

Acts 9 – Transformation of Saul and healing of his sight

THEME: Conversion of Saul of Tarsus (son of Shem).

This chapter tells about another remarkable conversion. The conversion of the Ethiopian eunuch was in a chariot; the conversion of Saul of Tarsus was down in the dust. Probably he was riding a little donkey when he went up to Damascus, and he was knocked right down into the dust.

When we get to the Book of Philippians, we will look at the theological, psychological, and philosophical aspects of the conversion of Saul of Tarsus. Here, we are dealing with the facts of what actually happened on the road to Damascus. - McGee

The Conversion of Saul

Act 9:1-2 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.

When the persecution broke out in Jerusalem, the church went underground. The apostles remained in Jerusalem, but many of the others were scattered—we found Philip up in Samaria and along the Mediterranean coast. The thing that triggered it was the stoning of Stephen, followed by persecution.

The other religious leaders in Jerusalem were satisfied after they had run the Christians out of Jerusalem. They were willing to let it stay at that point. But not Saul of Tarsus! He was the one who was breathing out threatenings and slaughter. He hated Jesus Christ. I do not think that the Lord Jesus Christ ever has had an enemy greater than this man Saul of Tarsus. He went to the high priest and said, "Look, I've heard that a group of them have run off up there to Damascus, and I'm going after them." The fact of the matter is that he intended to ferret them out, anywhere they went. His goal was to exterminate the Christians.

Act 9:3-4 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?"

Paul will recount this incident twice more in the Book of Acts. In fact, Paul never tired of telling about his conversion. We find him going over it again in his Epistle to the Philippians where he gets right down to the heart of the matter and tells what really happened to him. Here we are simply given the facts. He will go over them again when he gives his testimony before king Agrippa—that is a masterpiece. - McGee

Act 9:5 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."

Will you notice, here, the ignorance of Saul? He was possibly the most brilliant man of his day. He was probably a graduate of the University of Tarsus, the greatest Greek university of that day. He was a student in the school of Gamaliel, the Hebrew scholar. He was trained in the details of the Jewish religion. But he did not know the Lord Jesus Christ. "Who art thou, Lord?" Friend, to know *Him* is life. Saul didn't know Him! - McGee

Act 9:6 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."

Saul is right down in the dust on that road to Damascus. This is a remarkable conversion. He immediately reveals his conversion. This man who hated the Lord Jesus, who did everything he could against Him, now calls Him "Lord." And he asks what the Lord would have him do. He is ready to do the bidding of the Lord. He has been completely changed. "Wherefore by their fruits ye shall know them" (Mat_7:20). We can surely tell what has happened to this man.

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Act 9:7 *And the men who journeyed with him stood speechless, hearing a voice but seeing no one.*

Later on it says that they didn't hear. Is this a conflict? No, they heard a voice but that was all. They couldn't understand what was said. It didn't make any sense to them. They didn't see anyone. There was no one for them to see. They were speechless with amazement. We shall see this in more detail in Acts 22 and 26. - McGee

Act 9:8-9 *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.*

This man was blinded by the light that he had seen from heaven. Here was a man who was puzzled as much as any man has ever been. Some people jump up and down when they are converted. Some shout for joy. Not Saul of Tarsus. There never was a man as confused as he was. Had we met him on one of those three days in Damascus and had we asked him what had happened to him, his answer would have been, "I don't know." But he is going to find out. - McGee

Act 9:10-12 *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."*

Saul of Tarsus, a brilliant young man, is sitting in darkness and confusion. The Spirit of God comes to another man, Ananias, and sends him over to Saul of Tarsus. - McGee

Act 9:13-16 *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."*

God states two reasons for calling Saul. He was God's chosen vessel for two things. First, he was to bear the name of Jesus. Notice that he is not called a witness as the disciples were. Although Paul may have seen Jesus at His crucifixion, he had not walked with Him in the days of His flesh. He really knew nothing about Him until that day on the road to Damascus. Now he is to bear that name. That is the same name we are to bear today, the name of Jesus.

He is to bear that name before three different groups: Gentiles, kings, and the children of Israel. Gentiles are first on the list. Paul will be the great apostle to the Gentiles. Then to kings—he will appear before kings, probably including Nero himself, and then to the nation Israel. When Paul goes into a city, he always will begin in the Jewish synagogue. The synagogue will be his springboard to put him into the community, into the life of the city. From there he will reach the Gentiles. But he will go to the Jews first.

