**Introduction – Acts 9:1–31**

* **General Overview:** This section covers the conversion of Saul (Paul). And while it’s a familiar story, it’s critical to start by admitting that we might have in our minds a composite picture of the events—including details about a donkey, the time of day, etc. However, Luke *never* gives a single, composite picture of Saul’s conversion in Acts. Instead—more like the Gospels—tells the story 3 separate times (9:1–31; 22:3–21; 26:9–18), and each version targets its own audience.[[1]](#footnote-1) In this particular account, Luke doesn’t use the language of “conversion,” he doesn’t mention the time of day, and he doesn’t mention a donkey. For that reason, readers should *not* flip ahead to “versions 2 and 3” of the story to “help fill in the gaps” that “exist” in version 1. *There are no gaps in version 1*. It’s perfect. And in reading this version—and only this version—you’ll catch Luke’s emphasis: Saul’s conversion is the Lord’s way of encouraging *His Church*. It’s all His gift to them.
* **Textual Keys:** To get our arms around the story, it’s important to identify the weight-bearing words that Luke used when building it. They are as follows:
	+ **“Lord”:** The term “Lord” is used at frequent intervals in the text and it conveys the *sovereignty* of Jesus, which Luke wants in center-frame when talking about Saul. Saul is certainly on the stage, but he’s not the main character. The Lord is. For example:
		- Luke begins by depicting Saul as a violent aggressor against the disciples “of the Lord” (9:1). So, Saul is seen waging a battle he can only lose.
		- Saul is confronted by the “Lord” (v. 5), who then orders Saul to change his course and await further instruction. The Lord is clearly steering the story.
		- The “Lord” reveals himself to Ananias, who acknowledges Him as “Lord” (vv. 10–11, 13, 15) and hears more about His sovereign plan for Saul.
		- Ananias then tells Saul “the Lord” sent him to help Saul regain sight (v. 17).
		- Later, Barnabas assures the saints that Saul indeed saw and heard from “the Lord” (v. 27)
		- Saul is then described as speaking boldly “in the name of the Lord” (v. 28)
		- And finally, the church is so shaped by the Lord’s work in Saul’s life that they go forward in the “fear of the Lord” (v. 31).
		- Luke could’ve used any number of different titles for Jesus, but by tracing this one, it’s key that Luke wants Theophilus to see the sovereign hand of the Lord at work to make Saul His disciple (cf. v. 15).
	+ **“Disciple”**: The second most important term is “disciple,” mainly because of how ties to “Lord.” The term refers to someone whose mind is conducted by an outside authority (TDNT, 4:391)—in this case, the Lord Jesus (v. 1). And so, what Theophilus would see here is how Saul, who once persecuted “the disciples of the Lord” (9:1), is actually so confronted by the Lord that he *becomes* “a disciple” himself (vv. 26–27). In other words, Saul’s life and mind is now controlled by the Lord.
	+ **“Damascus” & “Jerusalem”**: These are the two theaters in which the story unfolds. Saul begins by departing from Jerusalem “to Damascus” (v. 1) in order to try to haul disciples back “to Jerusalem” (v. 2)—creating a circuit for the story. Along the way (literally), the Lord dramatically intervenes, Saul has a mid-life crisis, and we eventually see Saul return to Jerusalem a disciple himself. To explain this, Luke gives a series of events that occur in or around Damascus (vv. 3, 8, 10, 19), and he follows that with a parallel series of events that occur at Jerusalem (vv. 26, 28, see page 13).
	+ **Verse 31**: Because the entire section (9:1–31) concludes with a “therefore” statement in verse 31, it’s important to start by glancing at the conclusion to ensure we know where Luke is going. Verse 31 is where Luke ties off the narrative threads that he’s woven throughout verses 1–30—and from how he ends it, the story’s not about Saul.
	+ The story concludes: “So [lit. *therefore*], the church throughout all Judea and Galilee and Samaria was having peace, being built up. And going on in the fear of the Lord and in the encouragement of the Holy Spirit, it continued to multiply.”
	+ What’s important to see here is that Luke sees the story of Saul as a way in which the Lord supports the regional church. Ever since widespread persecution broke out at Stephen’s death, Luke pinned Saul as a key aggressor against the churchin Judea & Samaria (8:1, 4; 1:8). By converting him here, however, the Lord reversed all of this, and allows the church to advance. Thechurch was given “peace” and the opportunity to be “built up” (in contrast to the efforts of Saul to “destroy” believers, 9:21). The church went on “in the fear of the Lord,” (in contrast to how they were formerly “afraid” of Saul, 9:26, same root word). Finally, the church went forth in the encouragement of the Holy Spirit, which ties back to how Barnabas (9:27)—whose name means “son of encouragement” (4:36)—encouraged the disciples to realize that Saul was truly a changed man now. For these reasons, readers should see the story of Saul as God’s gift to the regional church.

