

Acts 9:1-20
October 6, 2020

Acts 9:1-2. Saul, still breathing threats and slaughter

1. But Saul, still breathing threats and slaughter against the disciples of the Lord, went to the high priest, 2. and asked for letters from him to the synagogues of Damascus, that if he found any who were of the Way, whether men or women, he might bring them bound to Jerusalem.

1a. “But Saul, still breathing threats and slaughter against the disciples of the Lord”

In chapter 7, we read that Saul he was present at the stoning of Stephen and “ravaged the assembly” by entering Christian homes and imprisoning Christians (8:3).

Saul is “breathing threats and slaughter against the disciples” because he believes them to be enemies of God.

1b, 2a. “went to the high priest, and asked for letters from him to the synagogues of Damascus”

Saul asks the high priest for letters to synagogues rather than civil authorities. He needs their help to root out Christians who have fled Jerusalem.

His purpose for rooting them out is not very Christian or Jewish in my humble opinion.

Your thoughts.

2b. “that if he found any who were of the Way, whether men or women, he might bring them bound to Jerusalem”

Early Christians adopted “the Way” as the name for their movement, because Jesus spoke of being “the way, the truth, and the life” (John 14:6).

Evidence points to Saul only wanting to arrest them and bring them to Jerusalem where they can be tried.

Acts 9:3-6. Suddenly a light from the sky shone around him

3. As he traveled, it happened that he got close to Damascus, and suddenly a light from the sky shone around him. 4. He fell on the earth, and heard a voice saying to him, “Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?” 5. He said, “Who are you, Lord?” The Lord said, “I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting. 6. But rise up, and enter into the city, and you will be told what you must do.”

3. “As he traveled, it happened that he got close to Damascus, and suddenly a light from the sky shone around him”

In retelling his story later, Paul says that this incident took place at midday (22:6; 26:13)—the time of day when the sun is most intense. This light from heaven would have to be bright to be noticed so dramatically in the presence of the noonday sun. Paul will describe it as “brighter than the sun” (26:13).

Light is a recurring theme throughout Luke/Acts.

Luke presents the Gospel as

- Shedding light “on those who sit in darkness and the shadow of death” (Luke 1:79)
- “a light for revelation to the nations” (Luke 2:32)
- “The sun was darkened” (Luke 23:45).
- When an angel rescues Peter from prison, “a light shone in the cell” (Acts 12:7).

Later, Paul will say that God has called him to be “a light for the Gentiles” (Acts 13:47).

4a. “He fell on the earth, and heard a voice”

This story tells us that Saul heard the voice, but Barnabas will later tell the apostles that Saul “had seen the Lord in the way, and that he had spoken to him” (v. 27).

4b “Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?”

In Hebrew scripture, God often uses a name twice to get the attention of a person whom he is calling for a special role (Genesis 22:11; 46:2; Exodus 3:4; 1 Samuel 3:4, 10).

5a. “Who are you, Lord?”

In Hebrew, Lord can mean “Sir” or “Lord”. Sir = respect, Lord = God.

Saul knows that this voice from heaven is either God or a messenger of God and certainly not a mere mortal.

5b. “I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting”

Christ identifies with his disciples so that persecuting disciples is tantamount to persecuting Christ.

Now Saul learns that, instead of doing Godly work as he intended, he has been opposing God, as Gamaliel (remember him) earlier warned might be possible (5:38-39).

6. “But rise up, and enter into the city, and you will be told what you must do”

Jesus simply orders Saul to go to Damascus to await orders.

Acts 9:7-9. When his eyes were opened, Saul saw no one

7. The men who traveled with him stood speechless, hearing the sound, but seeing no one. 8. Saul arose from the ground, and when his eyes were opened, he saw no one. They led him by the hand, and brought him into Damascus. 9. He was without sight for three days, and neither ate nor drank.

7. “The men who traveled with him stood speechless, hearing the sound, but seeing no one”

There appears to be a conflict between this verse and Paul’s later report that “Those who were with me indeed saw the light and were afraid, but they didn’t understand the voice of him who spoke to me” (22:9).

8a. “Saul arose from the ground, and when his eyes were opened, he saw no one”

I believe Saul knows literal level what readers already know to be true about him on a spiritual yet metaphorical level: he is blind.

8b. “They led him by the hand, and brought him into Damascus”

In his blindness, Saul is completely helpless. He cannot even walk to town without assistance.

9. “He was without sight for three days, and neither ate nor drank”

I could be that Saul is:

- fasting in repentance for having persecuted the Messiah.
- simply in shock at the sudden turn in his life.
- Believes in embraces as a spiritual discipline to make himself vulnerable and open to the Lord’s working in his life.

Acts 9:10-12. Now there was a disciple named Ananias

10. Now there was a certain disciple at Damascus named Ananias. The Lord said to him in a vision, “Ananias!” He said, “Behold, it’s me, Lord.” 11. The Lord said to him, “Arise, and go to the street which is called Straight, and inquire in the house of Judah for one named Saul, a man of Tarsus. For behold, he is praying, 12. and in a vision he has seen a man named Ananias coming in, and laying his hands on him, that he might receive his sight.”

10a. “Now there was a certain disciple at Damascus named Ananias”

We meet other Ananias’ in scripture:

- one died after trying to deceive the church (5:1-5)
- another is the high priest, Ananias (23:2; 24:1).

Paul will later identify this Ananias as “a devout man according to the law, well reported of by all the Jews who lived in Damascus” (22:12)

- We know nothing more of him.
- The Lord brings him onstage long enough to perform a simple but important task, and then he disappears.

God often uses ordinary people in significant ways—sometimes, as here, only once in a lifetime. Does God use us in similar significant ways? Examples?

