

Acts 9 • The Turning Point

Introduction

The conversion of Paul is not limited to teaching about our own personal encounter with Christ, but may be the greatest turning point in God's dealing with Israel. Rather than through Peter or one of the original apostles, God is going to use this unusual man to evangelize the whole of the world, someone who has connections to both Jew and Gentile in his training and upbringing. If we are going to rightly divide the Word of Truth, it's imperative to understand that in the Book of Acts we have two different ministries represented by Peter and Paul. There are definite contrasts between the two:

Peter

1. One of the twelve apostles.
2. Centered in Jerusalem.
3. Ministered mainly to Israel.
4. Called on earth by Christ.
5. Saw Christ's glory on earth.

Paul

1. Called apart from the Twelve.
2. Centered in Antioch.
3. Ministered mainly to the Gentiles.
4. Called by Christ from heaven.
5. Saw Christ's glory in heaven.

Paul is God's spokesman to the church, something which even Peter admits. (2 Peter 3:15-16). In other words, the model for the church is not set and limited to what occurred in Acts 1-7, but revealed subsequently through Paul. Even Peter did not fully understand this new program from God and required further instruction. (See Galatians 2).

¹Now Saul, still breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord, went to the high priest, ²and asked for letters from him to the synagogues at Damascus, so that if he found any belonging to the Way, both men and women, he might bring them bound to Jerusalem. ³As he was traveling, it happened that he was approaching Damascus, and suddenly a light from heaven flashed around him; ⁴and he fell to the ground and heard a voice saying to him, "Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting Me?"

⁵And he said, "Who are You, Lord?"

And He said, "I am Jesus whom you are persecuting, ⁶but get up and enter the city, and it will be told you what you must do."

⁷The men who traveled with him stood speechless, hearing the voice but seeing no one. ⁸Saul got up from the ground, and though his eyes were open, he could see nothing; and leading him by the hand, they brought him into Damascus. ⁹And he was three days without sight, and neither ate nor drank.

"Paul & Jesus" [Read v.1-9]

Q: How do we know from this passage that, at this very time, the body of Christ is in existence?

A: Jesus says, "Why are you persecuting Me?" instead of "My people". There is a clear distinction being made between the church and Israel.

Point: In God's economy, there are 3 types of people: Jews who have failed to fulfill their role as God's people, Gentiles who have no relationship at all with God, and the church which is composed of **BOTH** Jews and Gentiles who have accepted Jesus as Messiah. Stephen's death was the beginning of the end for Israel because of their continual rejection of Jesus which we can see here is taking root even further.

Q: What are the 3 characteristics of Saul's conversion?

1. He saw a light. (v.3)
2. He heard a voice. (v.4)
3. He obeyed a call. (v.5-6)

Q: How does this relate to the general salvation experience for everyone?

1. Every sinner is in the dark until the light of the Gospel shines on them.
2. We hear the voice of the Lord through the Word of God.
3. The result is living a changed life according to His Word and ways going forward.

Q: What are some of the startling contrasts in Paul's life as a result of this experience?

1. The persecutor becomes the persecuted.
2. The spiritually blind becomes physically blind.
3. The instrument of Satan becomes the instrument of God.
4. Instead of making prisoners of faith, now frees prisoners from sin.
5. Others?

Q: What might be represented by the fact that Paul's condition continued for 3 days?

A: Similar to Jesus and Jonah, it's a kind of resurrection from the dead, a passing from being spiritually dead to spiritually alive.

Q: Was Paul's persecution of the church merely verbal abuse?

A: The full weight of the meaning of "breathing threats and murder" is explained by Paul himself in Acts 22:4 where he states, "I persecuted this Way to the death, binding and putting both men and women into prisons".

Q: What attribute of God is most revealed in Saul's conversion?

A: Grace. God suddenly interrupted his murderous mission and, by grace, transformed him into a new person.

Application: How does this speak of our own experience? What are the similarities to our life before Christ and after?

Paul & Ananias [Read v.10-19a]

¹⁰Now there was a disciple at Damascus named Ananias; and the Lord said to him in a vision, "Ananias."

And he said, "Here I am, Lord."

¹¹And the Lord said to him, "Get up and go to the street called Straight, and inquire at the house of Judas for a man from Tarsus named Saul, for he is praying, ¹²and he has seen in a vision a man named Ananias come in and lay his hands on him, so that he might regain his sight."

¹³But Ananias answered, "Lord, I have heard from many about this man, how much harm he did to Your saints at Jerusalem; ¹⁴and here he has authority from the chief priests to bind all who call on Your name."

¹⁵But the Lord said to him, "Go, for he is a chosen instrument of Mine, to bear My name before the Gentiles and kings and the sons of Israel; ¹⁶for I will show him how much he must suffer for My name's sake."