**The Lord Spoke to Saul (9:1–9)**

* **Overview:** This section covers how the Lord cherrypicked an elite persecutor from among His enemies, confronted Him, and enlisted him for divine service. This is a divine interdiction (a military term used for how to forcibly stop enemy maneuvers). Verses 1–9 describe how the Lord ambushed a man who expected to be doing the ambushing.
* **Vv. 1–2 –** Verses 1–2 provide the setup for the story, introducing all the essential ingredients: the main characters (Saul, the disciples, the Lord), the context (Damascus, Jerusalem), and the tension that makes the story go (a bounty hunting mission). Luke begins with a picture of the villain and a look at his evil plans.
	+ **The Man (1a):** The phrase “Now Saul” reintroduces this persecutor from earlier (7:58; 8:1, 3). He’s immediately profiled as a violent aggressor, “still breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord.” The fact that Luke says Saul is working against “the Lord” gives readers a clarity that Saul himself was didn’t have (cf. 1 Tim 1:13). Only in time would Saul realize the uphill battle he was in. Nevertheless, Saul’s aggression is intense. He was “breathing threats and murder,” a poetic way of saying that his words brought death—unlike the gospel, which is “the message of this Life” (5:20). (Beyond this, it’s possible that Luke’s choice of “breathing…murder” serves as a bookend to the story which ends with the church multiplying in the strength of the Holy Spirit, v. 31. “Breathing” and “Spirit” share the same Greek root, and the story demonstrates how the Spirit of God ultimately blew Saul’s plans to pieces).
	+ **His Mission (1b–2):** Luke describes how Saul set out to maximize harassment and stamp out what he believed to be a blasphemous band of revolutionaries. Luke presents Saul’s authority and aggression to help frame up a menacing picture.
		- **His Authority:**
			* **The High Priest:** Mention of “the high priest” conveys Saul’s supreme authority under Judaism, since he went all the way to the top for his green light. More generally, this paints Saul as an agent of the enemy *system*. Note how verses 1–2 present two teams: 1) Saul (agent) and the high priest (sovereign), stacked against 2) the disciples (agents) and their Lord (sovereign). (For more, see 9:10–19a.)
			* **Letters:** Luke shows how Saul sought “**letters** from [the high priest] to the synagogues at Damascus.” These letters gave him legal right to haul Christians off to their doom. The precise nature of the letters is left vague by Luke—and that’s important.[[2]](#footnote-2) If he wanted us to know specifics, he would have written specifics. But what Luke *does* tell Theophilus (and what he wants us to see) is how the letters *functioned*. Not only is Saul operating within an apostate system’s hierarchy, the letters show that he’s also trying to launch a far-reaching inquisition of believers. The letters help him leverage the outposts of Judaism (synagogues) with the goal bringing Christian believers “bound [under law back] to Jerusalem.” This is part of a high-scale, systemic attack on Christianity.
		- **His Aggression:**
			* **Asking for letters:** Verse 2 describes how Saul didn’t wait for orders but—as the aggressor—“**asked** for letters from [the high priest] to the synagogues at Damascus.” He’s initiating the persecution and leading the offensive effort for the enemies of God.
			* **Reaching for Damascus:** Interestingly, Saul is looking to hunt believers down in Damascus—170 miles from Jerusalem (see pg. 15). The city isn’t mentioned except in Saul’s conversion stories, so the important takeaway is that Damascus lay *outside* of Israel. This shows the lengths to which Saul’s zeal was taking him (cf. 26:11). And in view of Acts 1:8, it seems that the hope fulfilling the divine mission is endangered. Just when the persecuted church thought they were safely out of range, we see Saul coming to hunt them down and drag them *back* “to Jerusalem”—erasing the progress gained in the global advance of the gospel.
			* **Attacking “the Way”:** Luke describes how Saul was looking for “any belonging to the Way, both men and women.” The language of “any…both men and women” demonstrates the indiscriminate and merciless nature of Saul’s campaign. And the description of believers as those “belonging to the Way” is used later on (19:9, 23; 22:4; 24:14, 22), specifically in reference to the morally upright way of living under God’s rule (19:23, 26 “turned away [from idolatry]”; 24:14). For that reason, it is understood that way here, and because *Luke* is the one saying it (not Saul), readers should see again that Saul is seeking to harm the good guys because he is truly evil.
			* In summary, readers see Saul aggressively grabbing for the power to persecute the good guys—and getting it (cf. v. 14). But it won’t be long before they also see that Saul’s authority is no match for the power of the Lord Jesus. Saul planned to bring his captives “bound to Jerusalem,” but readers soon see the Lord beat him to the punch; He catches Saul in his craftiness, grabs hold of *him*, and forces *him* to be the one “led by the hand” to Damascus (v. 9). The Lord is really in charge.

