

# Session #9: Acts Chapter 9

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For the past few weeks we have studied those beginning moments of the early Christian community as the good news or gospel of Jesus spread throughout Jerusalem and more recently to Samaria. With today's study our attention turns to the conversion story of St. Paul who will become one of the greatest voices of faith and understanding the life, death,

resurrection and teachings of Jesus.

## **Saul's Conversion 9:1-19**

What we are about to read and study is the first of three accounts St. Paul gives of his conversion experience. In that he offers of the memory of this moment, which he will do three times in Acts (9:1-19; 22:3-16; 26:2-18) is a testimony to the importance this experience carries in his life. Each account is slightly different as St. Paul emphasizes different elements. But the words of Jesus: "*Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?*" remain the same. Saul/Paul goes from a ruthless persecutor to one of the most committed apostles of Christ. We should note that St. Saul/Paul does not convert in the typical way we understand it. He is a Jew and will remain a Jew who understands the teachings of Jesus Christ, the person of Jesus Christ as the fulfillment of the Old Testament.

### **9:1-9**

**9:1 Saul** Saul was likely a member of the tribe of Benjamin and was named for the first King of the Israelite people.

**went to the high priest** Just as today the police must get a warrant before proceeding with Police business, St. Paul goes to the chief authority of the Temple to get "official" permission to hunt down and bring the members of the Way to justice. Saul sees/believes what he is doing as God's will. Saul/Paul's quest to seek out and destroy the Christians is simply a duty of purifying the faith.

**9:2 Damascus** Damascus is a city found in Syria northwest of Jerusalem, about 140 miles. As the Christians fled from Jerusalem during the persecution discussed in Chapter 8 of Acts Damascus must have been where many fled.

**the Way** This was the first name the early Christian community gave themselves and will appear again in Acts. The idea, as best as scholars can guess, is that these followers of Jesus named themselves such because they were seeking to live "His Way" of life, following His teachings. This name or title has ties with the prophet Isaiah who wrote of visions

of the messianic age that would focus on living “the way” of the Lord. (Isaiah 40:3) The writings speak of, using the analogy of the Exodus, the messiah freeing the people and then leading them along a new “way” – from sin to salvation. Scholars believe, as a statement of fulfillment, the early Christian community adopted this name as a statement of their belief. Some scholars suggest that the early Christian community may have adopted this name because of the Jewish belief (which comes out of Deuteronomy) that there are basically two ways in life – the one that follows God’s teaching leads to life and the other to death.

*If you obey the commandments of the LORD, your God, which I enjoin on you today, loving him, and walking in his ways, and keeping his commandments, statutes and decrees, you will live and grown numerous, and the LORD, your God will bless you in the land you are entering to occupy, If, however, you turn away your hearts and will not listen, but are led astray and adore and serve their gods, I tell you now that you will certainly perish .*

Deuteronomy 30:15-18

**9:3 suddenly a light from heaven flashed about him** Saul/Paul now shares in a long line of Jews who have received a message from God in a vision. Isaiah 6:1-13; Jeremiah 1:4-10; Ezekiel 1:1-3:11; Daniel 8:15-26

**9:4 Saul, Saul** Saul and Paul are one in the same person. This name which is Saul in Hebrew is translated to Paul in Latin. Scholars believe that once Saul experienced his conversion and when he realized that his mission was to the Gentiles of the Roman world he adopted the Latin variation of his name. The fact that his name was stated twice by our Lord is typical of divine encounters found in the bible. (Genesis 22:11; 46:2; Exodus 3:4; 1 Samuel 3:10)

**Why do you persecute me?** This one statement would be the basis of many of St. Paul’s understandings of the Church. In several of his letters he will refer to the Church as the Body of Christ. Why? Note that the voice of Christ is not stating that Saul is persecuting the Church. Jesus is stating that Saul is persecuting Him. That He Himself is being attacked. Through baptism followers are united to Christ in a mystical union

**9:7 hearing the voice** What the Temple soldiers/police who accompanied Saul heard we do not know. Some scholars believe they heard exactly what Saul heard. Other scholars that the guard heard a non-articulate voice. When we get to chapter 22 of Acts these companions will hear nothing.

