

A Study of the Acts of the Apostles
Week Eleven
Acts 9:1-31

Day One

9:1 Meanwhile, Saul was still breathing out murderous threats against the Lord's disciples. He went to the high priest² and asked him for letters to the synagogues in Damascus, so that if he found any there who belonged to the Way, whether men or women, he might take them as prisoners to Jerusalem.³ As he neared Damascus on his journey, suddenly a light from heaven flashed around him.⁴ He fell to the ground and heard a voice say to him, "Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?"

v. 1 – While the Lord was doing great exploits through Philip and the other believers who were outside Jerusalem, Luke now takes us back to Jerusalem, where things were still tense. We last saw Saul when, having been a witness to Stephen's death, he began to go house to house to ferret out believers (see Acts 8:1-2). Saul was red-hot in his hatred for Christians, which ironically made him a perfect candidate for God's work and choice:

I know your deeds, that you are neither cold nor hot. I wish you were either one or the other! So, because you are lukewarm — neither hot nor cold — I am about to spit you out of my mouth (Revelation 3:16).

v. 2 – Saul requested letters to go to Damascus, Syria. Since the Sanhedrin had jurisdiction over Jews the world over, they gave him letters instructing the synagogue leaders to help Saul identify believing Jews in their midst. Why Damascus? We aren't told. Why Saul? We don't know that either, except to look back and see how God was directing his steps before he ever knew it!

In his heart a man plans his course, but the LORD determines his steps (Proverbs 16:9).

The LORD works out everything for his own ends — even the wicked for a day of disaster (Proverbs 16:4).

Can you identify a time in your life when you didn't sense that God was leading you, but He was? Could that be happening today and you aren't aware of it?

v. 3 – Luke doesn't tell us that Saul was on a horse or donkey. But on his way to persecute believers, Saul suddenly encountered a bright light so overpowering that it threw him to the ground. Or perhaps he simply fell over in response to the awesome power of God. I like to look at this as the light of the truth that everyone encounters when we come to know Jesus. Our darkness was so great before His coming, whether we lived a life of "gross" sin or not, that His arrival is seen as absolute and pure light. And of course Jesus Himself said that He was *the* light.

v. 4 – Now that Saul’s eyes were debilitated, the Lord could speak to him and be assured of Saul’s full attention. Don’t trust your eyes; they sometimes lie! **By what are you living and walking? Faith or sight?** Remember what Paul went on to write:

So we fix our eyes not on what is seen, but on what is unseen. For what is seen is temporary, but what is unseen is eternal (2 Corinthians 4:18).

We live by faith, not by sight (2 Corinthians 5:7-8).

Day Two

5 "Who are you, Lord?" Saul asked. "I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting," he replied. 6 "Now get up and go into the city, and you will be told what you must do." 7 The men traveling with Saul stood there speechless; they heard the sound but did not see anyone. 8 Saul got up from the ground, but when he opened his eyes he could see nothing. So they led him by the hand into Damascus. 9 For three days he was blind, and did not eat or drink anything.

v. 5 – In verse four, the Lord clearly indicated that when Saul persecuted the Church, he was really persecuting Jesus. And Jesus reiterated this in verse five. We are Jesus’ body. We represent Him, carry out His wishes and how people treat us is how they would treat Him. When people reject you or your witness for Jesus, don’t take it personally. As the Lord told Samuel;

And the LORD told him: "Listen to all that the people are saying to you; it is not you they have rejected, but they have rejected me as their king (1 Samuel 8:7-8).

If you take this personally, then you won’t represent the Lord or persevere in your witness to that person or the world.

v. 6 – It always amazes me how little the Lord said to Saul about his “sin.” Here was a man persecuting Christians to their death, yet the Lord says very little about that. Instead, the Lord talked to Saul about his purpose—what God had created him to do. I think if the Church spoke less about sin and more about purpose, we would be more effective in our outreach. I am not minimizing sin or its heinous nature; I’m just saying that our job is to preach the good news and the Holy Spirit’s role is to convict people of sin. As soon as the Lord had Saul’s undivided attention, he put him on a road that would lead to his purpose and life’s work. **What is your purpose? What is your life’s work?**

v. 7 – And what became of these men who were with Saul? They heard the voice but their lives were presumably unchanged. Did they bear witness ever to the truth of what Saul said happened on that road? Or did they return to their legalistic Judaism? We often think that supernatural encounters will convince people of the truth, but this isn’t always the case. There was at least one other example of this in the Bible:

Father, glorify your name!" Then a voice came from heaven, "I have glorified it, and will glorify it again." The crowd that was there and heard it said it had thundered; others said an angel had spoken to him (John 12:28-29).