**Day 1 – Questions**

1. Why would Luke reference “the Lord” so much in this story about Saul?
2. Why does Luke want us to see how evil Saul was? How does he also imply that Saul stands on the losing side of things?
3. How can this encourage us as we think about those who would oppose the Lord’s people?

**Day 2 – Divine Interdiction (9:3–9)**

* **Overview:** This text recounts the scene in which the Lord intervened in Saul’s life and performed a flawless interdiction. He ambushed Saul, disabled him, humbled him, confronted him, and ordered him forward as His new prisoner (and choice draft pick).
* **Vv. 3–4 –** These verses continue the story, shifting to Saul “as he was traveling.” In other words, Saul’s plan is now underway. Luke’s narration of events is rather straightforward. He prepares Theophilus to receive a larger story with the phrase “and it happened”—with the entire story being what “it” refers to. Reading on, one discovers that the story includes two major plot points. The reason we can say there are two is because the two main verbs in the story correspond to the two main plot points Barnabas later mentions in his recap of what happened in verse 27. Barnabas says (1) Saul saw the Lord on the road, and (2) the Lord spoke to Saul. These two actions correspond to the main verbs Luke uses in vv. 3–4: how (1) “a light from heaven flashed around [Saul]” (i.e. Saul saw the Lord, cf. v. 17), and (2) he “heard a voice” (i.e. the Lord spoke to Saul). These are the two main ideas, and other phrases modify them as shown below:
	+ **The Appearance of Christ:** Luke speaks about “a light from heaven.”As a reference to the work of the Lord, this is quite indirect, but the language is intentional. Luke has already tied the themeof “light” to Jesus in Luke 2:32, and he’s consistently used “heaven” to refer to the current command center of Christ (1:10; 2:2; 7:49, 56). Thus, Luke is indicating that the Lord Jesus is the one ambushing Saul’s operation. Even so, the indirect and impersonal nature of his language provides dramatic irony and demonstrates how the Lord is moving miraculously on the stage of human history. Luke gives three phrases to modify the idea of Christ’s appearing:
1. This happened while “[Saul] was approaching Damascus,” which gives tension to the story because Saul is on his final descent into the target area of his intended attack.
2. This happened “suddenly,” which demonstrates that the Lord has sprung this upon Saul to catch him off guard.
3. The light “flashed around him,” which implies an ambush from all sides, especially when seen alongside the use of “suddenly.”
	* **The Voice of Christ:** As it is so often the case in Luke-Acts, the real focus lands on the word of the Lord (he heard a voice saying to him). This point is modified in two ways:
4. First, it came while Saul was “falling to the ground,” which shows Saul in a posture of defeat. Luke wants to show the Lord speaking to someone He put flat on his rear.
5. Luke also shares the content of what was said: “Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting Me?” The use of “Saul, Saul” grabs his attention and the question (“why…”) throws Saul into an interrogation. Since Saul was targeting Christ’s disciples (v. 1), the fact that Jesus says Saul was persecuting “Me” demonstrates that Jesus views Himself as tied to all His people as their ruler (cf. John 13:20). From these phrases, readers see Saul thrown into an uncomfortably intimate meeting with the Lord of all things.
* **V. 5a –** Verse 5 moves us deeper into the exchange between Saul and the Lord. Since Saul was completely caught off guard, he asks, “Who are you, Lord?” which sets up for a glorious revelation of Jesus’s identity that would change Saul’s life forever. Since “Lord” simply addresses a sovereign, it’s clear that Saul admits his inferiority to the person with whom he’s speaking, but the fact that he raises his question about who this Person is is itself a demonstration that he does *not* in fact know this is the Lord Jesus. For Luke’s readers, the important thing is that they see Saul admitting himself to be a lesser man than Jesus. Luke’s language is crafted to stress that point.
