

## The Historical Stories of the Acts of the Apostles

### Lesson 6 Acts 9:1 – Acts 9:43

One hundred and thirty-three miles north of Jerusalem is the city of Damascus. It is an ancient city noted in public documents from as far back as 1500 BC.<sup>104</sup> The Bible mentions the city in the days of Abraham.<sup>105</sup> In 64 BC, the Romans capture the city, making it the chief government seat east of Rome. Because Damascus is in Syria, not Israel, Saul of Tarsus needs a legal document to allow him to expand his persecution past the borders of the Sanhedrin's control.

The Sanhedrin high priest was appointed by the Roman government. In this case the position was an appointment by Valerius Gratus the Prefect of Judea.<sup>106</sup> Gratus appointed Caiaphas as the high priest in AD 18. Tiberius Caesar replaced Gratus as Prefect of Judea with Pontius Pilate in AD 26. At the same time, Herod Archilaus was the king of Judea and Herod Antipas was the tetrarch of Syria, but Pontius Pilate was ruler over both of them. Herod Archilaus allowed the Sanhedrin to do as they pleased in his area, but Herod Antipas did not allow the same freedom in his domain. Since Caiaphas answered directly to Pilate, a letter from him gave Saul the authority he needed to continue his zealous persecution in Syria.

#### The Lord Speaks to Saul on the Road to Damascus

**Acts 9:1** Now Saul, still breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord, went to the high priest, **2** and 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. **3** And it came about that as he journeyed, he was approaching Damascus, and suddenly a light from heaven flashed around him; **4** and he fell to the ground, and heard a voice saying to him, "Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting Me?" **5** And he said, "Who art Thou, Lord?" And He said, "I am Jesus whom you are persecuting, **6** but rise, and enter the city, and it shall be told you what you must do." **7** And the men who traveled with him stood speechless, hearing the voice, but seeing no one. **8** And Saul 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. **9** And he was three days without sight, and neither ate nor drank.

It is interesting that Luke uses the word "breathing" in this passage. The English word does not hold the same connotation as found in the original language. It carries the idea of a snorting warhorse which loves to engage in a bloody battle. Saul has already sniffed the air of death with Stephen's stoning. Now he exhales the desire to press on to the distant lands to continue his war against the Church.

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<sup>104</sup> Damascus is mentioned among the conquests of the Egyptian king Thothmes III. (B.C. 1500), and in the Amarna tablets (B.C. 1400).

<sup>105</sup> Abraham was born in 2163 BC and died in 1986 BC.

Saul is a Benjamite, a descendant of Benjamin, the son of Jacob. In Genesis 49, we find Jacob on his deathbed giving a prophecy to each of his sons. In his prophecy to Benjamin he says, "Benjamin is a ravenous wolf; in the morning he devours the prey, and in the evening he divides the spoil."<sup>107</sup> Without a doubt, Saul is the greatest descendent in the history of the Benjamin line and he alone fulfills the prophecy.<sup>108</sup>

Luke is specific about Saul's need for a letter to the synagogues in Damascus, but evidently, the letter also gives him authority in other cities. Luke speaks about it when he quotes Paul saying, "And as I punished them often in all the synagogues, I tried to force them to blaspheme; and being furiously enraged at them, I kept pursuing them even to foreign cities."<sup>109</sup> Needless to say, Luke's purpose in this passage is to convey the final attempts of Saul to persecute the church.

Luke tells us that Saul falls to the ground when the Lord speaks to him on the road just outside Damascus, but later Luke records the testimony of Paul saying, "And when we had all fallen to the ground, I heard a voice saying to me in the Hebrew dialect, 'Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting Me? It is hard for you to kick against the goads.'<sup>110</sup> The most important point in this passage is the fact that Saul instantly surrenders to the Lord and does as He commands.

### The Lord Speaks to Ananias in Damascus

**Acts 9:10** Now there was a certain disciple at Damascus, named Ananias; and the Lord said to him in a vision, "Ananias." And he said, "Behold, here am I, Lord." **11** And the Lord said to him, "Arise and go to the street called Straight, and inquire at the house of Judas for a man from Tarsus named Saul, for behold, he is praying, **12** and 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." **13** But Ananias answered, "Lord, I have heard from many about this man, how much harm he did to Thy saints at Jerusalem; **14** and here he has authority from the chief priests to bind all who call upon Thy name." **15** But 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; **16** for I will show him how much he must suffer for My name's sake."