¹⁷So Ananias departed and entered the house, and after laying his hands on him said, "Brother Saul, the Lord Jesus, who appeared to you on the road by which you were coming, has sent me so that you may regain your sight and be filled with the Holy Spirit." ¹⁸And immediately there fell from his eyes something like scales, and he regained his sight, and he got up and was baptized; ¹⁹and he took food and was strengthened.

Q: How is Saul visibly different from his former self at this point?

A: Whereas he was previously "breathing threats and murder", now he is praying; whereas he previously saw only his own agenda to kill those who called upon the name of the Lord, now he sees visions in the name of the Lord.

Q: How might this encounter be similar to the one about to occur between Peter and Cornelius in the next chapter?

A: Christ mutually prepares both parties for the encounter.

Q: It's subtle, but what is revealed in this passage as confirmation that Jesus Christ is, indeed, God?

A: Throughout Scripture to this point, God has referred to those who follow Him as "saints", and here Ananias specifies them to Christ as "Your saints".

"A certain Ananias, a man who was devout by the standard of the Law, and well spoken of by all the Jews who lived there, came to me, and standing near said to me, 'Brother Saul, receive your sight!' And at that very time I looked up at him. And he said, 'The God of our fathers has appointed you to know His will and to see the Righteous One and to hear an utterance from His mouth. For you will be a witness for Him to all men of what you have seen and heard. Now why do you delay? Get up and be baptized, and wash away your sins, calling on His name.'

Acts 22:12-16

Q: Based on this passage in Acts 10 and Paul's retelling of the event in Acts 22, what role is carried out by Ananias? How might it relate to us?

A: He is an encourager, both for Paul to complete the work of salvation by being baptized, and in affirming God's Word for Paul's life.

Point: By using Ananias, Paul sees the truth which he missed in Stephen and others, that Christ is, indeed, in them. It begins to connect the salvation experience to the whole body of Christ and eliminates any false notion that this solely takes place on the individual level. The need to be plugged in to the whole body of Christ is established at the outset.

Q: To be sure, Paul was physically nourished by taking food after this, but what is this always a representation of throughout Scripture?

A: The consumption of the Word.

Application: How does this speak to our own role in bringing others to Christ? What is our responsibility for the way we handle ourselves with new Believers?

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Now for several days he was with the disciples who were at Damascus, ²⁰and immediately he began to proclaim Jesus in the synagogues, saying, “He is the Son of God.”

²¹All those hearing him continued to be amazed, and were saying, “Is this not he who in Jerusalem destroyed those who called on this name, and who had come here for the purpose of bringing them bound before the chief priests?”

²²But Saul kept increasing in strength and confounding the Jews who lived at Damascus by proving that this Jesus is the Christ.

²³When many days had elapsed, the Jews plotted together to do away with him, ²⁴but their plot became known to Saul. They were also watching the gates day and night so that they might put him to death; ²⁵but his disciples took him by night and let him down through an opening in the wall, lowering him in a large basket.

²⁶When he came to Jerusalem, he was trying to associate with the disciples; but they were all afraid of him, not believing that he was a disciple. ²⁷But Barnabas took hold of him and brought him to the apostles and described to them how he had seen the Lord on the road, and that He had talked to him, and how at Damascus he had spoken out boldly in the name of Jesus. ²⁸And he was with them, moving about freely in Jerusalem, speaking out boldly in the name of the Lord. ²⁹And he was talking and arguing with the Hellenistic Jews; but they were attempting to put him to death. ³⁰But when the brethren learned of it, they brought him down to Caesarea and sent him away to Tarsus.

³¹So the church throughout all Judea and Galilee and Samaria enjoyed peace, being built up; and going on in the fear of the Lord and in the comfort of the Holy Spirit, it continued to increase.

Paul & the Jews [Read v.19b-31]

Q: What are the two visible activities from a human point of view which confirm that Paul’s conversion was authentic?

1. He prayed. (v.11)
2. He preached. (v.20)

Point: Ever notice how new converts have a burning desire for these two activities? They want to know Christ even more through prayer, and for everyone to come to Him and therefore enthusiastically share what has happened to them.

Q: Paul was yet to be fully trained by Christ in the Gospel, yet here he is preaching nonetheless. Was he probably preaching along the same lines as what would later be written in his epistles?

A: No, Paul began from the very basic starting point of preaching what he knew.

Point: This is a wonderful lesson for those of us who believe we might need extraordinary training before engaging others in evangelism. The genuineness of what we’ve experienced is enough to be effectively shared. With age in the Lord will come greater knowledge, but passion for what has been revealed is enough at any moment.

Q: What probably took place in between v.25 and 26?

A: According to Galatians 1:17-20, Paul spent 3 years in Arabia, during which time he was being taught the truths of God’s “mystery of the church”.

Point: Just as Christ spent 40 days in the wilderness being tested before the formal onset of His ministry, so Paul is similarly prepared.

