

## ***The Church of the Servant King***

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### ***Survey of the Bible Series – The Book of Acts***

(SB\_Acts9A\_Saul's Conversion)

#### **Introduction**

Saul was briefly introduced at the beginning of chapter 8, a chapter which contains a major emphasis upon the results of Stephen's martyrdom. Saul was among those who persecuted the emerging and growing *ekklesia* ("church" or "assembly"). The persecution scattered believers into the regions of Samaria and beyond while the apostles remained in Jerusalem. As we noted, it was very likely that the apostles in particular remained in Jerusalem as a result of the Lord's teaching regarding their position and involvement in the coming Kingdom (see Lk 12:32; Matt 19:28; 21:43 cf. Rev 21:9-14). Also, based upon the Lord's teaching, they knew that a time of Tribulation would come (Matt 24:2-22 cf. Luke 21:20-24) and it is most likely that they thought they were in the Tribulation period especially due to the persecution that believers were beginning to experience.

Into this scenario, God injects Saul, a man who at the time seemed to be the most unlikely person for God to use – the man who would become the channel through which God would communicate the "mystery" doctrines of the intercalated age of the Body of Christ. It was through Paul that God would disclose His revelation of "the times or seasons which the Father has put in His own authority" (Acts 1:7) – not the other 12 apostles to the Jews.

Luke considered the conversion of Saul to be so significant that he describes or mentions it on three different occasions in the book (Acts 9, 22, and 26). Luke describes the conversion of Saul at this point (chapter 9) in order to prepare us for the gospel going to the Gentiles (chapter 10). [Paul, the apostle to the Gentiles (Gal 2:8; Eph 3:8), is preceded in this ministry to the Gentiles by Peter's evangelization of Cornelius and his household (Acts 10).]

Another reason Luke mentions Saul's conversion here is that it is related to Stephen's martyrdom (Acts 7:59). If Stephen's message was accepted by the masses, it could have jeopardized the entire basis upon which Jewish society was built – the Law. Paul, a Pharisee of Pharisees, understood the Law as well as, if not better than any man. God knew that Saul's background and training had prepared him well for God's plan to introduce the mystery truths of the Body of Christ.<sup>1</sup>

- ✓ He knew the Jewish culture and language well (Acts 21:40; Phil. 3:5).
- ✓ Since he was reared in Tarsus, he was well-acquainted with the Greek culture and its philosophies (Acts 17:22-31; Titus 1:12).
- ✓ He possessed all the privileges of a Roman citizen (Acts 16:37; 22:23-29; 25:10-12).
- ✓ He was trained and skilled in Jewish theology and God could leverage that knowledge as a basis for the apologetics that would be needed to defend the truths related to this new, intercalated age (Gal. 1:14).
- ✓ Saul was able to support himself in a "secular" trade (Acts 18:3; 1 Cor. 9:4-18; 2 Cor. 11:7-11; 1 Thes. 2:9; 2 Thes. 3:8).
- ✓ Saul had personality characteristics and knowledge compatible with a leader who would not lose vision or focus in spite of persecution. He had zeal, drive, objectivity, humility, deep theological understanding, and wisdom.

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<sup>1</sup> These points more or less correspond to those found in Stanley D. Toussaint, "Acts," in *The Bible Knowledge Commentary – New Testament*, John Walvoord and Roy Zuck, editors (Wheaton, Illinois: Victor Books, 1983), 375.

These are characteristics or qualities that the apostles to the Jews did not possess; therefore, God could not use them in the same way as Saul. It is a magnificent demonstration of God's omniscience in action in human history in order to effect His will and purpose through yielded men and women. It does not mean that the twelve apostles to the Jews were not loved by God. It does not mean that their reward in eternity will be lessened. It is simply a fact that we must acknowledge – not all believers can be used in the same way by God, yet all believers can be yielded to be used in the manner God chooses. Today, some believers are more effective in ministering to people who have been wounded by life in ways to which others have a hard time understanding or relating.