* **Vv. 5b–6 –** Jesus answers Saul’s question with “I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting.” The reemergence of the name “Jesus” in the story would reveal to Saul that he is speaking with the same Man whom Israel condemned and crucified not long ago (2:22–23, 36) and the same Man for whom Saul watched Stephen be put to death (7:58–8:1). Once again, we see Jesus haunting His enemies. The fact that Jesus reiterates Saul’s “persecuting” work reinforces the evil of his actions, as he is in fact persecuting the Savior of the world. Having said this, Jesus does not dwell on this point but instead makes a hard turn in the conversation (using strong Greek contrastive particle for “but”) to give orders to Saul. He effectively gets him “back on track” by sayings, “rise up and enter the city,” but Jesus makes it clear that Saul’s intended mission has now been hijacked. Note how Jesus leaves him in the dark on the specifics that await him but reaffirms His authority in saying, “it will be told you what you must do.” From this, we see that Saul is no longer the aggressor in the narrative, but he has been forced into an inferior position. Adding to this, Luke’s use of “must” (Gk. *dei*) is a critically important theme-word—used over and over *and over* in Luke–Acts—to demonstrate the sovereign plan of God unfolding. You could say this classifies as a mid-life crisis.
* **Vv. 7–8** – Verses 7 and 8 are a package deal because “the men traveling with Saul” become supporting characters (the “they” in v. 8) who bring Saul’s disabled self into Damascus. Taken together, verse 7 distinguishes these men from Saul, and verse 8 binds them to him. The effect of these verses is to show how, while these other men are present, this was very much a precision strike on Saul—not them.
	+ **V. 7 -** Unlike how Saul was knocked to the ground, Luke distinguishes these men by saying that they “stood” nearby (i.e. the miracle didn’t affect them in the same way). He also says they were “speechless,” which shows how they are *not* in command of the situation, unlike Jesus whose voice commands the scene. This nuance is clear because their speechlessness is modified by the phrase “hearing the voice but seeing no one.” In other words, they were dumbstruck and outmatched by something beyond their wit. (Something similar happened when the prophet Daniel received a vision and said, “I, Daniel, alone saw the vision that appeared, but the men who were with me did not see the vision; nevertheless a great terror fell on them”; Dan 10:7.) Again, this was uniquely targeted for Saul.
	+ **V. 8 –** With Saul and his men in a fog, Luke moves the story along.
		- He says, “And Saul got up from the ground,” which marks the start of his renewed journey to Damascus. Luke adds, “and though his eyes were open, he could see nothing” demonstrating that Saul has been completely immobilized.
		- Beyond this, the language here becomes important for Luke’s development of the theme of “seeing but not perceiving.” This language ties to Old Testament judgment language (Isa 6:9; cf. Jer 5:21), which comes into play later in Acts (28:26). On top of that, the third time Luke records Saul’s testimony in Acts, Saul explains that Christ gave him a mission to the lost “to open their eyes so that they may turn from darkness to light” (26:18). So Saul experiences a physical healing that *symbolizes* the nature of his ministry to those who need the same thing.
		- Readers shouldn’t miss the irony when Luke mentions that the travel buddies were “leading [Saul] by the hand” when “they brought him into Damascus.” While he set out to ravage Damascus and bring believers “bound to Jerusalem” (9:2), the Lord intervened and now it is *Saul* who is found being led by the hand into Damascus. The Lord caught the crafty in their craftiness.
* **V. 9 –** Lastly, Luke writes that Saul “was three days without sight, and neither ate nor drank.” The significance of three days could be debated, but so far Luke has not used this phrase for anything that seems to tie to this point (he does not even use it for Jesus’ time in the grave). Rather, this seems to simply serve the purpose of giving a break of time that was long enough for Saul to fast—like how the three-hour gap was long enough for Ananias to be buried (5:7). The fact that Saul fasted would demonstrate that he was truly humbled by this collision and understood that the Lord was intervening in his life. Awaiting next steps became more important to him than eating.