For three days Saul remains blind while he stays in the home of Judas in Damascus. We know nothing about Judas. We can only assume that he is a Jew because his home had been previously secured for Saul's stay while in Damascus. Ananias is a Christian, yet he is well-respected in the Damascus Jewish community.<sup>111</sup> His encounter with the Lord frightens him because he has heard about the reputation of Saul and the terror he is inflicting on the church.

The Lord announces to Ananias His plans for Saul. He is to be a witness for the Lord to the "Gentiles and kings and the sons of Israel." Perhaps the Lord knew that He

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<sup>107</sup> Genesis 49:27

<sup>108</sup> Jacob died in 1854 BC while living in Egypt.

<sup>109</sup> Acts 26:11

<sup>110</sup> Acts 26:14

<sup>111</sup> **Acts 22:12** And 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.

would have to convince Ananias of the future greatness of Saul in order to get him to make the visit to Judas' home. But the Lord adds the pressure on Ananias by telling him, "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." Saul is expecting Ananias to show up and help him.

### **Ananias Lays Hands on Saul**

**Acts 9:17** And 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." **18** And immediately there fell from his eyes something like scales, and he regained his sight, and he arose and was baptized; **19a** and he took food and was strengthened.

When Ananias finally sees Saul just as the Lord announced in the vision, all of Ananias' suspicions about him vanish. Seeing Saul as a true brother in Christ, he calls him "Brother Saul." It is a gracious greeting spoken to a person who will be under suspicion from both the Jews and the Church. The respect for Ananias will help soothe the fears of the believers in Damascus.

On the third day, after hearing the words of the Lord just outside Damascus, Saul regains his eyesight and is baptized,<sup>112</sup> more than likely by Ananias in a pool in Damascus as a symbol of his new life in Christ that had begun three days before.

### **Saul Stays in Damascus Several Days**

**Acts 9:19b** Now for several days he was with the disciples who were at Damascus, **20** and immediately he *began* to proclaim Jesus in the synagogues, saying, "He is the Son of God." **21** And all 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?" **22** But Saul kept increasing in strength and confounding the Jews who lived at Damascus by proving that this Jesus is the Christ.

With the same vigor and vitality that he had persecuted the church, Saul now defends its leader. In no time, he goes to the synagogues to proclaim that Jesus is the "Son of God." This phrase becomes Saul's theme for the rest of his ministry. Amazingly, Saul begins his ministry in the very synagogues where he had intended to arrest those who profess the same Jesus that he now calls Lord.

### **The Jewish Leadership Seeks to Kill Saul**

**Acts 9:23** And when many days had elapsed, the Jews plotted together to do away with him, **24** but their plot became known to Saul. And they were also watching the gates day and night so that they might put him to death; **25** but his disciples took him by night, and let him down through *an opening in* the wall, lowering him in a large basket.

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<sup>112</sup> Acts 9:9

Saul's constant preaching irritates the Jews. After weeks of irritation, they plot to kill him, but the faithful help him escape by lowering him down the wall of the city in a basket. Paul<sup>113</sup> recalls this story and gives a clue to the timing of the event in his letter to the Corinthians when he says, "In Damascus the ethnarch under Aretas the king was guarding the city of the Damascenes in order to seize me, and I was let down in a basket through a window in the wall, and so escaped his hands." <sup>114</sup>

Aretas was the king of Arabia and the father-in-law of Herod Antipas. His daughter was Antipas' first wife whom he divorced in order to marry Herodias, the wife of his brother Herod Philip.<sup>115</sup> Herod Antipas' adulterous relationship with Herodias was condemned by John the Baptist. Ultimately, Herodias convinced her daughter to dance lewdly at Antipas' birthday party and eventually ask for the head of John the Baptist as a gift. Aretas, furious with Antipas, invaded the territory and totally destroyed the armies of Antipas in AD 36. He also took advantage of the death of Caesar Tiberius in AD 37, taking possession of all the area including the eastern Roman capital of Damascus.