Second, the Lord said He will show Saul what great things he must suffer for His name's sake. He is chosen to suffer for Jesus Christ. In my judgment, there has never been anyone else who has suffered for the Lord as Paul the apostle suffered. None of us dare say, "I'm suffering more than anyone else. Why does God let this happen to me?" We may be suffering or we may think we are suffering more than we are. At any rate, none of us suffer as Paul the apostle suffered for the Lord.

Now as we look back on this remarkable conversion, you may remember that I said conversion requires the Holy Spirit using the Word of God through a man of God. Does this prove true in the conversion of Saul of Tarsus?

The Lord Jesus appeared to Saul personally. Before the Lord Jesus left His disciples, He told them that He was going away but that He would not leave them orphans. He promised them that He would send His Holy Spirit, and this is what the Spirit would do: "He shall glorify me: for he shall receive of mine, and shall shew it unto you. All things that the Father

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hath are mine: therefore said I, that he shall take of mine, and shall shew it unto you” (Joh_16:14-15). Now I think that when our resurrected Lord appeared to Saul personally, the Spirit of God opened his eyes spiritually and closed them physically so that he might see the Lord Jesus. So the Holy Spirit was definitely at work.

How about the Word of God? How was that used in the conversion of Paul? Saul of Tarsus was a Pharisee. He knew a great deal about the Word of God. In fact, if there ever has been anyone saturated with the Word of God, he was Saul of Tarsus. When reading his epistles, it becomes obvious that he was very familiar with the Old Testament. The Holy Spirit and the Word of God were operative in Saul's conversion.

How can one say that God used a man of God as the human instrument to reach Saul? Although a man of God was not present at the time, I believe the man whom the Lord used to reach Saul was none other than Stephen. These two young men, Saul and Stephen, met only once, and that was when Saul stood with those who killed him. Stephen had looked up into the heavens and said, “I see heaven open and Jesus standing there!” (see Act_7:56). Saul of Tarsus looked up into the heavens and couldn't see anything. Then he looked into the face of Stephen, and he knew that Stephen was actually seeing something. I believe that Saul actually hoped that the heavens would open and that he, too, could have a vision of God. And he did on the Damascus road. It was Jesus Christ who was revealed to him.

I believe that God uses a human instrument in the conversion of every individual, although that individual may not be present at the moment of the conversion. That is the reason you and I should cast our influence for the Lord Jesus Christ at all times.

Recently I received a letter from a man who is a barber. A certain man had been his customer for twenty years. One time when the customer got out of the chair and was paying for his haircut, he asked the barber, “Have you ever heard Dr. McGee on the radio?” The barber said he had not; so the customer walked over to his radio and turned it to the station on which we can be heard in that town. He said, “Every morning at eight o'clock! You listen to him!” That was the last time these two men saw each other. The customer died suddenly within a day or so. You can guess the end of the story. The barber started listening to the program. He had been listening to it for over two years when he wrote to me. He has come to know Jesus Christ as his Savior. The human instrument in his conversion was his old customer.

Dr. C. I. Scofield is the man who edited the Scofield Bible. Before his conversion he was an outstanding international lawyer, but he had the problem of being a very heavy drinker. He had a godly mother who prayed for him continually. She died before Dr. Scofield was converted. On one occasion Dr. Lewis Sperry Chafer was praying with Dr. Scofield. He told us that he heard Dr. Scofield say, “Lord, if my mother doesn't know that I have been converted, would You please tell her so?” God uses a human instrument in the conversion of every person although that person may not be present at the moment of conversion. I don't think a person can be converted without a human instrument. So why don't you be an instrument? That doesn't mean you have to get a person to his knees; it does mean that you get the good news of Jesus Christ to him. There will not be a real conversion without a man of God using the Word of God, directed by the Spirit of God.

Now, going back to Saul of Tarsus where we left him in Damascus, he is still sitting in solitary blindness, praying. Brilliant young man that he is, he is still somewhat confused since his conversion. So the Spirit of God appeared to Ananias and sent him over to help him.- McGee

Act 9:17 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."

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What a change! He is still Saul of Tarsus, but now he is Brother Saul. He is not the enemy. He is a brother. Any person who loves the Lord Jesus Christ is a brother to any other believer. Unfortunately, I must add that brothers don't always act like brothers.