**Day 2 – Questions**

1. Why do you think the Lord chose to perform a *miraculous* intervention in Saul’s life? Couldn’t He have done this another way?
2. What strength can you draw from the fact that Jesus identifies so closely with His people as He does here (the “Me” in v. 4)?
3. Why do you think the Lord chose to *blind* Saul? Couldn’t He have worked in other ways? What’s the significance of this miracle (and it’s healing) for Saul’s next season of life?

**Day 3 – The Lord Spoke to Ananias (9:10–19a)**

* **Overview:** Verses 1–9 are straightforward, but verses 10–19 are a little more complex. This is because Luke arranges 10–19a to mirror 1–9—like the other side of a coin. If readers miss this, certain details will seem strangely irrelevant. But when these sections are read together, we see what Luke is doing. Note how Luke does something similar just a few verses later in chapter 10 when he shares the story of how Peter and Cornelius meet—first telling the story from Cornelius’ side, then from Peter’s. Here, Luke has told the story from the perspective of a persecutor, and now he tells the story from the perspective of a Christian who accepts him into the fold. As Peterson writes, “The risen Lord Jesus encounters both Saul and Ananias, but in different ways, bringing them together and changing both of them in the process.”[[3]](#footnote-3)
* **Parallels:** Readers should note that Luke includes a few “strange” details that only make sense if he wants these stories read together For example:

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| **Acts 9:1–9** | **Acts 9:10–19a** |
| Ends with Saul led “by the hand” in weakness (v. 8) | Ends with Ananias laying “hands” on Saul for empowerment (v. 17) |
| Ends with Saul “without sight” for“three days” (v. 9) | Ends with Saul regaining “his sight” “immediately” (v. 19a) |
| Ends with Saul not taking any food in his weakness (v. 9) | Ends with Saul taking food and being “strengthened” (v. 19a) |
| Saul gets orders to go after “The Way” (v. 2) | Ananias gets ordered to go to “the street called Straight” (v. 11) |
| Saul goes after “any” of the believers – generally (v. 2) | Ananias goes after “a man…named Saul” – specifically (v. 11) |
| Saul’s response to the Lord “Who are you, Lord?” (v. 5) | Ananias’ response to the Lord, “Here I am, Lord” (v. 10) |
| Saul goes to “the Synagogues at Damascus” (v. 2) | Ananias goes to “the house of Judas” (v. 11)  |
| Saul “heard” a voice that highlights his persecution (v. 4) | Ananias has “heard” from many about Saul’s persecution (v. 13) |
| Saul is told “it will be told you what you **must** do” (v. 6; Gk *dei*) | The Lord says, “I will show [Saul] how much he **must** suffer for My name” (v. 16; Gk *dei*) |