God spoke to Jesus, but the people who heard it disagreed about who was speaking.
Could God be speaking with you and you don't recognize His voice? Ask Him for clarity today and in faith believe that you have it. What are you hearing?

v. 8 – Paul was temporarily blinded by the light and experience on that road. He had to be led to the place where he had been rushing in his own sight to persecute the Church. That is our spiritual condition apart from Jesus: blind and hurling ourselves headlong into futile activities. And this is our condition after Jesus: We need God to lead us to the truth and to the fulfillment of our purpose. I meet many people who act like they must figure out what God wants or work to make it happen. **Are you like that? You simply must have faith that God will make it happen and accept what the "it" is for you. God will do the rest. Are you living your life according to that truth?**

v. 9 – God was dealing deeply in the life of His apostle-to-be, so much so that he was blind and could not eat or drink for three days. I don't fast as often as I used to. **How often do you fast? Fasting is such an important spiritual discipline. Are you willing to go without food to find God's will? Hear His voice? Is His voice and will more important than food, newspapers or television? What price are you willing to pay to hear, clarify and do the will of God?**

Day Three

10 In Damascus there was a disciple named Ananias. The Lord called to him in a vision, "Ananias!" "Yes, Lord," he answered. 11 The Lord told him, "Go to the house of Judas on Straight Street and ask for a man from Tarsus named Saul, for he is praying. 12 In a vision he has seen a man named Ananias come and place his hands on him to restore his sight." 13 "Lord," Ananias answered, "I have heard many reports about this man and all the harm he has done to your saints in Jerusalem. 14 And he has come here with authority from the chief priests to arrest all who call on your name."

v. 10 – The Lord was working overtime where Saul was concerned. Having appeared to Saul in a vision, He then appeared to Ananias. Notice Ananias' immediate and enthusiastic response. Perhaps this is why the Lord came to him in the first place. Abraham, Moses and Samuel all responded to God's call with the phrase, "Here I am!" **Do you have "here-I-am" faith and obedience?** The ultimate "here-I-am" person was Jesus, whose obedience was described the psalmist:

Then I said, "Here I am, I have come — it is written about me in the scroll. I desire to do your will, O my God; our law is within my heart" (Psalm 40:7-8).

When I have been at my darkest times when I didn't know what to do or where to go, I always prayed, "Lord, I'll do whatever You want me to do, wherever you want me to do

it.” I felt that was a “here-I-am” prayer. **Do you agree? Do you need to pray this prayer?**

vs. 11&12 – The Lord gave Ananias his instructions to go pray for the man Saul, who was praying in a certain house on Straight Street. And we are told that Saul had seen Ananias coming in a vision; that was the third vision in this conversion experience. I have found six instances in Acts where the Lord appeared to Saul in a vision. This seems to be one special way that the Lord spoke to Saul. **How does the Lord speak to you?** I’m convinced that God has a unique way how and sometimes a special place where He speaks to every person. Reflect on your history with the Lord and determine if this is true for you.

Also, notice here that God knew exactly where Saul was, what he was doing and what would happen to set him free to fulfill his purpose. **Do you think God has forgotten you?** He hasn’t! He has His eye on you and knows where you are, what you’re going through and how to deliver you. You must have faith that this is true. **Do you have that kind of faith?**

vs. 13&14 – Saul’s reputation had preceded him as well as his assignment and Ananias was quick to point this out to the Lord. And you have to chuckle that Ananias took this opportunity to give God information—as if God would need a report from Ananias! I’ve done the same thing, taking time to inform God of what He already knew. When God asks you to do something, He already has all the information He needs—and He still chose you to go or do something. So just say, “Here I am” and get on with it. When God has spoken to me, I’ve also taken the opportunity to complain to Him about my current conditions. This isn’t a good thing:

Do everything without complaining or arguing (Philippians 2:14-15).

