

# **ACTS 9: 1 – 31**

## **FROM ANTAGONIST TO EVANGELIST; THE TABLES ARE TURNED**

I have an old car. I love my car. My lovely wife hates it, for many different reasons. One of the reasons she hates my car is, that in her opinion, it needs more maintenance than a newer one. I'm not saying she is wrong there, but in my mind, it is still cheaper for me to work on it than paying a car note. My point in bringing this up is that we all relish being able to make our way home in the afternoon, sitting down and enjoying the evening, knowing that we have accomplished something that day. There is a simple satisfaction in that. What has that got to do with having an old car? Well, when you own an older car, you can't always go home and sit down to enjoy the last hours of the day. Many times, you have to work on the older car in order to be able to get to work the next day. As soon as you think you have everything working on the car, something else pops up – and this can be exasperating. It can make you not want to go on, or it might make you want to sell the car and get something that requires less maintenance so you can enjoy some time in peace without having to deal with another problem.

And that is where we find ourselves in the book of Acts. As we closed out chapter eight, we saw God moving to reclaim the nations and how that was going according to plan as the church moved out from its epicenter in Jerusalem to Samaria and Judea, towards the ends of the earth. That is still going on today. We also saw God move in the hearts of certain individuals, namely those of Simon the Sorcerer and the Ethiopian eunuch. God met them

where they were, in their situations, in their contexts and completely turned their lives around. We will see all these things happen again today as we begin to make our way through chapter nine. We begin with the “problem” in our passage. That is, a young zealous, Jewish Scholar, by the name of Saul, attempts to stamp out the church as it has now reached the major urban center of Damascus, Syria. He can’t let this thing spill out of the box any more than it already has. (He is attempting to kill the dandelion by hitting it, and once again, we will see that that method backfires on him in major way. We will see God turn the tables on this young man. To get back to my introductory point, the church made it through another storm in a valiant way, with God moving and growing the church as it came under persecution. (The old car was now fixed.) But just when they thought they could relax and take a siesta, a man named Saul turns up the heat once again. (The old car has broken down once again.)

***1 Then Saul, still breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord, went to the high priest 2 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.***

What’s so special about Damascus?

Picking up outlier cities.

City was under Israelite authority in King David’s day.

It was a major urban center in NT times.

Large Jewish population there.

Who was Saul?

Christians know him better as Paul. Many assume he took his new name upon his conversion, but we don’t really see that until he begins his ministry to the Gentiles in earnest, in chapter 13.

Roman citizens had three names, and if they were Jews, presumably even a fourth. "Paul" comes from a Latin word, meaning, "little." This was one of his three Roman names. He inherited his Roman citizenship from his parents and grew up in Tarsus, a city located in southern, Modern Turkey. Tarsus was the third largest center of Greek culture in the Mediterranean world behind Athens and Alexandria, Egypt. He would have begun his rabbinical training between the ages of 12 and 18. His teacher was Gamaliel, whom we have already heard from in the book of Acts.

His cultural background enabled him to move seamlessly between the Jewish and Greek world as well as between the worlds of the common people and the intellectual elites of his day.

He has zealously been quashing the church at every opportunity, but as we shall see, God has other plans for him and apparently has been working on Saul for some time – though how this has been, we don't know.

***3 As he journeyed he came near Damascus, and suddenly a light shone around him from heaven. 4 Then he fell to the ground, and heard a voice saying to him, "Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting Me?"***

***5 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."***

***6 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."***

***7 And the men who journeyed with him stood speechless, hearing a voice but seeing no one. 8 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. 9 And he was three days without sight, and neither ate nor drank.***

As Saul moved north from Jerusalem to Damascus, a bright light suddenly flashed before him, causing him to hit the ground. At this point a voice spoke to him from Heaven, asking, **“Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me? It is hard for you to kick against the pricks.”**

Two things to note here: 1) The voice says that “He” is being persecuted. Saul has been persecuting the believers of the early church. Now he is confronted by the voice of a singular, “He.” Where and from whom is this coming? From our vantage point, this is obviously Jesus, but Saul doesn’t know this, even though as we can ascertain from the following sentence, he has been dealing with this individual for some period of time. This is what is meant by, “It is hard for you to kick against the goads.”

Define goad

Saul has been battling the Holy Spirit for some time. How long? We don’t know. But God has obviously been working on his heart.

This is how God works, drawing us to Himself through the conviction of the Holy Spirit. Saul has been fighting it, as do most of us.

We also see that when the church is persecuted, when individual believers are persecuted, this persecution is always linked to Jesus, Himself. This is why the voice says, “You have been persecuting Me!”

We are not alone in our struggles and persecutions.

Whatever is being done to us in the name of persecution, is actually being done to and being felt by Jesus.

Saul, trembling then asks, “Lord, what do you want me to do?” He is then given his marching orders; namely to go to Damascus and when he arrives, then and only then will he be told what to do.

This is akin to Abram being told to go to Canaan and not receiving any more info until he gets there.

When God tells us to move, we need to move, no matter how little information we are given. This is true obedience. When Saul stood up, he was blind and had to be led to the city by his companions, who also heard the voice.

We are told that he prayed and fasted for 3 days. In verse 11, Jesus tells Ananias that Paul is praying during this time. It took him some time to process what was going on.