With the mention of Aretas, we know that the dating of this event is after AD 36. More than likely, Saul has been preaching Jesus in the synagogues for more than two years since his conversion on the road just outside Damascus, but he does not spend all his time in the city.

Paul fills in a little more information about these first few years in his letter to the Galatians when he says,

But when He who had set me apart, even from my mother's womb, and called me through His grace, was pleased to reveal His Son in me, that I might preach Him among the Gentiles, I did not immediately consult with flesh and blood, nor did I go up to Jerusalem to those who were apostles before me; but I went away to Arabia, and returned once more to Damascus. Then three years later I went up to Jerusalem to become acquainted with Cephas, and stayed with him fifteen days.<sup>116</sup>

Therefore, from the time of Saul's conversion until his first visit back in Jerusalem is three years. When we add the fact that Aretas is the king when Saul escapes from Damascus, we can assume at this point in the narrative that it is approximately AD 37 and that places his conversion date in AD 34.

### **In Jerusalem, Barnabas Takes Saul to the Apostles**

**Acts 9:26** And when he had come to Jerusalem, he was trying to associate with the disciples; and they were all afraid of him, not believing that he was a disciple. **27** But 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. **28** And he was with them moving about freely in Jerusalem, speaking out boldly in the name of the Lord. **29** And he was talking and arguing with the Hellenistic Jews; but they were attempting to put him to

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<sup>113</sup> In Acts 12:9 Luke begins referring to Saul as Paul. Paul is his Gentile name; Saul is his Hebrew name.

<sup>114</sup> 2 Corinthians 11:32-33

<sup>115</sup> Luke 2:19-20, Mark 6:17; Matthew 14:36

<sup>116</sup> Galatians 1:15-18

death. <sup>30</sup>But when the brethren learned of it, they brought him down to Caesarea and sent him away to Tarsus.

The people are fearful of Saul when he returns to Jerusalem after a three year absence. They have not forgotten the terror of his persecution and they are afraid that his new-found religion is a ploy to trap the believers in the city. Barnabas, who comes to the aid of Saul, is not new to the historical stories of the *Acts of the Apostles*; Luke introduced him earlier in the letter.<sup>117</sup> He is also known as Joseph, a Levite of Cyprian birth who sells his property to give to the needs of the church just before Ananias and Sapphira sell their property and lie to the apostles about the price. Because Luke introduces Barnabas so early in the story, we can assume that he has been a believer for many years and the apostles know him well. He is a trustworthy and faithful man in the cause of Christ and he holds great influence with the apostles. His testimony about Saul's conversion calms the fears of some of the church and he is able to join the communion with believers in Jerusalem. Peter believes the testimony about Saul and treats him as his guest for two weeks.<sup>118</sup> But Saul is not in Jerusalem to be Peter's guest; he has come to receive a commission from the apostles to spread the gospel.<sup>119</sup>

Saul's nature will not let him stay quiet even while he is Peter's guest. During his two week stay, he begins to proclaim his message about Jesus everywhere in the city, stirring up strife among the Jews who do not believe in the Savior. It is not hard to imagine the scene in Jerusalem when the brilliant young Pharisee, the prize student of Gamaliel, returns to Jerusalem, preaching the same message that he has so vehemently persecuted a mere three years before. The "brethren" have to intervene to save Saul's life, moving him first to Caesarea, a city on the shore of the Mediterranean Sea about seventy miles northwest of Jerusalem. From there they most likely place him on a boat, shipping him off to his home in Tarsus, about three hundred miles away by sea and then another twelve miles north of the Mediterranean coastline in modern day Turkey.

For the fourteenth time we see the use of the word "brethren" in Luke's letter. Its meaning is the same throughout the New Testament, but its use in this passage shows its intent clearly. "Brethren" always refers to a Jew or a Christian of Jewish heritage or bloodline, never a person of Gentile heritage. Therefore, the Christian Jews are the ones who come to the aid of Saul and protect him by getting him out of the country and back to his boyhood home where the Sanhedrin has absolutely no authority whatsoever.

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<sup>117</sup> **Acts 4:36-37** And Joseph, a Levite of Cyprian birth, who was also called Barnabas by the apostles (which translated means, Son of Encouragement), <sup>37</sup>and who owned a tract of land, sold it and brought the money and laid it at the apostles' feet.