**9:5-6 \*\*** In older bibles you may find the following words between verses 5 and 6: *It is hard for thee to kick against the goad.* Not found in the earliest documents more recent additions have taken the phrase out.

**9:8 he could see nothing** An outward statement of an inward disposition. Paul, standing for the glory of God, comes out of his experience blind. But as we study on we will find this blindness is only temporary possibly stopping Paul, convicting his heart well enough so

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that he would be in a personal place to really receive the message of Christ. Isn't it ironic that Saul, expecting to imprison those who follow the "Way" is now a prisoner of his own blindness.

### **9:9 three days**

If you are wondering is there a symbolism to the fact that Paul entered into fasting and lived with darkness for three days you would probably be right. Just as Jesus was in the tomb three days, Paul lived with the darkness for three days. For Paul it was a period of purification, repentance and finally for preparation for his own growth in the Lord and eventually his mission and ministry. You could say that the blindness that Paul experienced was an outward statement of his inward spiritual darkness.

### **9:10-19a**

Ananias took on the role of Spiritual director for Paul. Even to this day this is a role that some take on in the Church – wise guides who walk with individuals who seek to grow in their faith life. We can assume that Ananias was a man of deep personal faith and great intellectual power to be called by God to counsel and direct St. Paul. In the *Navarre Bible* it states and then quotes:

*On the spiritual guidance of ordinary Christians, who seek holiness and carry out apostolate in the context of everyday life, St. Escriva, writes: 'A director – you need one, so that you can give yourself to God, and give yourself fully... by obedience. You need a director who understands your apostolate, who knows what God wants: that way he will second the work of the Holy Spirit in your soul without taking you from your place, filling you with peace and teaching you how to make your work fruitful.'* (The Way, 62)

### **9:13 Your holy ones**

Ananias is speaking here of those followers of Christ, those who are members of the way. A better translation would be "your saints".

### **9:15 he is a chosen instrument**

St. Paul was called by God for a specific mission and purpose to take the message of faith and deliverance proclaimed in the gospel out into the world. St. Paul will stand before Jew and Gentile, free and slave, King and ordinary people.

### **9:16 he must suffer for the sake of my name**

If you read the letters that St. Paul has written you will hear of the many ways he has suffered for the sake of the gospel.

### **9:18 something like scales fell from his eyes**



Because we have nothing more about St. Paul's condition scholars have suggested a variety of explanations as to the "scales". All agree that it is no coincidence that Paul's blindness reminds the Jewish audience of Tobit of the Old Testament. Tobit was a righteous man who was blinded and later his sight was restored by his son. Paul's own desire and pride blinded him to the truth of God and it was only after he came to a true vision of Jesus as the Messiah did his physical vision return.

### **9:19b-31 Paul Begins His Public Ministry**

What the exact sequence of events happen in St. Paul's early Christian life we cannot be certain. We know that he stayed for a short while in Damascus, most likely under the tutelage of Ananias. We know from Galatians (1:17-18) that St. Paul went to Arabia for a period of three years. Most scholars agree that this period in Arabia happened immediately after St. Paul's vision was restored and it was a time of deep prayer and study. Why Arabia? In this section we will read of two attempts on St. Paul's life.

**9:20 son of God** This is the only time in Acts that the title for Jesus as "the Son of God" is used.

**synagogues** Remember, there is only one Temple and that Temple can only be in Jerusalem. Imagine if there could only be one place where Mass could be said and the Blessed Sacrament be kept. Where would Catholics meet? Synagogues are those community centers where the Jews, to this day, meet to study the bible, pray and hold festival events. Paul in Damascus goes to the one place he knew the Jewish people will gather.

**9:23 many days have passed** Is this the three years that St. Paul talks about in Galatia? Scholars are unsure. (See opening comments to the beginning of this section.) This could be a few days or three years, we cannot know for certain. One set of scholars suggest that St. Paul, so filled with the Holy Spirit immediately set forth to teach and preach only to be denied by the suspicious and closed hearts of the Christians who knew Paul as the enemy. It was with this rejection that St. Paul then went off to Arabia.