Saul had not sold his soul to the political aspects of the situation in these early days of the 1<sup>st</sup> Century as had the other Jewish religious leaders. Paul's motives were purely religious. He was as much of a zealot for keeping the Law and the "customs delivered by Moses" (Acts 6:14) as Stephen was zealous for introducing the truth regarding Jesus as the Messiah who had satisfied the Law – thus set it aside. Since Paul was a "purist" (an essential component of one who is a zealot), and not a politician willing to sell his soul knowingly, Paul could be used of the Lord.

The Law taught that anyone who died on a tree was cursed (Deut 21:23). So, while Saul might have been willing to accept the Law as having been set aside and fulfilled when the Messiah came, Jesus could not have been that Messiah since He died as a cursed man according to the Law and according to Saul's reasoning. A crucified Messiah was worse than a contradiction in terms – it was tantamount to blasphemy according to Saul's reasoning. The penalty for blasphemy was stoning.

Later, after his conversion, Paul would preach the crucified Messiah as a *skandalon* (a "stumbling block") to the Jews (1 Cor 1:23), thus he would demonstrate how necessary it was for the Messiah/Redeemer to die under the "curse of the law" (Gal 3:13).<sup>2</sup>

### **Damascus and "The Way" (9:1-2)**

The violence of the persecution of believers after Stephen's martyrdom drove many Jewish believers, especially the Hellenists, out of Judea. However, even though they were outside of Judea, they were not out of reach of the Sanhedrin. It is very likely that the high priest had the right to request extradition of those who had violated Jewish law – a right or privilege that had been granted by the Romans to the Jewish religious leadership. Saul was at a minimum, complicit with the strategy of the high priest to exercise his power of extradition. Saul went to Damascus seeking the believer refugees and was probably unaware that there was a community of believers already there.

When the Jewish state won independence under the Hasmonaeans, it had powerful patrons in the Romans, who let the countries surrounding Judaea know this and demanded that Judaea should be granted the rights and privileges of a sovereign state, including the right of extradition. Thus, a letter delivered by a Roman ambassador to Ptolemy VIII of Egypt in 142 B.C. concludes with the requirement: "if any pestilent men have fled to you from their country [Judaea], hand them over to Simon the high priest, that he may punish them according to their law" (1 Maccabees 15:21). Those rights and privileges were confirmed anew to the Jewish people (even though they no longer constituted a sovereign state), and more particularly to the high-priesthood, by Julius Caesar in 47 B.C. Paul in his crusading zeal resolved that the high priest should exercise his right of extradition against the fugitives, and procured from him "letters to the

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<sup>2</sup> See F.F. Bruce, *Paul: Apostle of the Heart Set Free* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans, 1997), 69-70 for an excellent analysis of this subject.

synagogues of Damascus, so that if he found any belonging to the Way, men or women, he might bring them bound to Jerusalem” (Acts 9:1). It appears that there was already in Damascus a community of followers of the Way, with whom the fugitives from Judaea could hope to find refuge. These Damascene disciples were not the subjects of the extradition papers which Paul carried; he may not have even been aware of their presence there. It was the refugees whom he had come to apprehend, no doubt hoping that if he could accomplish this purpose satisfactorily in Damascus, he could repeat the procedure in other foreign cities. [Acts 26:11] But the first disciple of Jesus with whom he had to do in Damascus was a member of this local community, one Ananias, “a devout man according to the law, well spoken of by all the Jews who lived there” (Acts 22:12).<sup>3</sup>

This phrase or title (“the Way”) had been used by Jesus in John 14:6 – “I am the way, the truth and the light. No man comes to the Father except through Me.” The phrase is used in Acts to describe faith in Christ (Acts 19:9, 23; 22:4; 24:14, 22; John 14:6).

### **Saul’s Conversion (9:3-19)**

There is probably no single event in human history, except for the Christ event (birth, life, death, resurrection) that has had more impact upon the course of the history of believers than the conversion of Saul. The resurrection of Jesus and the conversion of Saul have long been two of the strongest arguments for the truthfulness of the Christian faith over any other factors.