Saul is to receive his physical sight. Also, he is to be filled with the Holy Spirit. He is to be filled with the Holy Spirit for service. This is the experience which reveals itself in the life of the believer. He was baptized with the Holy Spirit on the Damascus road. In other words, he was saved on the Damascus road. But it wasn't until this man Ananias came to him that he was filled with the Holy Spirit. He is going to become a witness for the Lord Jesus. He will receive his physical weight and his spiritual sight. - McGee

Act 9:18 Immediately there fell from his eyes something like scales, and he received his sight at once; and he arose and was baptized.

Now he is baptized with water as a sign and seal of his conversion. The water had nothing to do with his salvation. He had been baptized by the Holy Spirit—that is, he had been saved on the Damascus road. When Ananias had laid his hands on him, he had been filled with the Holy Spirit for service. And now he is baptized with water. - McGee

Saul Proclaims Jesus in Synagogues

Act 9:19-20 So when he had received food, he was strengthened. Then Saul spent some days with the disciples at Damascus. Immediately he preached the Christ in the synagogues, that He is the Son of God.

Saul of Tarsus begins to witness immediately. Why? Because he is filled with the Holy Spirit. He began to preach “Christ in the synagogues, that he is the Son of God.”

Friend, you must know who Christ is before you can believe what He did. He died to pay the penalty for your sins. It is because He is the Son of God that He could die for your sins. I couldn't die for your sins; you couldn't die for mine. No human being can die a redemptive death for another human being. Only Christ could do this because He is the Son of God. So Saul began to preach that Christ is the Son of God. That is the first thing you must know. - McGee

Act 9:21-22 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.

The “very Christ” means the very Messiah. Saul confounded the Jews by preaching this. Saul of Tarsus is number one in several departments. He is number one in suffering; he is number one as a missionary. I think he is also number one in his I.Q.—he was a brilliant man. He was able to confound those who attempted to tackle him intellectually. - McGee

Saul Escapes from Damascus

Act 9:23-25 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.

When the Jews couldn't win by argument, they resorted to another tactic, which was to eliminate the enemy.

I'm sure it must have been quite a thrilling experience to have been let down over the wall in a basket. Yet we never read anywhere in the New Testament that Paul toured the Roman Empire giving a lecture on the subject, “Over the Wall in a Basket.” That ought to be a lesson for a great many folk who deal in sensationalism today. Here is a man who has had a most remarkable experience, but he has something more important to present.

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We must never let our experience get in the way of presenting Christ. We must never let our person get in the way of the person of Christ. Sometimes I hear the very pious prayer, “Hide the preacher behind the Cross.” No, friend, that is not what he needs. Rather, we should pray, “Help the preacher to present Christ in such a way that the Spirit of God can take the things of Christ and show them to us. Help him to present Christ!” This was Paul's method. - McGee

Saul in Jerusalem

Act 9:26 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.

They thought this was a deception on the part of Saul of Tarsus, that he was worming his way in. They were experiencing persecution. And they probably had heard of Simon the sorcerer and the tactics he used in Samaria. - McGee

Act 9:27-28 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.

Good old Barnabas, whose very name means the “son of consolation and comfort”! He comes over and puts his arms around Saul. What a blessing he was to him! How we still need people who will put their arms around some new Christian and will help that new Christian along. Barnabas becomes the sponsor of Saul.

Paul is accepted into the assembly at Jerusalem and joins forces with the Jerusalem church. - McGee

Act 9:29-30 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.

These are not Greeks. They are Israelites who have a Greek background. They had been brought up outside Israel somewhere in the Greek world. The witness of Saul was so powerful that they concluded the only way to get rid of his effectiveness was to eliminate him, to kill him.

Paul goes to his hometown. He probably went back home to tell his father and mother, brothers and sisters, and other relatives about Christ. We know nothing about them. Paul never talked about his family—with one exception. In Romans 16 he mentions some folk who are related to him. - McGee

Act 9:31 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.

The church continued to grow. The gospel went into Judea, Galilee, and Samaria. It will start to go to the ends of the earth very shortly. – McGee This is a partial fulfillment of Acts 1:8.

The Healing of Aeneas

Act 9:32-35 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.

Because Peter was an apostle, he had the sign gifts of an apostle.