<sup>118</sup> **Galatians 1:18** Then three years later I went up to Jerusalem to become acquainted with Cephas, and stayed with him fifteen days.

<sup>119</sup> **Galatians 1:1-2** Paul, an apostle (not sent from men, nor through the agency of man, but through Jesus Christ, and God the Father, who raised Him from the dead), <sup>2</sup>and all the brethren who are with me, to the churches of Galatia.

### **Saul's Persecution of the Church Ended**

**Acts 9:31** So 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.

The persecution of the church by Saul ended three years before, but the fear of Saul continues until his visit to Jerusalem in AD 37. It seems that no other Pharisee steps forward with the same zeal to persecute the church, so the church is able to meet peacefully and recruit new members with little obstruction from the Jewish community.

### **Peter Heals the Bedridden Man**

**Acts 9:32** Now it came about that as Peter was traveling through all *those parts*, he came down also to the saints who lived at Lydda. **33** And there he found a certain man named Aeneas, who had been bedridden eight years, for he was paralyzed. **34** And Peter said to him, "Aeneas, Jesus Christ heals you; arise, and make your bed." And immediately he arose. **35** And all who lived at Lydda and Sharon saw him, and they turned to the Lord.

With Saul back in his hometown, Luke returns to the task of recording the ministry of Peter. In terms of time, we will not hear about Saul for another eleven years. During that time Saul will study the word of God and sit under the direction of godly Christian men.

On the road back to Jerusalem after putting Saul on the boat in Caesarea, Peter takes the opportunity to heal Aeneas in the town of Lydda. Lydda is thirty-one miles from Caesarea and about nine miles from Joppa. Sharon is an open plain about thirty miles long and eight to fifteen miles wide between Caesarea and Joppa.<sup>120</sup> Luke includes this story because the healing of one man precipitates the conversion of an entire town and its surrounding neighbors who live on the plain of Sharon.

### **Peter Brings Tabitha Back to Life and Stays with Simon the Tanner**

**Acts 9:36** Now in Joppa there was a certain disciple named Tabitha (which translated *in Greek* is called Dorcas); this woman was abounding with deeds of kindness and charity, which she continually did. **37** And it came about at that time that she fell sick and died; and when they had washed her body, they laid it in an upper room. **38** And since Lydda was near Joppa, the disciples, having heard that Peter was there, sent two men to him, entreating him, "Do not delay to come to us." **39** And Peter arose and went with them. And when he had come, 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. **40** But 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. **41** And he gave her his hand and raised her up; and calling the saints and widows, he presented her alive. **42** And it became known all over Joppa, and many believed in the Lord. **43** And it came about that he stayed many days in Joppa with a certain tanner, Simon.

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<sup>120</sup> A flower grows in that plain that the Old Testament calls the "Rose of Sharon." Song of Solomon 2:1

Joppa is a seaport on the western shore of Israel about thirty miles from Jerusalem. The Old Testament frequently mentions this old city in its stories. It is where we find Jonah boarding a ship in order to run from God.<sup>121</sup> When Tabitha dies suddenly, two men are sent to Lydda just nine miles away to bring Peter to her aid and raise her from the dead.<sup>122</sup> Peter comes and does as they ask, resulting in the conversion of many of the people who live in the area.

Luke uses a favorite phrase when he tells Theophilus that Peter will remain in Joppa "many days." It really has no clear meaning. In some case it indicates days, other times it indicates months, and, in this case, it may even indicate years as will be seen with Luke's next story about Peter's ministry. Luke's point is to tell Theophilus of Peter's lengthy stay in Simon's house while he ministers throughout the area.

The Lord will move Peter out of Joppa when the time is right. In fact, he will send him back to Caesarea, about forty miles away, where a centurion is having an encounter with the Lord. The Lord sends Peter to give approval to his conversion just as he and John were sent to give approval of the new converts in Samaria several years before.<sup>123</sup>

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<sup>121</sup> Jonah 1:3

<sup>122</sup> Tabitha is also known by her Greek name Dorcas,

<sup>123</sup> Acts 8:14-17