In the 18<sup>th</sup> Century, two English unbelievers, Gilbert West and Lord Lyttleton, undertook the effort to disprove the historicity of these two events. The result of their efforts – they were converted to Christianity based principally upon the fact of Saul’s conversion.<sup>4</sup>

It was important that Paul actually see the resurrected Christ in order to give weight to his claim to be an apostle – a claim that he obviously had to defend on many occasions. He mentions his apostleship in an apologetic way in the opening paragraph of almost all of his epistles.<sup>5</sup> He argues for the authenticity of His claim to be an apostle in 1 Corinthians 9:1 and 15:8 – a resurrection appearance that was just as real to him as the appearances witnessed by Peter, James and many others on the first Easter. While Luke never specifically states that Saul

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<sup>3</sup> Bruce, *Paul*, 72-73. Toussaint in *The Bible Knowledge Commentary*, 375 provides another possible explanation of how the high priest could have exercised a form of jurisdiction over the synagogues in Damascus. He suggests that at that time, Damascus may have been under the rule of the Nabatean king, Aretas IV (cf. 2 Cor 11:32-33) who hated the Romans. In order to gain favor with the anti-Roman Jews, Aretas conceded this favor to the high priest.

<sup>4</sup> Both Bruce, *Paul*, 75 and Charles F. Baker, *Understanding the Book of Acts* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Grace Bible College Publications, 1981), 51 mention Lord Lyttleton and the book he tried to finish.

<sup>5</sup> Paul opens almost all of his letters with words to the effect of “Paul, an apostle of the Lord Jesus Christ.” The only exceptions are Philippians (A.D. 60-62), 1 & 2 Thessalonians (A.D. 51-52), and Philemon (A.D. 60). The content and audience of these three letters indicate that the recipients had already accepted his apostolic credentials. In the other letters where Paul mentions his apostleship, the content is either in the nature of an admonishment or it addresses a doctrinal issue that was likely to be controversial. Philippi had been granted status as a Roman colony in A.D. 42 and the local assembly there consisted principally of Gentiles. Thessalonica, like Philippi, was a European city and the local church there contained a significant number of Gentiles. Philemon was written to a Gentile slave owner. Other letters such as Corinthians are also directed to local churches in a Gentile city, but the difference is that they are addressing controversial issues or doctrinal issues that required Paul to assert his apostolic credentials.

saw the resurrected Christ, it is clear from the combination of Luke's testimony and Paul himself that Saul did see and hear the resurrected Christ.

On the surface there seems to be a contradiction between Acts 9:7 and Acts 22:9. The former seems to indicate that those who were with Saul heard the voice, but did not see Jesus; whereas the latter seems to indicate that they saw the light, but did not hear a voice. In 22:9, Luke uses the 3<sup>rd</sup> person, plural, aorist, active, indicative of ἀκούω (akouo) which means to hear. However, it is certainly permissible and best in this passage to translate it in the sense of "they understood not." This same Greek word is used in 1 Cor 14:2 where it is translated "for no man understandeth him."

*A note about the human conscience* – Saul's conscience had norms and standards that caused him to think that he was doing God a service by persecuting those of "the way." In Acts 26:9, we see statements made by Paul to that effect – he thought within himself that it was appropriate that he do things contrary to the name of Jesus. However, Paul was ignorant at that time of certain truth – truth that would transform his conscience (1 Tim 1:13).

The human conscience that has not been transformed by the Truth of the Word of God is not a good guide for life – believer or unbeliever. A person can do things in life that are perfectly consistent with the accepted norms and standards of the soul (i.e. the conscience) and those things can be totally opposed to the will of God for their lives and the purpose of God in human history.