* **V. 10 –** Flipping the camera to the other team—the church—Luke introduces “a disciple at Damascus, named Ananias.” Similar to Saul’s introduction, Ananias receives an authorization to act from his superior (the Lord). But unlike with Saul, Luke gives more insider detail (actual quotes) so we can hear the Lord’s plan.
	+ Unlike how Saul makes a request *up* his chain of command, Ananias is met (unexpectedly) by the Lord in a *top-down* fashion, demonstrating the Lord’s control. And unlike how Saul has a physical meeting with the high priest, Ananias has a spiritual meeting with his sovereign (in a vision), demonstrating the Lord’s supernatural authority over the situation. Furthermore, when the Lord speaks to “Ananias,” we see that he’s familiar with the Lord (“Here I am, Lord”), which is also very different from Saul (v. 5).
* **Vv. 11–12 –** Verses 11 and 12 serve to reassure Ananias that the Lord has sovereignly intervened in Saul’s life—and chose Ananias to take part in that. Notice several reversals:
	+ Like how Saul pursued “the Way,” Ananias is ordered to go to “the street called Straight.” Both terms can carry the idea of being morally “right” (as opposed to morally crooked, 8:21; cf. Luke 3:4),[[4]](#footnote-4) and readers can see that Ananias is supposed to go search for a man who’s now “on the right path,” so to speak. The fact that this man is “Saul” is almost unbelievable to Ananias.
	+ Unlike how Saul planned to visit to a slew of “synagogues” to look for “any” and every Christian, Ananias is told to go to one specific house—"the house of Judas”—and ask for one specific man—"a man from Tarsus named Saul.” From this we can see that, while Saul’s rage was more haphazard and indiscriminate, God was working out a plan that was incredibly personal and particular.
	+ Unlike how Saul was formerly painted as a violent persecutor (breathing threats and murder), the Lord now paints a different picture: “behold, he is praying, and he has seen in a vision [from Me] a man named Ananias come in and lay his hands on him, so that he might regain his sight.” All of this is designed to reassure Ananias that (1) Saul is now submitted to the Lord (praying) and (2) the Lord has indeed intervened in his life (in a vision). That intervention even includes Saul getting help from Ananias, but despite these reassurances, Ananias still has reservations.
* **Vv. 13–14 –** “Ananias answered” the Lord in a way that expressed his hesitations and those of “many” others. His concern is natural enough: Saul is an infamously violent man who threatens to harm God’s people (Note the God-centered language: “Your saints,” and those “who call on Your name”). Ananias references “how much harm [Saul] did to Your saints at Jerusalem,” and he is concerned that enabling this monster to regain its sight would be enabling it to replicate its evils in Damascus. Notice how he emphasizes “here [i.e. in Damascus] he [Saul] has authority from the chief priests to bind all who call on Your name.” So, unless something has truly changed, this seems dangerous. These verses give the Lord the opportunity to reveal more about His work and plan in Saul’s life.
* **Vv. 15–16 –** In response, God reemphasizes the need for Ananias to “Go,” but this time He gives deeper reasons—enabling Theophilus to see and appreciate the depth of God’s work in Saul’s life. The reason Ananias is told to go is because God has decided to put Saul in a divine custody from which he will never be released. This completely flips the script for Saul. One moment he was trying to bind other believers, and another, the Lord seizes him and calls him “a chosen instrument of Mine.” And whereas one moment Saul was going to *halt* the spread of the Lord’s glory in Gentile areas, God now reveals that Saul will be one to *advance* it, “to bear My name before the Gentiles and kings and sons of Israel.”
	+ **“Chosen Instrument” –** This language demonstrates how Saul becomes a new multitool tool in God’s hands. Not only is he chosen (lit. elected), but the term for “instrument” means that Saul will be a means to an end. This is the same term used for the “object like a great sheet” that brings food from heaven down to Peter (10:11, 16). Saul is now a vehicle for the Lord’s name to be brought around the world.
	+ **Gentiles, kings, sons of Israel –** These three titles are incredibly significant:
		- “Gentiles” helps us recall God’s plan to bring His glory to the end of the earth (1:8), and it sets up for the following story in which Peter cracks the door to the Gentile world by going to Cornelius.
		- “Kings” is important because the most recent mention of kings is in Acts 4:26, which describes the kings of the earth taking their *stand against* the Messiah. This is a battle context, and it ties to the present context as Saul too was opposed to the Lord (persecuting Him), but now he’s been humbled and brought into the Lord’s service to bear witness *back out* before the kings of the earth on the Lord’s behalf. (Theophilus may have anticipated that this ministry would occur with Saul in bonds (Luke 21:12; Acts 25:22ff)).
		- “the sons of Israel” refers to Israelites, many of whom are wayward (Luke 1:16; Acts 5:21; 7:23). Positioning them last in the list shows that God is not finished with Israel even though He sends a man out to the Gentiles. Saul’s circuits in the Gentile world circle back to amplify his witness to Israel (Rom 11:13).
* The deepest reason God delivers to Ananias is found in the last phrase: “For I will show him how much he must suffer for my name.” The phrase “I will show him” helps a hesitant Ananias see that, by going, he’s not hereby becoming Saul’s handler; it is *the Lord* who will handle him. Moreover, the fact that Saul will join the church in suffering for the name of the Lord helps to reassure Ananias that Saul won’t continue persecuting after regaining his sight. Also, the use of “must” is a key Greek word Luke uses over and over in Luke-Acts to demonstrate what *must* happen according to the promise-plan of God. In other words, Saul’s future is written by the Lord, and the Lord will guide him into it. Ananias doesn’t need to worry.
* **V. 17 –** Reassured, Ananias obeys. He went where the Lord told him to go, and even identified with him by “laying his hands on him.” Strikingly, readers see Ananias address him as “Brother Saul,” demonstrating Ananias now trusts the Lord and sees things as the Lord does. Ananias then points Saul to how “the Lord Jesus” is superintending this entire process. Ananias helps Saul to see that the One who met him on the road is the One who miraculously sent Ananias to help him miraculously regain his sight and even “be filled with the Holy Spirit.” All of this demonstrates how supernaturally the Lord is working to empower Saul. The filling with the Holy Spirit would refer to some form of empowerment in this context, since Saul is already to be called a “brother” (believer).
* **Vv. 18–19a –** At these words, Luke points to “something like scales” which “fell from [Saul’s] eyes,” enabling him to regain his sight “immediately.” The term “scales” is used for fish scales (BDAG, 592; Lev 11:9), but precise nature of these isn’t important. What’s important is only what Luke says—that something “***like*** scales” fell from his eyes—which emphasizes that there was a physical hindrance to his sight that is now removed. In light of how Saul’s later ministry emphasizes “opening eyes” in a spiritual sense (Acts 26:18), this physical impediment carries a spiritual significance in the narrative. After regaining his sight, Saul “got up and was baptized,” and in context, “getting up” shows Saul back on his feet and ready to serve, and his baptism is critical because a *persecutor* has now been baptized into the church. This aligns with the recent significance of an Ethiopian eunuch being baptized (8:38), and a Gentile being baptized (10:48)—all of whom are “unlikely converts.” We are seeing the waters of baptism freely given to all who profess faith, even persecutors. Lastly, rounding out the story, Saul “took food and was strengthened,” which closes out this second half of the story in contrast to his fast in verse 9.