**plotting to kill him** There are many beauties in the ongoing study of the scriptures. One is being able to put pieces together. We read in 2 Corinthians (11:32-33) this conspiracy included the governor of Damascus. We read: *At Damascus, the governor under King Ar'etas guarded the city of Damascus in order to seize me, but I was let down in a basket through a window in the wall, and escaped his hands.* St. Paul's escape will also remind us of other escapes found in the Old Testament. The two spies that Joshua sent into Jericho and were saved by Rahab lowering them out of a city wall window (Joshua 2:15); or David being saved by Michal when King Saul was in pursuit of his life (1 Samuel 19:12).

**9:26 came to Jerusalem** Since we have no "travel log" of these days we don't have an exact time line of what St. Paul did and where he went but if we look to Galatians (1:18-19) we can see that this trip to Jerusalem most likely did not occur until three years later. That Paul traveled to Arabia and most likely spent those three years in prayer, study and discernment.

**they did not believe** We cannot think in modern terms of news and information. Within a few hours we can know something from the other side of the world; actually in a few minutes. The apostles would have heard rumors and they would have discussed the possibility but until Paul stood before them they would not have had to make a decision.

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**9:27 Barnabas** We were introduced to Barnabas earlier in Acts (4:36). Scholars believe that Barnabas was a Jew from the tribe of Levi and will become first an advocate for St. Paul and later his and St. Luke's companions.

**9:29 ...against the Hellenist.** Remember, Hellenists were those Jews converted to Christianity who spoke Greek. They were both within the Christian community because they were prevalent in the Jewish community. It is interesting to realize that Paul now argues before the same group of people (for the most part) that Stephen had (6:9-10) stoned.

**9:30 Tarsus** This is Paul's birthplace. We will find this out later in the book of Acts (22:3). Tarsus is the capital of the Roman province of Cilicia which is today found in southeastern Turkey. In Paul's day it was a prestigious center of culture and education combining the Greek and Roman schools. Tarsus was also the home to a Jewish settlements dating back to the second century B.C. Most likely out of fear St. Paul is sent away and returns to his home town. He will remain here until Barnabas retrieves him to help with the growing community in Antioch (Acts 11:25-26).

**9:31 was in peace** Ah, sweet peace. St. Luke brings this section to a close by letting the readers know that this fledgling community continued to grow and to flourish. With Paul now off to Arabia the early community was able to live without fear from their main adversary. But this doesn't mean that they didn't have others from the Temple as well as Roman authority to worry about. This was simply the calm after another major storm

### **One last word about St. Paul:**

Before we leave St. Paul in Arabia let's take a moment to look at this man that God has chosen. In many ways Paul is like Moses. Both are well educated – Moses in the courts of the Pharaoh, Paul was educated by some of the most respected Rabbi one of whom was Gamaliel (Acts 22:3). The very education and intellect he used to seek for the destruction of "the Way", Paul will now use to defend and explain Jesus as the Messiah.

### **9:32-43 The Way begins to Grow**

With this section St. Luke begins to show the development of the early Christian community. Now that the threat of Paul is gone Peter is able to make a "tour" of those communities where Christians are beginning to establish themselves: Lydda, Sharon and Joppa. Some commentators make the point that the language St. Luke uses in these next two stories should remind us of the Old Testament descriptions of the work of Elijah and Elisha (1 Kings 17:17-24; 2 Kings 4:31-37). The suggestion is that St. Luke wants us to make the parallel between Moses followed by the prophets to Jesus followed by the prophets.

### **9:32-35 Peter in Lydda**

**9:32 the saints** This is a phrase used in the New Testament to identify those who believe in Jesus. Saints not yet officially defined by the Church. In truth we are all saints, those who believe. One commentator offers that the Greek word used here for saints is *hagios*, which

can be translated as *holy*; but the root meaning of the word is *different*. These men and women were different from other people. Their difference rested in their choice to follow Jesus, to seek after what is holy.

**Lydda**

This was a Judean town 12 miles inland from the Mediterranean coast. It sat just north of the road between Jerusalem and the port of Joppa

**9:33 a man named Aeneas**

Since there is nothing else in scripture regarding this man we can only know that he had been injured or sick causing him to be bedridden for eight years. Some scholars suggest that he was probably a member of the Christian community in Lydda.