Q: What is contained herein that probably confirms Paul’s later assertion in Galatians 1:15-18 that his message came from Christ Himself and not from men?

A: The authorities in Jerusalem were afraid of him and refusing to associate with him. It takes Barnabas (whose name means “son of consolation”) to introduce Paul to the group.

“It happened when I returned to Jerusalem and was praying in the temple, that I fell into a trance, and I saw Him saying to me, ‘Make haste, and get out of Jerusalem quickly, because they will not accept your testimony about Me.’ And I said, ‘Lord, they themselves understand that in one synagogue after another I used to imprison and beat those who believed in You. And when the blood of Your witness Stephen was being shed, I also was standing by approving, and watching out for the coats of those who were slaying him.’ And He said to me, ‘Go! For I will send you far away to the Gentiles.’”

Acts 22:17-21

Point: Paul wanted to minister in Jerusalem, but God commanded him to depart and minister among the Gentiles. Although things would progress well for awhile, God’s kingdom program for Israel was beginning to close while just beginning for the Gentiles. God took a lot of precautions to keep separate the ministries of Paul and the twelve apostles.

Application: Why is it sometimes most difficult if not impossible for us to witness to our family and friends? Why is it not automatic that the group or affiliations out of which you're saved are the exact same ones you're supposed to go back and minister to? Why are we often called to "new" ministry fields?

³²Now as Peter was traveling through all those regions, he came down also to the saints who lived at Lydda. ³³There he found a man named Aeneas, who had been bedridden eight years, for he was paralyzed. ³⁴Peter said to him, "Aeneas, Jesus Christ heals you; get up and make your bed." Immediately he got up. ³⁵All who lived at Lydda and Sharon saw him, and they turned to the Lord.

³⁶Now in Joppa there was a disciple named Tabitha (which translated in Greek is called Dorcas); this woman was abounding with deeds of kindness and charity which she continually did. ³⁷And it happened at that time that she fell sick and died; and when they had washed her body, they laid it in an upper room. ³⁸Since Lydda was near Joppa, the disciples, having heard that Peter was there, sent two men to him, imploring him, "Do not delay in coming to us." ³⁹So Peter arose and went with them.

When he arrived, they brought him into the upper room; and all the widows stood beside him, weeping and showing all the tunics and garments that Dorcas used to make while she was with them. ⁴⁰But Peter sent 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. ⁴¹And he gave her his hand and raised her up; and calling the saints and widows, he presented her alive.

⁴²It became known all over Joppa, and many believed in the Lord. ⁴³And Peter stayed many days in Joppa with a tanner named Simon.

Peter & the Saints [Read v.32-43]

Q: Why might it not be a coincidence that Luke seems to suddenly switch to Peter at this point? Why might the answer have something to do with Peter's coming to Joppa?

A: Joppa is the place to which Jonah fled in order to catch a ship for Tarshish in order to avoid obedience to God's command to preach His message to the Gentiles in Nineveh. Here we have someone who is going to instead be obedient to God and, in the next chapter, be an instrument of God in the revelation of the Gospel to the Gentiles.

Q: What was the greater work that became evident as a result of the miracle of the healing of Aeneas?

A: "They turned to the Lord".

Q: What was the greater work that became evident as a result of the miracle of raising Tabitha from the dead?

A: "It became known all over Joppa, and many believed in the Lord." In other words, the sign was accompanied by an even greater explosion of the Word.

Q: What might a strictly observant Jew think about Peter staying with a tanner? What might this indicate about Peter?

A: The Jews considered the job of tanner to be "unclean", someone with whom they wouldn't associate in order not to be declared unclean themselves. It may indicate the way the Lord is shaping Peter's heart in preparation for his encounter with Cornelius when Jesus declares that **NOTHING** is unclean any longer.

Observation: The most-often asked question of Jesus by the disciples was when His kingdom on earth would be permanently established. A lifetime of traditional Hebraic teaching conditioned them to believe that the next step after Christ's ascension into Heaven would be a fairly immediate return to establish His throne in Jerusalem and rule over all the earth. They failed to see the true nature of the interval between these events when the work would first turn to providing the Gospel to every nation and person on earth as a prelude to the final kingdom to come. What the apostles didn't realize at this particular point in time was that just as John the Baptist prepared the way for Christ, and John would have to become smaller and Christ greater, so it would be for the apostles whose initial work would pave the way for Paul and eventually give way to it.

Overall Application

Consider seriously the fact that for neither Paul nor the Twelve was the return of Christ the number one issue in their ministry. They gave it the emphasis it was due, but their overwhelming concern was to preach the Gospel as often as possible, to as many as possible, and whenever possible. Christ's own advice concerning the End Times was to preach the Gospel as much as possible. "The gospel of the kingdom shall be preached in the whole world as a testimony to all nations, and then the end will come." (Mt. 24:14) How should we apply all of this to ourselves at this present time?

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