**Day 3 – Questions**

1. Why is it important to see that Ananias had his own journey towards accepting Saul? How do you navigate your own personal skepticism towards new professing believers?
2. What specifically reassured Ananias that Saul wouldn’t continue to harm Christians?
3. Why do you think Saul’s ministry also focused on the sons of Israel?

**Day 4 – Saul’s Ministry in Damascus (Acts 9:19b–25)**

**Overview:** As Schnabel says, “The next episode…narrates the beginning of Saul’s missionary work in Damascus and in Jerusalem (9:19c–30).”[[5]](#footnote-5) From this larger text, verses 19b–25 cover Saul’s ministry in Damascus, and verses 26–30 cover his ministry in Jerusalem. In a similar way to how Luke told the story of Saul’s (9:3–9) and then followed it up with a structurally parallel story about Ananias, here too Luke tells Theophilus the story of Saul’s ministry in Damascus before following it up with a parallel story of his ministry in Jerusalem.

* **Vv. 19b–20 –** Luke begins with a general description of Saul’s time in Damascus, and the key point is that “he was with the disciples.” This is such a stark reversal from how he was “breathing threats and murder against the disciples” just a few days before (9:1). But this didn’t slow Saul down. Verse 20 says “immediately he began to proclaim Jesus in the synagogues, saying, ‘He is the Son of God.” So, in the places he once sought support to condemn Christians, he’s now proclaiming the Christian’s own message.
	+ **His Message:** “He is the Son of God” **–** Luke finds it important to summarize the content of Saul’s message—Jesus is God’s Son—but this title is not common in Luke-Acts. Luke has only used it for Jesus, in reference to how He was generated by God at His birth (Luke 1:35, 4:3, 9, 41), and for Adam, who was generated directly by God at the beginning of creation (Luke 3:38). So unlike how John uses this title for the *preincarnate* Son, Luke uses the phrase to portrays Jesus as the last Adam and rightful ruler over God’s created order—the Son incarnate. Jesus is portrayed as a Man of cosmic significance and authority in the plan of God. This is the message that Jesus explicitly confessed before the Jewish rulers in Luke 22:70, and now Saul is doing something similar here in Damascus.
	+ **Aside: How could Saul start preaching so quickly?** – Luke says Saul began preaching “immediately” and there are questions about how this was possible.
		- Considering the scene, though, Schabel suggests, “Since Saul arrested followers of Jesus and as he was presumably involved in their interrogations, he would have witnessed not only the courageous commitment of the believers to these convictions, but learned more details about Jesus’ life and teaching. And as a trained Torah expert who had probably memorized the Scriptures, he quickly would have linked relevant passages in Scripture with Jesus’ life, death, resurrection, and exaltation, and he would soon have been able to formulate the implications and consequences of Jesus’ identity—who spoke to him from the light of God’s glorious reality.”[[6]](#footnote-6)
* **Vv. 21–22 –** Luke gives space to describe the public’s response to Saul’s message:
	+ Verse 22 demonstrates that these Jews are unbelievers—those who would have helped him find and eliminate Christians if possible (9:2). It is to them that Saul now proclaims Jesus, and everyone hearing Saul “continued to be astounded” because he had formerly “destroyed those that called on this name” in Jerusalem and had even come all the way out “here [Damascus]” to further that effort and drag believers back to Jerusalem “bound before the chief priests.” It’s almost unbelievable. The man who was going to “destroy” Christian society and hold believers accountable to the chief priests is now standing before them as a noisy *member* of Christian society seeking to hold *unbelieving Jews* accountable to the Son of God.
	+ Nevertheless, their questions and astonishment do nothing to hinder Saul. Luke says, “But Saul kept increasing in [spiritual] strength and confounding the Jews who lived at Damascus by proving that this One is the Christ.” So, like Stephen before him, Saul is now baffling his countrymen. And one reason that proving the *Messianic* identity of Jesus (“the Christ”) is significant is that it relates to the final interrogation of Jesus. There, Jesus was asked if He was two things: 1) The Christ (Luke 22:67) and 2) the Son of God (22:70). Both of these titles are what Saul is standing up for and arguing here—thereby bringing the fullness of Jesus’ identity to bear before the sons of Israel.
* **Vv. 23–25 –** These verses describe the close of Saul’s time in Damascus:
	+ **In verse 23**, Luke truncates a lengthy period of time with a short phrase, “when many days had elapsed,” and this helps him stay on-theme to get to the fact that “the Jews plotted together to do away with him.” Luke noticed how preaching Christ brought blowback, and he wanted Theophilus to see that connection too. Other scholars have noted that these “many days” likely refer to the time mentioned in Galatians 1:15–17 when he went to Arabia.[[7]](#footnote-7) According to Galatians, Paul was in Damascus for roughly three years (Gal 1:18), but again, these specifics are not Luke’s point.[[8]](#footnote-8)
	+ **In verse 24**, Luke goes on to mention that the plot of the Jews was somehow revealed to Saul (passive voice, stressing how their desires were thwarted). It with this understanding that Luke wants Theophilus to read of how Saul escaped persecution. These opponents don’t mess around, since they manned “the gates day and night so that they might put him to death” and it is in this context that Saul was delivered.
	+ **In verse 25**, Luke mentions that Saul’s own disciples conducted a nighttime smuggling operation to help him escape—letting him “down through an opening in the wall, lowering him in a large basket.” It is significant that Saul has disciples by this point because it demonstrates the practical success of his ministry. At the same time, their desire to help him live demonstrates their understanding of the Lord’s plan to use his life for greater things. When it comes to the significance of Luke mentioning the basket, the context seems to contrast this means of transport with the open walkways of the gates, illustrating how Saul is on a team that is forced into clandestine operations. Despite having the upper hand in religious debates, they occasionally need to move in the shadows.

**Day 4 – Questions**

1. How could Saul have started preaching the Christian gospel so quickly after his conversion? What do you imagine it was like for him to see the message so differently after being saved?
2. Why do you think Luke mentions Saul’s reception in the synagogues? How does that shape our understanding of his life story?
3. Why do you think Luke emphasizes Saul’s ability to confound the Jews in the synagogues? What does this tell us about the gospel? And why is this important to see before we read about him fleeing town in a basket?

