



God's Grace at Work in Saul and Peter Acts 9

Introduction

Luke introduced Saul in Acts 7:58 as *a young man* who guarded the clothes of the witnesses as they stoned Stephen, an act which showed that Saul was *consenting to his death* (8:1). Not only had Saul consented to the martyrdom of Stephen, he was actively devoted to the destruction of Christianity (8:3). The first verses in Chapter 9 show that Saul's zeal in persecuting the church (*the Way*) had by no means diminished. In fact, he extended his efforts beyond Jerusalem to Damascus. God, however, had other plans for Saul. By His grace God reached out and changed his life.

Saul had been born and raised in the Gentile city of Tarsus in Cilicia, but his parents were strict Aramaic speaking Jews. Saul had been taught Aramaic and sent to Jerusalem to study Jewish law under the respected teacher and leader, Gamaliel (5:34). In one of his letters, Saul (called Paul by the time he wrote it) described himself as *circumcised the eighth day, of the stock of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews; concerning the law, a Pharisee; concerning zeal, persecuting the church; concerning the righteousness which is in the law, blameless* (Philippians 3:5-6). These things show Saul's pride in his Hebrew heritage and religious status. However, all of that changed on the road to Damascus. After that, *What things were gain to me, these I have counted loss for Christ* (Philippians 3:7).

Chapter 9 is a beautiful picture of God's grace in the life of a sinner, *Of whom I [Paul] am chief* (1 Timothy 1:15). Chapter 9 also portrays God's grace through the apostle Peter as he traveled through Palestine ministering to the saints and preaching the gospel.

Outline of Acts 9

- I. Saul Meets Jesus - Acts 9:1-19
- II. Saul Preaches Jesus - Acts 9:20-31
- III. Peter Ministers in Jesus' Name - Acts 9:32-43

I. Saul Meets Jesus - Acts 9:1-19

Saul was not content to hunt down and destroy the Jerusalem Christians only. His aim was to pursue and persecute believers in Christ wherever they were, even beyond the borders of Israel. Later in his life he confessed before King Agrippa, *"Being exceedingly enraged against them, I persecuted them even to foreign cities"* (Acts 26:11).

A. Saul's Plan - Acts 9:1-2

The Christians are described as those who were of *the Way*, a term used several times throughout Acts (19:9, 23; 22:4; 24:14, 22) to refer to the followers of Jesus Christ who is *the way, the truth, and the life* (John 14:6). Believers at this time had not made a break away from Judaism, and they continued to meet in their local synagogues. Paul's plan was to go to the synagogues of Damascus, arrest the Christians, and take them as prisoners back to Jerusalem. Since the high priest had religious jurisdiction over the Jews, Saul requested and received authorization from him.

B. God's Plan - Acts 9:3-18

Saul started out for Damascus and was nearly there when a miraculous event took place.

1. Jesus' appearance to Saul - 9:3-9

a. The light - 9:3-4

Suddenly, as Saul and his company walked down the road, a light *from heaven* shone all around them. It was a supernatural light, brighter than the sun (Acts 26:13). It was the *light of the world* (Matthew 5:14) shining His grace upon Saul. The light caused Saul to fall to the ground.

b. The voice - 9:4-5

As he lay on the ground, Saul heard a voice asking, *"Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?"* As far as Saul was concerned, he had been persecuting ignorant and insolent rebels against his beloved Judaism. Little did he imagine that he had been the insolent one, insulting the Lord in heaven.

Saul's response was, *"Who are You, Lord?"* Surely he did not realize that he was speaking to the Lord Jesus Christ, but his use of the title, "Lord," reveals that he knew the voice was that of a supernatural being.

The voice answered, *"I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting."* In persecuting the church, Saul had been persecuting Jesus, and so it is ever true that those who mistreat Christ's followers are really directing their abuse at Him.

NOTE: The statement by the Lord in 9:5, *"It is hard for you to kick against the goads,"* and the first sentence

of 9:6 are not found in the oldest Greek manuscripts, and thus omitted in some Bibles. However, the same phrase is found in 26:14 and presents an interesting picture of Saul as a plow-ox with Jesus as the driver holding the *goad* (a prodding stick). The meaning is that Saul can no more resist Jesus than the plow-ox can resist his driver.

c. The command - 9:6

Jesus directed Saul to get up off the ground, go into the city of Damascus, and wait for further instructions. Acts 26:16 adds that Saul would be sent to minister to the Gentiles.

d. Speechless onlookers - 9:7

Those who were traveling with Saul saw the light (22:9) but did not see Jesus. They heard the voice but, according to 22:9, they probably heard only the sound and did not hear discernible words. The result was that they were *afraid* (22:9) and *stood speechless* -- an apt response.

e. A waiting period - 9:8-9

Getting up from the ground, Saul opened his eyes but could see nothing. Acts 22:10 notes that Saul was blind from the *glory of that light*. Those who were with him led him by the hand into the city of Damascus. "A few moments earlier Saul had been storming up the road determined to capture and imprison Christians. Now he was led like a child by the hand. God's grace is often displayed in great powerful acts and in apparent catastrophes" (The Bible Knowledge Commentary, John Walvoord and Roy Zuck, Ed.).