Dorcas Restored to Life

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Act 9:36 *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.*

This woman was engaged in social service. She had the gift of sewing. Do you mean to tell me that sewing is a gift of the Holy Spirit? Yes, it was for this woman. Many people today are seeking for some exciting, fleshly gift such as speaking in tongues. May I suggest seeking a gift that is practical? I say very carefully and kindly, "Dear sister, learn to sew."

Sewing was a gift of Dorcas. I doubt that she ever spoke at a missionary meeting or taught a women's Bible class. I don't think she ever had such an opportunity because she was one of the early saints. But she did a lot of wonderful things for folk. - McGee

Act 9:37-39 *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. 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.*

Notice how the Christians prepared for burial in that day.

They sent word from Joppa to Lydda that a very wonderful woman in the church there in Joppa had died. They apparently believed that Simon Peter could raise her from the dead. At least they asked him to come down.

You will notice that it was the widows who conducted this fashion show. They were all showing off the garments that Dorcas had made. Why did the widows do it? Because they were poor. They wouldn't have had any clothes if it had not been for Dorcas. She had sewn their clothes for them. This was her ministry. Sewing was her gift of the Holy Spirit. - McGee

Act 9:40-41 *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.*

Here is an example of the exercise of a sign gift. We have in the Book of Acts, the historical book of the church, the ministries of Simon Peter who was an apostle and of Paul who was an apostle. Simon Peter was a minister to his own people; yet he was the one to open the door for the Gentiles. Saul of Tarsus became the apostle Paul, and he was the apostle to the Gentiles. The record states that each one raised a person from the dead. Quite possibly they raised others, but these are recorded to show that these men had sign gifts. They could perform miracles. They could heal the sick. They could raise the dead. These were the marks, the evidences of an apostle. They were apostolic gifts. Paul says that the apostles are the foundation of the church in the sense that the church is built on them. They are the ones who put down the New Testament on which the church is actually built.

Today we do not need sign gifts. The issue today is doctrine. At the end of the era of New Testament writings, the apostle John wrote his epistles. Listen to his instructions for detecting deceivers: "If there come any unto you, and bring not this doctrine, receive him not into your house, neither bid him God speed: for he that biddeth him God speed is partaker of his evil deeds" (2Jn_1:10-11).

Toward the end of Paul's own ministry the record clearly shows that Paul did not exercise the gift of healing. For instance, notice that he left Trophimus at Miletum sick (2Ti_4:20). Why did not Paul heal his friend Trophimus? Paul, you see, had come to the end of his ministry, and the sign gifts even then were beginning to disappear from the church. At the beginning of Paul's ministry nothing of the New Testament had been written. Paul himself wrote the second book of the

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New Testament. When he went into a new territory with his message, what was his authority? He had no authority except sign gifts. However, after the New Testament was in written form, the emphasis shifted from sign gifts to correct doctrine. Paul warns that if a man does not have correct doctrine—even if he is an angel from heaven—you should not receive him. “But though we, or an angel from heaven, preach any other gospel unto you than that which we have preached unto you, let him be accursed” (Gal_1:8).

However, in the early days of the church, the apostles' sign gifts were important. Notice the reaction of those who heard of Dorcas being restored to life. - McGee

Act 9:42-43 And it became known throughout all Joppa, and many believed on the Lord. So it was that he stayed many days in Joppa with Simon, a tanner.

This miracle of resurrection **became widely known**, so that **many believed on the Lord**. However, comparing verse 42 with verse 35, it seems that more were converted through the healing of Aeneas than through the raising of Dorcas.

Peter stayed many days in Joppa, staying in the house of Simon, a tanner. The mention of Simon's trade here is significant. The Jews considered tanning a disreputable business. Constant contact with the bodies of dead animals caused ceremonial defilement. The fact that Peter lived with Simon showed he was no longer bound by this particular Jewish scruple.

It has often been pointed out that in three successive chapters we have the conversion of a descendant of one of Noah's sons. The Ethiopian eunuch (chap. 8) was undoubtedly of the line of Ham. Saul of Tarsus (chap. 9) was a descendant of Shem. Now here in chapter 10, in Cornelius, we see one of Japheth's posterity. It is a striking witness to the fact that the gospel is for all races and all cultures, and that in Christ all these natural distinctions are abolished. As Peter used the keys of the kingdom in opening the door of faith to the Jews in chapter 2, he is seen doing the same to the Gentiles in chapter 10. – Believers' Bible Commentary