10b. “The Lord said to him in a vision, ‘Ananias!’ Behold, it’s me, Lord”

This is a typical call and response sequence in Hebrew scripture (Genesis 22:1; 1 Samuel 3:6, 8; Isaiah 6:8).

11a. “The Lord said to him, ‘Arise, and go to the street which is called Straight”

I have heard that there is a modern Damascus street called Straight. Could be the same street referenced in this verse, but I found no evidence that it might be the same one.

11b. “in the house of Judah”

We know nothing more of this Judah but note the specific directions that the Lord gives to Ananias.

11c. “and inquire in the house of Judah for one named Saul, a man of Tarsus”

In Paul’s time Tarsus was not only an important commercial center, but was also known as a center of intellectual activity.

11d. “For behold, he is praying”

We learned in verse 9 that Saul was fasting. Now we learn that he is praying. Fasting and prayer are corresponding spiritual disciplines.

12a. “and in a vision he has seen a man named Ananias coming in”

Keep in mind that the Lord is speaking to Ananias in a vision and is reporting that Saul has also seen a vision.

12b. “and laying his hands on him, that he might receive his sight”

We talked about laying on of hands last week, but in the Old Testament,

- Moses laid hands on Joshua to commission him (Numbers 27:18-23).
- In the New Testament, the apostles laid hands on people
 - to heal them (Matthew 9:18; Acts 28:8)
 - to impart the Holy Spirit (Acts 8:17; 19:6)
 - to ordain them for a particular work (Acts 6:6; 13:3; 2 Timothy 1:6).
- This laying on of hands is unusual in that Ananias is not an apostle and has no other credentials, but God chooses to call him to lay hands on Saul.

Acts 9:13-16. Go, for he is my chosen vessel

13. But Ananias answered, “Lord, I have heard from many about this man, how much evil he did to your saints at Jerusalem. 14. Here he has authority from the chief priests to bind all who call on your name.” 15. But the Lord said to him, “Go your way, for he is my chosen vessel to bear my name before the nations and kings, and the children of Israel. 16. For I will show him how many things he must suffer for my name’s sake.”

13. “Lord, I have heard from many about this man, how much evil he did to your saints at Jerusalem”

Luke has told us of Saul having “ravaged the assembly” and “breathing threats and slaughter against the disciples (9:1).

Ananias protests strongly, because he knows Saul as an enemy.

14. “Here he has authority from the chief priests to bind all who call on your name”

Ananias not only knows of the things that Saul has done in Jerusalem, but is also aware of Saul's intentions for disciples found in Damascus.

15a. “Go your way, for he is my chosen vessel”

Here God is telling Ananias that he has chosen and shaped Saul for an important purpose—proclaiming the Gospel to Gentiles.

15b. “my chosen vessel to bear my name before the nations and kings, and the children of Israel”

Saul intended to “bind all who call on your (Jesus’) name” (v. 14), but now Jesus will use Saul to proclaim his name to Gentiles, kings, and the people of Israel.

16. “For I will show him how many things he must suffer for my name’s sake”

Saul who intended to persecute those who invoke Jesus’ name will now suffer for Jesus’ name (v. 16). For a list of Paul’s subsequent sufferings, see 2 Corinthians 11:23-28.

Acts 9:17-19a. Brother Saul, the Lord sent me

17. Ananias departed, and entered into the house. Laying his hands on him, he said, “Brother Saul, the Lord, who appeared to you on the road by which you came, has sent me, that you may receive your sight, and be filled with the Holy Spirit.” 18. Immediately something like scales fell from his eyes, and he received his sight. He arose and was baptized. 19a. He took food and was strengthened.

17. “Ananias departed, and entered into the house. Laying his hands on him, he said, ‘Brother Saul, the Lord, who appeared to you on the road by which you came, has sent me, that you may receive your sight, and be filled with the Holy Spirit’”

Ananias’ greeting, “Brother Saul,” is remarkable given the opinion he so recently expressed about Saul (vv. 13-14).

Ananias says that he is here so that Saul will “be filled with the Holy Spirit,” but the following verses do not record him receiving the Holy Spirit. They do, however, record that he was baptized (v. 18), so he apparently received the Holy Spirit as part of his baptism...as we all do in my opinion.

18. “Immediately something like scales fell from his eyes, and he received his sight. He arose and was baptized”

The healing happens and Saul is baptized, presumably by Ananias. After this event, we hear nothing further of Ananias. His job is done, and Saul’s job about to begin.

19a. “He took food and was strengthened”

Saul has not eaten for three days (v. 9), so he breaks his fast to regain strength for the work that lies ahead.

Acts 9:19b-20. Immediately Saul proclaimed the Christ

19b. Saul stayed several days with the disciples who were at Damascus. 20. Immediately in the synagogues he proclaimed the Christ, that he is the Son of God.

19b. “Saul stayed several days with the disciples who were at Damascus”

Ananias told the Damascus disciples about his experience with Saul, and they seem to accept him as a brother, as Ananias did earlier (v. 17).

I think we can safely presume, these disciples include some of the Jerusalem disciples who fled Saul's earlier persecution.

20. “Immediately in the synagogues he proclaimed the Christ, that he is the Son of God”

Saul will become the great missionary to the Gentiles, but he begins his ministry in the synagogues.

Luke introduced us to this title, Son of God, in the annunciation to Mary (Luke 1:35; see also Luke 3:38; 4:3, 9, 41; 22:70). At Jesus' baptism, a voice from heaven announced, “You are my beloved Son. In you I am well pleased” (Luke 3:22).

This is the only instance in the book of Acts where the title “Son of God” is mentioned.