For three days, Saul was blind, and he neither ate nor drank but spent those days in prayer (9:11). During that time, the Lord was preparing a messenger to send to him.

2. Ananias' visit to Saul - 9:10-19

Ananias was a devout man and well respected by the Jewish community (22:12). He was also a Christian, one of the men Saul went to Damascus to persecute. Now the Lord chose Ananias to be His emissary to Saul.

a. Ananias' vision - 9:10-11

The Lord appeared to Ananias in a vision and instructed him to go to Saul, even giving him the address where Saul was staying. It is comforting to know that the Lord Jesus knew exactly where to find Saul. He always knows how to find those who are His and send help during times of difficulty. Can you remember a time God sent someone to comfort or advise you when you

were in trouble? Has God ever used you, as He used Ananias, to help a new believer?

b. Saul's vision - 9:11-12

The Lord prepared Saul for Ananias' coming by appearing to him in a vision also. The Lord let Saul know that a man named Ananias would come to him and lay his hand on him so he might regain his sight.

c. Ananias' apprehensiveness - 9:13-14

At first Ananias was uneasy about going to face the infamous Saul. He knew about the persecution of the *saints* (the first time in the Bible that believers are called saints) in Jerusalem, and he knew of Saul's malicious reason for coming to Damascus.

d. Saul, the chosen vessel - 9:15-16

The Lord encouraged Ananias by explaining He had chosen Saul "to bear my name before Gentiles, kings, and the children of Israel." Saul considered his calling to be preaching the gospel to the Gentiles (Galatians 1:15-16). However, on his missionary journeys, as he traveled from city to city, he always went to the synagogues first to preach the gospel to the Jews (as in 13:14).

The Lord also revealed to Ananias that Saul would suffer much as he carried out his mission. The persecutor would meet with persecution. We will see the realization of this as we continue in the study of Acts.

e. Saul regains his sight and receives the Holy Spirit - 9:17-18

Ananias obeyed the Lord. He went to Saul at Judas' house on Straight Street (9:11), laid his hands upon him, and called him "*Brother Saul*", welcoming him into Christian fellowship. Ananias confirmed that it was the Lord Jesus who had appeared to Saul on the road. His visit also verified the vision Saul had seen (9:11-12).

Immediately, as Ananias laid hands on Saul and spoke to him, *something like scales* fell from Saul's eyes and he could see. The opening of Saul's eyes is also symbolic of the spiritual sight he had received. He thought he was enlightened and wise, seeing all things clearly (Philippians 3:4-6), but he had really been in the dark (See Acts 26:18; Ephesians 6:12 and Colossians 1:13). God opened his eyes and now Saul could see. At this time Saul was also baptized, presumably by Ananias.

II. Saul Preaches Jesus - Acts 9:19-30

After eating for the first time in three days, Saul was strong enough to go out and begin preaching.

A. Preaching in Damascus - Acts 9:19-25

Saul's strategy was always to preach in the synagogues, and that is where he began in Damascus.

1. Saul's message - 9:20

Saul had gone to Damascus to persecute the believers in Jesus, but instead he preached Jesus Christ as the Son of God. Throughout his ministry, Christ was his only message (1 Corinthians 2:2). He took great joy in Christ being preached (Philippians 1:18).

2. People's amazement - 9:21-22

The Greek word for "amazed" is "existanto." It literally means "to be beside oneself" or "to be struck out of one's senses." The people who heard Saul could hardly believe that the man who preached Christ with such boldness (9:27) and intensity was the same one who had destroyed the Christians in Jerusalem and had come to Damascus with the very same purpose in mind. Matthew Henry in his Commentary observes that, "The miracle that had taken place in this man's mind far outshone any miracle performed on men's bodies. Witnessing the dramatic change in Saul's heart was a greater miracle than hearing men speak with tongues."

3. Jewish leaders' opposition - 9:22-25

Saul's arguments proving that Jesus is the Messiah totally frustrated the Jews. Apparently they became so confused they could not answer Saul. So they plotted to kill him instead. They watched the city gates day and night hoping to apprehend him as he left the city. Consequently, Saul had to leave Damascus through the window of a house on the wall, just as the Jewish spies had left Jericho (Joshua 2:15), and just as David had escaped from King Saul (1 Samuel 19:12). The one who had gone to Damascus to persecute others now ended up being the one persecuted.

NOTE: Luke omits Saul's going to Arabia as mentioned in Galatians 1:17. The visit to Arabia probably took place either between 9:19-20 or between 9:22 and 23. Nothing more is known about Saul's trip to Arabia.

B. Preaching in Jerusalem - Acts 9:26-30

When Saul left Jerusalem he had been a violent enemy of Christianity, but by God's grace (Galatians 1:15-16) he returned as a minister preaching the word of God (Colossians 1:25).