This principle is key to understanding the evil (and humanistic good) practices that are so accepted by the world. The world, in good conscience, attributes things to "God's will" or "God's desire" that are 180 degrees or diametrically opposed to the will of God. Unbelievers accept the lie of human good, multi-culturalism, toleration, false religion, humanism, etc. – all in the name of being a "good" person and "all religions that embrace good lead to God." Believers accept some of the same lies and contribute to humanistic causes that do not advance the name of Christ. In each case, the conscience that is influenced by false doctrine or that is scarred by the rejection of Truth never alerts the individual that something is out of alignment with God's plan, but instead only sanctions such behavior.

In Saul's case, as knowledgeable of Scripture as he was, he had accepted a set of norms and standards that he believed to be consistent with God's will and plan. His conscience (norms and standards) had been shaped by that understanding. He was persecuting those he considered to be heretics and his conscience never bothered him in the least. It took a dramatic event in his life to shake the very foundations of his soul. The scales that fell from his eyes are representative of the enlightenment that the Truth provided to his soul with the result that his conscience was reshaped.

*A note about "election" vs. "selection"* – Some claim that Saul's conversion is an example of divine "election." They define "election" to mean God's sovereign choice of the individual to be saved. They cite Paul's statement in Galatians 1:15 (similar to David's statement) that he was separated by God from his mother's womb and called. Paul states in Acts 9:15 that he was a chosen or elected vessel.

Such a definition of the terms "election" and God's "sovereignty" form and are part of a paradigm of thinking that views God's sovereignty in such a manner so as to result in an imbalance in the function of the attributes of God. For instance, God's omniscience is never discussed or it is downplayed in any such analysis. Also, there is rarely a distinction drawn between "election" of the nation Israel and the race of the Jews versus the "election" of the Body of Christ.

We will not explore this topic in depth in this study, but suffice it to say, it is my opinion based upon an analysis of passages mentioning God's "election" or "calling" or "choosing" that in order to interpret Saul's conversion accurately, we need to recognize the role of God's omniscience and understand God's sovereignty in a way that encompasses more than just the individual. Also, we need to distinguish between what I will term "selection" to a ministry and "election" related to eternal purposes.

In our passage, Saul's conversion and its relationship to "election" (eternal purposes) and "selection" (ministry purposes) are all blended together.<sup>6</sup> As a part of the conversion experience (i.e. Saul becoming a member of the body of the elect), the resurrected Lord revealed certain things to him about the ministry for which he had been selected. His ministry would involve suffering for the sake of the Truth regarding Jesus Christ (see Acts 22:10-15; 26:16-20 cf. 2 Cor 11:22-29; Gal 2:20; 5:11; Phil 1:19-25, 27-30).

The probable thought process of early 1<sup>st</sup> Century believers – Believers in those early days of the *ekklesia* ("assembly" or "church"), while initially skeptical, eventually received the conversion of Saul as an encouraging sign. They may have reasoned that with the cessation of persecution from Saul and the conversion of a significant Pharisee, the religious leadership of Israel might be tilted in their favor and the Kingdom on earth would dawn with this remnant that had endured to the end (Matt 24:13-14). Little did they realize at this time that this man, who had previously persecuted them, would soon be used of God to pronounce judgment upon the nation of Israel due to her blindness (like he himself once had). Saul would be the vehicle through which God would unfold the truth concerning a completely new dispensation – the age of the Body of Christ (a.k.a. the "Church" Age).

A note about Saul's baptism – Saul was saved under the then prevailing Kingdom program – a program in which the gospel was kingdom and Messianic-centric and in which baptism was practiced as a symbolic cleansing ritual to provide outward evidence of one's acceptance and identification with the Kingdom gospel. As soon as Ananias had laid hands on Saul and the scales fell from his eyes and he could see, Ananias told Saul to "arise and be baptized, and wash away your sins, calling on the name of the Lord" (Acts 22:16).

