the first time Christians are called **saints** in Acts. When the Bible calls Christians **saints**, the idea isn't of a super-perfect people; the idea is of a people who are *different*. Saints are set apart from the world at large; they are distinctive.

4. ([Acts 9:43](#)) **Peter stays with Simon, a tanner.**

So it was that he stayed many days in Joppa with Simon, a tanner.

a. **He stayed many days in Joppa with Simon, a tanner:** This sentence would be somewhat shocking to an observant Jew of that time. According to their understanding of the law, it was strictly forbidden to associate with anyone who routinely worked with dead animals.

i. According to the laws of that time, a tanner had to live at least 75 feet (25 meters) outside a village because of his constant ritual uncleanness.

ii. “The trade of a tanner was held in such supreme contempt that if a girl was betrothed to a tanner without knowing that he followed that calling, the betrothal was void.”

b. **He stayed many days in Joppa with Simon, a tanner:** Because of this, we see Peter was becoming less concerned about Jewish traditions and ceremonial notions than before. This work of God in Peter’s heart laid groundwork for what God would do in Peter in the following chapter.