Are you grumbling or complaining at this time about something in your life that isn’t to your liking? Then the Bible is clear—you can stop.

Day Four

15 But the Lord said to Ananias, "Go! This man is my chosen instrument to carry my name before the Gentiles and their kings and before the people of Israel. 16 I will show him how much he must suffer for my name." 17 Then Ananias went to the house and entered it. Placing his hands on Saul, he said, "Brother Saul, the Lord-Jesus, who appeared to you on the road as you were coming here — has sent me so that you may see again and be filled with the Holy Spirit." 18 Immediately, something like scales fell from Saul's eyes, and he could see again. He got up and was baptized, 19 and after taking some food, he regained his strength.

v. 15 – How important it is to see people from God’s point of view and not our own. Too often I have “written people off” because I didn’t think they measured up to the task. I’m

encouraged that even Samuel the prophet did this when he went to Jesse's house to anoint Saul's replacement:

But the LORD said to Samuel, "Do not consider his appearance or his height, for I have rejected him. The LORD does not look at the things man looks at. Man looks at the outward appearance, but the LORD looks at the heart" (1 Samuel 16:7).

Is there anyone that you're dismissing as insignificant that the Lord has chosen to do His work? I want to commit the rest of my adult life to finding, equipping and encouraging such people. Will you join me in this worthy endeavor?

v. 16 – Saul was a chosen instrument to carry out a tough assignment. First, he would have to speak to the stiff-necked, hard-hearted Jews. Then he would have to evangelize the evil strongholds of the Gentile world. To do those things, Saul would need a radical and clear revelation from God. And he would need a realistic assessment of the difficulty of the task. Purpose and preparation—those two things caused Saul to change the world. And you will need the same two. Do you know your purpose? Are you preparing yourself to fulfill your purpose? Are you ready to suffer for Him and the cause to which He has called you? Are you suffering now?

If you suffer, it should not be as a murderer or thief or any other kind of criminal, or even as a meddler. However, if you suffer as a Christian, do not be ashamed, but praise God that you bear that name. For it is time for judgment to begin with the family of God; and if it begins with us, what will the outcome be for those who do not obey the gospel of God? And, "If it is hard for the righteous to be saved, what will become of the ungodly and the sinner?" So then, those who suffer according to God's will should commit themselves to their faithful Creator and continue to do good (1 Peter 4:15-19).

v. 17 – Saul then had to receive his healing from one of the people that he had come to persecute. Saul's new life was about to begin. When Ananias came, he knew Saul's story so Saul in turn knew that God had sent him. I can't help but ask: Where were the men who were with Saul on the road to Damascus? They heard the voice, but could not respond. Ananias heard the same voice, but he responded and came to set Saul free from his blindness. **What group do you belong to? Do you hear God's voice and go off in another direction, or do you hear His voice and swing into obedient action?** Don't answer the question too quickly.

v. 18 – When Ananias laid hands on Saul and prayed for him, scales fell from his eyes! Saul's spiritual blindness was so real and tangible that it had a physical manifestation. Saul had been blinded by the legalism of his generation, but now he would see more clearly than all his peers and would change the course of salvation history forever. This man Saul went on to "see" the Gentile church and to step out of Judaism into the marvelous light of the gospel.

What a step for Saul to submit to baptism! This man immediately joined the ranks of those he had been opposing! I just counted 25 books in my library written about Saul and

Paul. He is a remarkable man worthy of our time and study. But even more remarkable is the grace of God that was made manifest in his life:

Even though I was once a blasphemer and a persecutor and a violent man, I was shown mercy because I acted in ignorance and unbelief. The grace of our Lord was poured out on me abundantly, along with the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus (1 Timothy 1:13-14).