Baptism under the kingdom gospel was a washing or cleansing ritual or ceremony – the same as many baptisms within the Age of Israel (Heb 9:10). Paul never tells his Gentile converts to be baptized in order that their sins might be washed away even though he did practice baptism during the transition period (e.g. Acts 16:15, 33). In 1 Corinthians 1:17, Paul indicates that he was not sent to baptize, but to preach the gospel. After the Transition period and when the new dispensation of the Body of Christ had begun, Paul mentions only one spiritual baptism – that accomplished by the Holy Spirit (Eph 4:5; 1 Cor 12:13).<sup>7</sup>

A note about Saul's "filling" with the Holy Spirit – Ananias also commanded Saul to "be filled with the Holy Spirit" (Acts 9:17). This was a type 1 filling – a filling with the content of the Holy Spirit rather than the type 2 filling – a filling with the character of God by the Holy Spirit commanded of the believer by Paul in Ephesians 5:18.<sup>8</sup> This is an important distinction since the

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<sup>6</sup> For an excellent analysis of the subject of divine "election" from a purely inductive approach (vs. a deductive approach where either the Calvinistic or Arminian positions are defended), see William W. Klein, *The New Chosen People: A Corporate View of Election* (Eugene, Oregon: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2001).

<sup>7</sup> Baker, *Understanding the Book of Acts*, 53.

<sup>8</sup> See previous teaching on the subject of the "filling" of the Holy Spirit where I have clarified the grammatical and contextual distinction between the two different types of "fillings" found in the New Testament. The first is and was temporary and is no longer present in this Age

type 1 filling is only found within the pre-Resurrection & pre-Ascension period of the Age of Israel and within the post-Resurrection & post-Ascension transition period of the Age of Israel. The type 2 filling is Pauline and relates to the believer of the present age.

Was the blinding flash of light that was a part of Saul's conversion experience related to the thorn in the flesh that Paul later mentions? The bottom line is we don't know and it is not really important. However, it is interesting to note that it appears that Paul had bad eyesight based upon his own testimony in Galatians 4:15 and 6:11. The purpose of the thorn in the flesh that Paul mentions was so that he would not become overly exalted (2 Cor 12:7).

### **Saul Preaches at Damascus & Escapes Death (9:20-25)**

In Luke's account as recorded here in Acts, it appears that Saul immediately went to Damascus to preach Jesus as the Messiah in the synagogues. We learn from Acts 17:2 & 3 that Paul's custom was to go into the synagogues and reason with the Jews from the Hebrew Scriptures regarding the necessity that the Messiah should suffer and rise from the dead. Not only were the synagogues a place where Paul would have found an immediate audience, but the synagogues were consistent with the "Jew first" nature of the gospel then being preached.

The chronological sequence of events is uncertain here – Luke does not mention the fact that Saul went to Arabia after his conversion. We learn this fact from Galatians 1:17. So, the chronology of events is difficult to nail precisely. Here's a possible chronology:

- ✓ Luke informs us that Saul stayed certain days with the disciples at Damascus and preached Jesus as the Christ (Messiah) in the synagogues
- ✓ After many days (uncertain number), the Jews (unbelieving Jews) took counsel to kill him.
- ✓ The believing disciples let Saul down in a basket to escape from the city (Acts 9:23-25).
- ✓ In Galatians 1, Paul informs us that he went to Jerusalem three years after his conversion.
- ✓ We do not know how much of that time was spent in Arabia and how much was spent in Damascus (the city that is the subject of our passage)
- ✓ Luke uses an adverb that is translated into English as "immediately" (Gr.  $\mu\epsilon\tau\epsilon\theta\epsilon\tau\omicron\tau\omicron\varsigma$ ) and we get the impression that his stay in Damascus was in successive chronological sequence after his conversion.
- ✓ However, Paul uses the same Greek adverb in Galatians 1:16 & 17 where he states – "Immediately, I conferred not with flesh and blood: neither went I up to Jerusalem to them which were apostles before me; but I went into Arabia, and returned again unto Damascus" (Gal 1:16, 17).
- ✓ According to Paul's account, it would seem that he went to Arabia immediately after his conversion, i.e. after his first experience in Damascus as recorded by Luke here in 9:10-22.
- ✓ This means that Paul would have likely gone to Arabia between Acts 9:22 and 9:23.
- ✓ This seems to be supported by Paul's statement in Galatians 1:16-17 that he "returned again unto Damascus."