**9:34 Christ heals you.**

Peter used this formula of calling on the name of the Lord for two reasons. First, to unleash the same healing power that Jesus had manifested during his ministry, and as we can see it was a powerful experience for all. Second, to make sure those around did not confuse just who was doing the healing. As we have seen there were those who would take the glory for themselves

**3:35 and they turned to the Lord**

Having experienced a miracle done in the name of Jesus becomes the bridge by which the residents of Lydda come to belief in Jesus Christ.

**9:36-43 Peter in Joppa**

In this final section of chapter nine we once again see that St. Luke wants to make sure that those reading, reflecting and supported by these pages see that women placed a significant role in the early Church. Joppa would be present day Tel Aviv.

**9:36 a disciple named Tabitha**

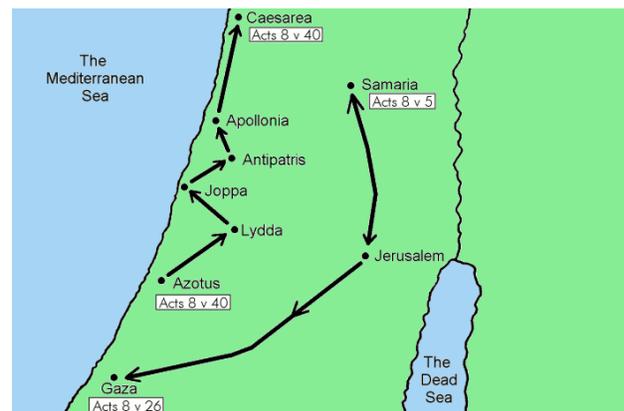
This miracle of Peter should remind us of Jesus' raising Jairus' daughter from the dead (Mark 5:35-43); as well as a miracle performed through Elijah who revived the son of a widow (1 Kins 17:17-24). So, who is Tabitha (Dorcas)? What we know about her comes from this short passage. We know that she lived the message of Jesus Christ in her life and was so essential to the community in Joppa the others could not imagine life without her. By offering both her Greek and Jewish names St. Luke is letting us know that her goodness went beyond boundaries and touching many lives.

**9:38 "Please come to us without delay"**

We cannot tell from this passage if the community in Joppa was expecting anything more than comfort in this time of great sorry. But it is interesting to see that Peter, as the primary Sheppard of the growing Christian community is established in the believers.

**9:43 (Peter) stayed...with Simon, a tanner**

At first glance this interesting tidbit would be seen as completely insignificant. But in truth St. Luke is giving us previews of coming attractions. Remember at this time the Apostles and early disciples are



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understanding (for the most part) that the gift of life given by the Messiah Jesus Christ is given to the Jews. They are preaching and teaching in the Temple and Synagogues. As a Jew to associate with a tanner would be to expose oneself to ritual impurity. (One who works with dead animals would be in a state of perpetual ritual impurity (Leviticus 11:39) and anyone associating with him would be impure as well.) Peter, following in the footsteps of Jesus would have not necessarily held to the old purity laws but it is significant that Simon has adapted so completely to the ways of Christ. The coming attraction? The conversation do those Gentiles who come to belief in Jesus Christ must adopt all the Jewish rituals and theology as well as the teachings of Jesus. OR, is Christianity a reality unto itself?

### **A final word about Tabitha/Dorcus**

*Pope St. Gregory the Great wrote: One does not attain faith by virtues, but rather one attains virtues by faith. Tabatha's life demonstrated evidence of the good works that are born from her faith. The Catholic Church has never taught that there is a separation between faith and works. Scripture teaches that in the Last Judgment our lives will be judged according to the good works produced by our faith.*

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### **Reflection Questions:**

1. There are religious “nuts” and those who are completely committed to their faith. How would you describe the difference?
2. Have you ever felt called by God to step way outside of your comfort zone? Did you ever follow the Lord’s promptings? What were the results?
3. Ananias was called by God to go to St. Paul. What signs do you think he saw that informed him that St. Paul’s conversion was genuine?
4. Tabitha/Dorcus lived out her faith in Jesus touching many lives? What are you doing to care for those who are in need of help?

### **Catechism of the Catholic Church**

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Healing the Sick: 1506-1510

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