Day Five

Saul spent several days with the disciples in Damascus. 20 At once he began to preach in the synagogues that Jesus is the Son of God. 21 All those who heard him were astonished and asked, "Isn't he the man who raised havoc in Jerusalem among those who call on this name? And hasn't he come here to take them as prisoners to the chief priests?" 22 Yet Saul grew more and more powerful and baffled the Jews living in Damascus by proving that Jesus is the Christ.

v. 19b&20 – The New Testament model for ministry was immediate involvement. I am always intrigued when I meet believers who have known the Lord for 15 or 20 years who are “waiting on Him” before they get involved. They have pushed responsibility for their ministry onto the Lord, blaming Him that they aren’t more active because He hasn’t “led them.” Then there are others who have turned a Sunday role like ushering into their “ministry.” If you are going to be in church anyway and you help out with the offering, I fail to see how this is a ministry. But my point is that Saul was out fulfilling his purpose a few days after his conversion from a religious persecutor. We have people who were raised in the Church who never go outside the Church. **Is this what Jesus wanted? Is this your experience?** Is this what the writer of Hebrews meant when he wrote:

In fact, though by this time you ought to be teachers, you need someone to teach you the elementary truths of God's word all over again. You need milk , not solid food! Anyone who lives on milk , being still an infant, is not acquainted with the teaching about righteousness. But solid food is for the mature, who by constant use have trained themselves to distinguish good from evil (Hebrews 5:12-14).

v. 21 – Saul’s conversion caused many to marvel and wonder at God’s work and grace. God chose the most unlikely candidate and made him a showpiece for God’s handiwork. No one is beyond the touch of God’s grace, and Saul is a reminder of that truth. I have done a lot of prison ministry in the last 15 years and I have seen many sin-hardened men and women turn to Jesus. What’s more, I have seen Jesus receive these people. I never went into a prison that I didn’t sense God’s presence working in the lives of the inmates. I used to say to myself, “If Jesus hasn’t rejected these people, can I? If He is working in their midst, shouldn’t I work there as well?” **What about you? Who are you working among that keep you in touch with the effects of God’s grace?**

v. 22 – Saul grew more powerful the more he used his gifts and engaged in ministry. That is why you must not wait to get involved. Do something today that will help you

become more confident in God's ability to work with and through you. **What can you do this week that will involve you in ministry?** I'm not talking about cleaning the Church! If you want to clean the church, that's great. But please don't count this as ministry. Ministry is service to others, meeting their needs through the exercise of some spiritual gift. There are still two billion people in the world who haven't even heard about Jesus, some live in your own city. **How can you help to reach them or to disciple new believers?**

Day Six

23 After many days had gone by, the Jews conspired to kill him, 24 but Saul learned of their plan. Day and night they kept close watch on the city gates in order to kill him. 25 But his followers took him by night and lowered him in a basket through an opening in the wall. 26 When he came to Jerusalem, he tried to join the disciples, but they were all afraid of him, not believing that he really was a disciple. 27 But Barnabas took him and brought him to the apostles. He told them how Saul on his journey had seen the Lord and that the Lord had spoken to him, and how in Damascus he had preached fearlessly in the name of Jesus.

vs. 23&24 – The Jews were never concerned with pursuing the truth, but only with preserving their lifestyle and traditions. Someone has said that often the greatest opposition to the most recent move of God is from those involved in the previous move of God. *Lord, don't let me be guilty of trying to preserve what you did and opposing what you are doing!* **How do you treat your opponents and those with whom you disagree?** I try to listen and see if there is anything they are trying to teach me—something they see that I don't. As Thomas a Kempis said, "In things essential, unity; in doubtful, liberty; in all things, charity."

v. 25 – At this point, Saul already had followers. **How do you know if you are a leader?** One indication is that you have someone following you! We will see on several more instances that Saul never ran from danger, but when his life was threatened, he usually retreated. My life belongs to Jesus, but I shouldn't throw it away needlessly or prematurely.

v. 26 – I can only imagine how befuddled the Jerusalem believers were. Saul had left a persecutor but returned a worshipper. Don't ever underestimate God's power to turn things around.

v. 27 – Barnabas, the son of encouragement and being true to his name, encouraged Saul by standing with him and encouraged the saints to receive him as one of their own. These were two remarkable men. Barnabas was so given to encouragement that the apostles gave him a nickname that replaced his real name Joseph. Saul began to preach fearlessly after his conversion. Both these men had courage and fulfilled their purpose in the power and grace of God. This is the second person that the Lord used to establish Saul. The first was Ananias and the second was Barnabas.