1. The disciples' fear - 9:26

Returning to Jerusalem put Saul in a precarious position. The Jews had heard what had happened in

Damascus, so he couldn't go to them. On the other hand, the Christians knew him too well as the zealous persecutor and had no intention of associating with him.

2. Barnabas' encouragement - 9:28

Barnabas, the *Son of Encouragement*, (Acts 4:36-37) was truly an encouragement to Saul. He was moved to go and befriend Saul and take him to the apostles. Thus, Saul was able to testify of his miraculous conversion and explain how the Holy Spirit had filled him with boldness to preach in the name of Jesus.

Barnabas could have been risking his life in going to see Saul. None of the other disciples believed Saul could really be one of them (9:26), fearing this could be just a crafty trick to entrap them. Barnabas was obviously both sensitive and obedient to the leading of the Holy Spirit. How can you be more like Barnabas?

3. Hellenists' attempt to kill Saul - 9:30

It seems that Saul took up Stephen's ministry where it had left off. Saul's bold preaching of Christ led to a dispute with the Greek-speaking Jews. (See Acts 6:1-13.) Just as the Hellenists had turned against Stephen, they turned against Saul and tried to kill him. When the disciples found out, they took Saul out of Jerusalem, down to the seaport of Caesarea about 60 miles away, and then sent him home to Tarsus.

C. Peace in the Church - Acts 9:31

After Saul left Palestine, there was a time of peace in the church. Those whom he had persecuted now had a time of rest. But it was merely a lull between storms.

III. Peter Ministers in Jesus' Name

The last we saw of Peter, he was on his way back to Jerusalem after visiting Samaria with the apostle John. He was traveling from village to village preaching the gospel (8:25). Now he was taking advantage of the rest from persecution and making his way through Judea and Samaria visiting the saints.

A. Aeneas Healed - Acts 9:32-35

One of the towns Peter visited was Lydda, located on the southeast edge of the plain of Sharon, a fertile area along the coast of Palestine. There he met a man who had been paralyzed and confined to his bed for eight years. Peter called him by name saying, "*Aeneas, Jesus the Christ heals you. Arise and make your bed*" (9:34). *Immediately* Aeneas obeyed. He had been healed in the name of Jesus, the Messiah.

Aeneas used his healthy legs to go out and spread the good news that Christ had made him whole. *So all who dwelt at Lydda and Sharon saw him and turned to the Lord* (9:35).

B. Dorcas Restored to Life - Acts 9:36-42

1. Dorcas' death - 9:36-37

About 12 miles northeast of Lydda was the ancient seaport (Jonah 1:3) of Joppa. One of the Christians there was a woman named Tabitha. This was her Aramaic name — the Greek equivalent is Dorcas. Especially in towns where both Gentiles and Jews lived, it was customary for Jews to have both a Greek and an Aramaic name. Dorcas was a woman who showed her faith by doing good deeds to help the poor. She particularly ministered to needy widows by making clothing for them (9:39). Sadly, Dorcas became sick and died. Her body was washed according to the Jewish ceremonial law and then laid in an upper room.

2. Disciples send for Peter - 9:38

The disciples knew that Peter was in Lydda, only twelve miles away, so they sent and asked him to come quickly. It was too late to send for a physician, but it was not too late to send for Peter.

3. Peter's prayer - 9:39-41

Peter went to Joppa and to the upper room where Dorcas' body had been laid. All the widows whom Dorcas had helped were there weeping. They eagerly showed Peter all the clothing she had made for them.

Peter sent everyone out of the room just as Jesus had done when he raised Jairus' daughter from the dead (Mark 5:22-42). This was not an occasion for public display, but a time for the glory of God to shine through. Peter knelt to pray and then spoke to the body

saying, "*Tabitha, arise*", very similar to Jesus' words to Jairus' daughter, "*Little girl [talitha] arise*". Tabitha opened her eyes and saw Peter. She then sat up, took Peter's hand, and he lifted her up. Peter called all her Christian friends back into the room and presented Tabitha alive — by the grace of God.

4. Peoples' belief - 9:42

The word of the miracle spread throughout Joppa and many hearts were turned to the Lord.

C. Peter Prepared for Future Ministry - 9:43

Peter's ministry in Lydda and Joppa was getting him ready for what was to come. First, God used him in a special way, performing two miracles by His grace. Secondly, God was paving the way for him to preach to Gentiles. Both Lydda and Joppa were partially Gentile, and the tanner with whom Peter stayed was considered by the Jews to be ceremonially unclean because he worked with skins of dead animals (Leviticus 11:39-40). All of this helped prepare Peter for what was to happen next.

Applications

1. When Peter was called to go to Joppa, he arose and went immediately. When other believers ask for your help, do you respond immediately and cheerfully or are you an excuse maker?
2. What can you do to help your church be more like the church of Acts 9:31, filled with peace, fearing God, and growing by the power of the Holy Spirit? How can you edify and comfort your brothers and sisters in Christ?
3. Both Ananias and Barnabas were God's willing agents to help Saul. Are you willing to go out of your way to serve and offer encouragement to God's chosen leaders? Who might God be calling you to strengthen and support?