

Paul's Conversion – Why Three Accounts, and How Do They Differ?

By MD Harris Institute

The first account, in Acts 9, narrated Paul's conversion when it actually happened. After being a ringleader in persecuting Christians in Jerusalem and Judea, Paul obtained permission from the high priest, and then set out for Damascus, hoping to find and arrest Christians who had fled his persecution. While enroute, Paul and his companions suddenly saw a great light. Paul fell to the ground and heard Jesus' voice, asking why he was persecuting Him. The voice then told him what to do. Paul had been blinded by the light, and his companions led him to Damascus where he had nothing by mouth for three days. Meanwhile, the Lord commanded a believer named Ananias to meet Saul and minister to him. Despite his fear at revealing himself to the feared Pharisee and persecutor of Christians Saul of Tarsus, Ananias obeyed. Saul, soon to be known as Paul, regained his sight and began his ministry.

The second account, in Acts 22, described his testimony during his trial before the Jews. After years of preaching Christ throughout Asia Minor and Greece, Paul had returned to Jerusalem. He was falsely accused of bringing a Gentile into the temple and he was arrested. Addressing his accusers in their native Hebrew tongue, Paul reflected back on his conversion, telling them that he was a Jew, raised in the Diaspora but brought up and educated under the famous Jewish teacher Gamaliel. He recounted his zeal in persecuting Christians and his mission to Damascus. Like the first account, Paul described the bright light and the voice of Christ, but quoted Jesus as saying "I am Jesus the Nazarene whom you are persecuting." The descriptor "Nazarene" is not found in the earlier account. The chapter 9 account said "go into the city" but that in chapter 22 said "go to Damascus". The account of the Lord's message to Ananias is not found in the 22nd chapter, and the mention of Paul's baptism is not found in the 9th chapter. The third account, in Acts 26, is significantly different from the other two. In this case, Paul had been in prison for over one year and he had been testifying in his own defense before the Judean king Agrippa. Paul described his persecuting Christians in much greater detail. He added details about the encounter on the road, including that "it is hard for you to kick against the goads". In this account, Jesus told Paul that he was chosen by God and that he would bring the gospel to the Gentiles, all in great detail. Paul provided no details on his activities in Damascus and then went on to convey his message to the Gentiles.

Far from being proof of a fabrication, the differences in the accounts demonstrate the reliability of the account. Depending upon the purpose for telling a story and the audience that will hear it, people choose to emphasize different aspects of the story. The account in chapter 9, in which Luke's purpose was to tell the story of the early church, emphasized Paul and the believers in Damascus. The chapter 22 account was not intended to be a story but a testimony. It emphasized Paul's essential Jewishness and faithfulness to the Law, and referred to "the God of our Fathers". One can sense that he yearned for his Jewish accusers to see that Jesus is their Messiah. Paul's defense to Agrippa in chapter 26, a small, more private and less hostile audience, was different. Both in medicine and in law, a story that is totally unchanged between events is more likely to be considered a fabrication.

This conversion story is useful to all Christians in a variety of ways. Those who fear that they are too sinful for God to save have a useful role model. Those who believe that they can be “solo” Christians see the utter need that even the greatest among the apostles had for his brothers in Christ. Those who doubt the authority of Paul as an apostle can be reassured in his God-given authority. Paul’s story preaches well, demonstrating God’s sovereign choice in his servants, and the certainty of His will. It is a model for believers today.

Side-by-Side Comparison of St. Paul’s Conversion

Acts 9:3-19a	Acts 22:6-16	Acts 26:11-18
Now as he journeyed he approached Damascus, and suddenly a light from heaven flashed about him	As I made my journey and drew near to Damascus, about noon a great light from heaven suddenly shone about me.	At midday, O king, I saw on the way a light from heaven, brighter than the sun , shining round me and those who journeyed with me.
And (Paul) fell to the ground and heard a voice saying to him, “Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?”	And I fell to the ground and heard a voice saying to me, ‘Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?’	And when we had all fallen to the ground , I heard a voice saying to me in the Hebrew language, ‘Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me? It hurts you to kick against the goads.’*
And (Paul) said, “Who are you, Lord?”	⁸ And I answered, ‘Who are you, Lord?’	And I said, ‘Who are you, Lord?’
And he said, “I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting	And he said to me, ‘I am Jesus of Nazareth whom you are persecuting.	And the Lord said, ‘I am Jesus whom you are persecuting.
rise and enter the city, and you will be told what you are to do.”		But rise and stand upon your feet; for I have appeared to you for this purpose, to appoint you to serve and bear witness to the things in which you have seen me and to those in which I will appear to you, ¹⁷ delivering you from the people and from the Gentiles—to whom I send you ¹⁸ to open their eyes, that they may turn from darkness to light and

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		from the power of Satan to God, that they may receive forgiveness of sins and a place among those who are sanctified by faith in me.'
The men who were traveling with him stood speechless, hearing the voice but seeing no one	Now those who were with me saw the light but did not hear the voice of the one who was speaking to me.	
Saul arose from the ground; and when his eyes were opened, he could see nothing	And I said, 'What shall I do, Lord?' And the Lord said to me, 'Rise, and go into Damascus, and there you will be told all that is appointed for you to do.	
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.	And when I could not see because of the brightness of that light, I was led by the hand by those who were with me, and came into Damascus	
Now there was a disciple at Damascus named Anani'as. The Lord said to him in a vision, "Anani'as		
And he said, "Here I am, Lord."		
And the Lord said to him, "Rise and go to the street called Straight, and inquire in the house of Judas for a man of Tarsus named Saul; for behold, he is praying,		
and he has seen a man named Anani'as come in and lay his hands on him so that he might regain his sight.		
But Anani'as answered, "Lord, I have heard from many about this man, how much evil he has done to thy saints ^[b] at Jerusalem; ¹⁴ and here he has authority from		

the chief priests to bind all who call upon thy 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 sons of Israel; ¹⁶ for I will show him how much he must suffer for the sake of my name."		
So Anani'as 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 that you may regain your sight and be filled with the Holy Spirit. "	And one Anani'as, a devout man according to the law, well spoken of by all the Jews who lived there, came to me, and standing by me said to me, 'Brother Saul, receive your sight.' And in that very hour I received my sight and saw him.	
And immediately something like scales fell from his eyes and he regained his sight. Then he rose and was baptized, and took food and was strengthened.	And he said, 'The God of our fathers appointed you to know his will, to see the Just One and to hear a voice from his mouth; for you will be a witness for him to all men of what you have seen and heard. And now why do you wait? Rise and be baptized, and wash away your sins, calling on his name.'	

***Meaning of "to kick against the goad":** Apparently, "to kick against the goads" was a common expression found in both Greek and Latin literature—a rural image, which rose from the practice of farmers goading their oxen in the fields. Though unfamiliar to us, everyone in that day understood its meaning.

Goads were typically made from slender pieces of timber, blunt on one end and pointed on the other. Farmers used the pointed end to urge a stubborn ox into motion. Occasionally, the beast would kick at the goad. The more the ox kicked, the more likely the goad would stab into the flesh of its leg, causing greater pain.

Side-by-Side comparison created by Theresa Lisiecki using Revised Standard Version, Catholic Edition.