I believe that it is quite possible that the newly converted Saul departed into Arabia for a time of reflection and study of Hebrew Scripture so that he could reconcile his conversion experience with all that he had previously been taught. He needed time to study the Scriptures so that he could defend the faith to Jews.

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of the Body of Christ and the second commanded by Paul in Ephesians 5:18 is normative for the believer of this present age or dispensation.

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Page 6 of 7

## **Saul Escapes, Retreats to Isolate Himself for Meditation & The Church Prospers for a Time (Acts 9:23-31)**

The Bible Knowledge Commentary offers some helpful comments on this section of Acts 9. Saul's movements in chapter 9 may be summarized as follows:

- ✓ Jerusalem (vv. 1-2)
- ✓ Damascus (vv. 3-22)
- ✓ Arabia (Gal. 1:17)
- ✓ Damascus (Acts 9:23-25; Gal. 1:17; 2 Cor. 11:32-33)
- ✓ Jerusalem (Acts 9:26-29; Gal. 1:18-20)
- ✓ Caesarea (Acts 9:30)
- ✓ Tarsus (v. 30; Gal. 1:21-24)

Luke's conclusion to this section – (Acts 9:31). In the phrase “the church throughout Judea, Galilee, and Samaria” the word “church” is singular. Luke was obviously speaking of the universal church (as opposed to a local assembly) as it was dispersed. So strong was Jewish antagonism to Saul and his ministry that after he left Damascus, the church **enjoyed a time of peace**. The church (i.e. the assemblage of believers throughout the region) was still confined to Jews, half-Jews (the Samaritans), and proselytes to Judaism who became Christians (with the one exception of the eunuch from Ethiopia, 8:26-40). “But all was in readiness for the extension of the church to a new segment of the world's population. With this third of seven progress reports on the spiritual and numerical growth of the church (cf. 2:47; 6:7; 12:24; 16:5; 19:20; 28:30-31), Luke brought this section of his book to a conclusion.”<sup>9</sup>

Baker makes some very good comments regarding the common mistake of supposing that wherever Gentile salvation is found in Acts, there is prima fascia evidence of the “Church” of this present dispensation (i.e. the Age of the Body of Christ).

Some make the mistake of supposing that wherever Gentile salvation is found, we are necessarily involved with the Church of this dispensation. But there was Gentile salvation in the Old Testament times, but the Gentile had to conform to the rules laid down in Ex. 12:48,49. There was Gentile salvation while Jesus was on earth. There is certainly the plain inference that the Syro-phoenician woman and the Roman centurion were forgiven their sins and therefore saved. And there were Gentiles in the audience on the first Pentecost in Acts, for we read that there were Jews and proselytes (2:10), and proselytes were Gentiles who had turned to Judaism. In the Jewish synagogues throughout the Gentile world there were Gentiles who attended the services and some became proselytes, just as we find in the synagogue at Antioch in Pisidia (Acts 13:42). And, of course, there is to be worldwide Gentile salvation in the coming Kingdom after the Great Tribulation has taken place. What then is unique about Gentile salvation today? The uniqueness as I see it, is that Gentiles are being saved entirely apart from any association with Israel; in fact, Israel, nationally, has been cast aside and has become an enemy of the Gospel (Rom. 11:28), while salvation is being sent to the Gentiles.<sup>10</sup>

This is a distinctive characteristic of the present dispensation, that through the fall of Israel salvation has come to the Gentiles (Rom. 11:11). In the prophetic Scriptures referring to the Kingdom it is always through the rise of Israel that salvation would come to the Gentiles.

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<sup>9</sup> Walvoord, John F., and Zuck, Roy B., *The Bible Knowledge Commentary-New Testament*, (Wheaton, Illinois: Scripture Press Publications, Inc., 1983, 1985), 378.

<sup>10</sup> Baker, *Understanding the Book of Acts*, 55-56.  
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Page 7 of 7