Is there anyone whom you can encourage today? I'm not talking about saying something nice to them, but of really endorsing what God is doing in them. How can you do this? Can you hire a young businessperson to do some work for you? Can you give someone a chance to speak before your group? Can you meet with someone and tell them that you believe in their potential and what God is doing in their life?

I received a call yesterday from two men with whom I have worked in London. They called just to say hello and to thank me for the work I have done with them. They told me that their work is going well and that, in part, I helped make that happen. They wanted me to know that they hadn't forgotten me and that they would like me to come visit them again soon. I hung up the phone encouraged. The spirit of Barnabas was in them, and that spirit is the Spirit of Christ. I urge you to not underestimate your power today to stand with someone who needs it. Pray that God will show you who that person is.

Day Seven

28 So Saul stayed with them and moved about freely in Jerusalem, speaking boldly in the name of the Lord. 29 He talked and debated with the Grecian Jews, but they tried to kill him. 30 When the brothers learned of this, they took him down to Caesarea and sent him off to Tarsus. 31 Then the church throughout Judea, Galilee and Samaria enjoyed a time of peace. It was strengthened; and encouraged by the Holy Spirit, it grew in numbers, living in the fear of the Lord.

vs. 28&29 – Barnabas' endorsement saved the day and Saul was now free to move about and minister. He used the freedom to debate the Grecian Jews, a group he would have identified with because of his own Greek background. But this is the group that stirred up the leaders against Stephen. When they did that, Saul was with them, approving of their evil deeds. Now Saul was on the other side and these wicked men tried to kill him. They weren't interested in the truth, nor did they give any credence to Saul's conversion. Because he didn't believe what they believed, he was no longer worthy of life.

Do you write people off when they don't believe what you believe? Are people allowed to change their minds or opinions with you? Do you change your mind or opinions very often? No one's opinions are infallible, so you should be evaluating your own thought processes every now and then. If they are faulty, then you should then change your thoughts and conclusions.

v. 30 – The believers in Jerusalem saw the trouble that Saul was causing for himself, so they took him and sent him home to Tarsus. I can only imagine how distressed his family must have been when he came home and began to preach Jesus. Even Jesus said,

Jesus said to them, "Only in his hometown, among his relatives and in his own house is a prophet without honor" (Mark 6:4-5).

Plus, I wonder if some of the suffering that Saul endured wasn't when he was sent home. There his family tried to "save" him from his new faith and when they couldn't, they then punished him for his recalcitrance:

Five times I received from the Jews the forty lashes minus one. Three times I was beaten with rods, once I was stoned, three times I was shipwrecked, I spent a night and a day in the open sea (2 Corinthians 11:24-26).

v. 31 – Obviously God sent Saul home to give the church time to settle down and develop after the tumultuous expansion into the Gentile world. Certain things had to take place before the world was ready for Saul to take center stage. You may know your purpose, but perhaps you must wait for the conditions to be right before you can fulfill it. Winston Churchill "needed" World War II before he could engage his purpose of saving the free world. Before the War, he was being prepared for his day. The same was true for Saul and it may be true for you.

What are you doing to prepare for your day of effectiveness and fulfillment? Don't sit idly by waiting for that day. Get ready; equip yourself; get the training that you need.

At the same time, I must always keep in perspective that I am just a worker, an errand boy for the Holy Spirit. He is the One who causes the Church to grow. He was the one after Saul left that encouraged the church and caused the numbers to increase. He was the one that strengthened the believers. **Isn't it refreshing to know that if you are faithful to do what you can do, then God is faithful to do what only He can do? Are you acting like that is true? Are you anxious or confident? Nervous or calm?** I'm working to put my trust in the Lord where the Church is concerned and learning that He will bring the results that He wants in His time.