This is hard for many of us to do, when it comes to hearing from the Lord. Stopping for a period of time, let alone 3 days, in order to process what we have heard is difficult to say the least. But this encounter is going to turn Saul's entire world on its head! Every relationship he has ever had will be thrown into chaos. His entire life has been given to pursuing the God of Israel. But that pursuit was not in vain. God has heard and seen his zeal, but is now calling him to a fresh, new part of His plan. It won't make sense to any of his friends, other than those present with him on the road, but it will eventually make sense to all the believers and the Apostles. Try to imagine what this would be like for you, personally. Think of your entire life and purpose being turned upside down in an instant. Only the wooing of the Holy Spirit, which I'm sure Saul was contemplating during this time of prayer and fasting would help all this to make sense.

So, Saul complies with what he heard.

And now enters another character into the episode.

***10 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."***

***11 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. 12 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.”***

***13 Then Ananias answered, “Lord, I have heard from many about this man, how much harm he has done to Your saints in Jerusalem. 14 And here he has authority from the chief priests to bind all who call on Your name.”***

***15 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. 16 For I will show him how many things he must suffer for My name's sake.”***

***17 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.” 18 Immediately there fell from his eyes something like scales, and he received his sight at once; and he arose and was baptized.***

***19 So when he had received food, he was strengthened. Then Saul spent some days with the disciples at Damascus.***

A vision within a vision:

Jesus reached out to a believer in Damascus by the name of Ananias.

Ananias has some legitimate concerns. This is guy is locking folks up and some are even being killed, and you want me to go talk to him?

Jesus says, “Go, he is my chosen vessel. He will carry the Word to Gentiles, kings and Jews for my sake. And I will tell him what he must suffer for my name's sake.”

Ananias complies, though I'm sure he had butterflies in his stomach.

Ananias prays for Saul, addressing him as brother. Saul has been called by God. Therefore, he is already seen as a

brother in Christ. Saul arose, regained his sight, and then was baptized, receiving the Holy Spirit.

The one whom he had been fighting won the day. And now we will see the results of what can happen when a non-believer is refocused to the cause of God!

Saul then spent some time with the believers in Damascus.

***20 Immediately he preached the Christ in the synagogues, that He is the Son of God.***

***21 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?"***

***22 But Saul increased all the more in strength, and confounded the Jews who dwelt in Damascus, proving that this Jesus is the Christ.***

***23 Now after many days were past, the Jews plotted to kill him. 24 But their plot became known to Saul. And they watched the gates day and night, to kill him. 25 Then the disciples took him by night and let him down through the wall in a large basket.***

Saul at Jerusalem

***26 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. 27 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. 28 So he was with them at Jerusalem, coming in and going out. 29 And he spoke boldly in the name of the Lord Jesus and disputed against the Hellenists, but they attempted to kill him. 30 When the brethren found out,***

***they brought him down to Caesarea and sent him out to Tarsus.***

This is amazing! God used a man who had been schooled in the Law to now preach the kingdom of God and how Jesus is the Messiah of Israel!

This is how God can turn anyone's life around. And who better to take on the task of ministering to both Jews and Gentiles than Saul? His education and cultural affiliations made him the perfect guy. God saw him, knew him and then drew him to the task! No matter how hardened someone is, they can always be drawn by the Spirit to the cause of God. Saul immediately put his gifts to use for the Kingdom. He didn't hesitate.

But remember how Jesus said that Saul would be told what he must suffer for the cause of Christ? Saul, in a matter of days has to deal with two attempts on his life. We may feel comfortable here in America, but the call to the life of a Christian is only comfortable when we don't go about our new vocation as we should. There will always be resistance to the truth.

And to top off the threats on his life, the Apostles in Jerusalem were afraid to meet with him – for good reason. But once again, the Baptism of the Spirit legitimizes Saul as having been brought into the family of God.

Due to the death threats, the Apostles put Saul on a boat to his hometown where he can recoup and see what else has in store for him.

***31 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.***

Look at the geographical progression.

There was now peace in the church. But as we will see, another internal issue will soon rear its head. That is for later. But look at the B portion of verse 13.

***And walking in the fear of the Lord and in the comfort of the Holy Spirit, they were multiplied.***

**We often contrast fear with peace. But this is not the case for the Christian.**

**Walking in the fear of the Lord and in the comfort of the Holy Spirit are not mutually exclusive.**

Fearing, reverence for God leads to obedience. Obedience, along with the emboldening and power of the Spirit, leads to fruit. And these things together lead to peace. And it is at that point that we can take a look back on the day with the satisfaction of having completed our tasks for the day.

So, what have we seen today?

Going back to how to read biblical narrative, we began the text with a problem. Saul was launching a wave of persecution. Was that problem solved? Yes. Saul met Jesus and was saved. In the middle of all that, we see how God uses people to accomplish His plans. After all, He could have just dealt with Saul in the middle of the road. But instead, he sent Saul to Ananias. And we have seen that no matter how far away from the plan of God we are, He will reach out to us, and through the Holy Spirit, convict us. But at some point, we have to yield to God. We have also seen how we need to act in faith and obedience once we have heard from God, even in the face of what seems like certain persecution. And then, after all that, we have seen how persecution can come our way. In the case of Saul, it was death threats. But nothing could stop the man God chose. God can and will take the things in our lives and sift through them. What He cannot and/or will not use, he will filter out of us. But the very things that have made us who we are, that CAN be used by Him, He will use to His glory.

Take heart! No matter who or what you are. No matter how you or others see you, God sees a vessel that can be re-shaped and molded for His glory. As we have seen in those mentioned here today, all it takes is a willing heart of belief and obedience.