**Day 5 – Saul’s Ministry in Jerusalem (Acts 9:26–31)**

**Overview:** The following section introduces Saul’s return trip and ministry in Jerusalem. What is interesting is that Luke records this account alongside that of Saul’s Damascus ministry, and the two stories mirror each other (like how the story of Ananias mirrored that of Saul). Having said that, the parallel overlaps with the previous section (with Ananias), so, from that, it is clear that Luke is working on multiple levels (personally and geographically; mirroring Saul–Ananias, and mirroring Damascus–Jerusalem). Schnabel writes:

“There is a certain similarity between the events in Damascus and the events in Jerusalem. When Saul arrives in Damascus, Ananias hesitates to accept him (vv. 13–14), when he arrives in Jerusalem, the disciples there hesitate to welcome him (v. 26). The risen Lord’s reassurance given to Ananias (vv. 15–16) is paralleled by Barnabas’s reassurances to the Jerusalem believers (v. 27). More positively, Saul’s association with the disciples in Damascus (v. 19) and his proclamation of the gospel in the synagogues of Damascus (v. 20–22) is paralleled by his association with the disciples in Jerusalem (v. 28) and his preaching among the Greek-speaking Jews in Jerusalem (v. 29). There is a plot against Saul in Damascus (vv. 23–24) and in Jerusalem (v. 29), and an escape of Saul both in Damascus (v. 25) and in Jerusalem (v. 30).”[[9]](#footnote-9)

The pattern can be shown below:

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| **Textual Point** | **Damascus** | **Jerusalem** |
| Hesitation to accept Saul | 9:13–14 | 9:26 |
| Reassurance to accept Saul | 9:15–16 | 9:27 |
| Association with Saul | 9:19 | 9:28 |
| Proclamation of Saul | 9:20–22 | 9:29 |
| Persecution & Escape of Saul | 9:23–25 | 9:29–30 |

The effect of this structuring demonstrates how the Lord Jesus is working to reassure His people about His plans for Saul. Once the Lord’s people catch wind of what He is up to, they associate with Saul and help him advance the gospel, despite ongoing persecution. The man who was once their arch enemy is now their brother.

* **Vv. 26–27** – These verses pick back up with Saul returning to Jerusalem. And yet, just as with what happened with Ananias in Damascus, there’s hesitation on the part of the disciples to believe that the Lord really changed him. Luke says that Saul was even “trying to associate with the disciples, but they were all afraid of him, not believing that he was a disciple.” This presents the reader with a dilemma of how Saul’s status as a disciple will be vindicated. (Recall that the definition of disciple is “one whose mind is conducted by someone else.”) This is why Luke presents Barnabas as the man to argue Paul’s case: “Barnabas took hold of him and brought him to the apostles and described to them how he [Saul] had seen the Lord [true sovereign] on the road, and that He had talked to him, and how at Damascus he had spoken out boldly in the name of Jesus.” There are several points of this worth noting:
	+ Barnabas is named as the one who tries to fix the problem, and he is a man who’s already known as a sincere believer among the community (4:36–37).
	+ Barnabas tries to settle the issue by taking him “to the apostles,” and one advantage is that if he wins *them* over, they can use their voice to assure all other believers.
	+ Barnabas notes three evidences of the Lord’s sovereign work over Saul in making him a disciple:
		- *Saul saw the Lord* – This demonstrates, in language reminiscent of Isaiah’s commissioning experience (Isa 6:1), that Saul had a genuine encounter with the Lord of glory, and to see the Lord rightly means to see oneself as subservient.
		- *The Lord spoke to Saul* – This demonstrates that the Lord has conducted Saul’s mind on a personal level through what He has told him. The word of the Lord has come to guide and direct Saul.
		- *Saul spoke out in the name of Jesus* – This helps to prove that Saul was indeed a changed man. Speaking *for* Jesus is quite different from all the threats and murder he spoke against His followers. But it’s also important to see that he spoke out “boldly,” which means he did not hold back even when there was risk. Barnabas is citing how this happened “at Damascus” in order that Saul may be welcomed now in Jerusalem (which mirrors the hesitation of Ananias who cite Saul’s harm done in *Jerusalem* as reason not to welcome him in *Damascus*).
			* **Greek note:** In the three points that Barnabas makes, the Greek construction parallels the first and third statements, leaving the middle statement uniquely set apart. The phrase “that the Lord spoke to him” is perhaps the strongest point in the whole case that Saul is a disciple, because “disciple” means that Saul’s mind is conducted by the *words* of Jesus.
* **V. 28 –** Verse 28 indicates that Barnabas was successful in his appeal. Saul is now pictured as being “with them,” tying at least to the apostles (v. 27), but broadly to the disciples, of whom the apostles are a part (v. 26). Ironically, he was “moving about freely in Jerusalem,” in contrast to his original intent for those coming from Damascus. And he kept right on “speaking out boldly in the name of the Lord” as he had done in Damascus.
* **Vv. 29–30 –** Luke records how Saul’s time in preaching the sunshine was coming to a close. He soon meets another deadly form of resistance. Saul was “talking and arguing with the Hellenistic Jews,” indicating a bend toward Greek/Gentile ministry, but Luke says they were not receptive. They “were attempting to put him to death.” So, while he’s trying to call them to eternal life, they’re trying to put him to death. And it’s in this context that—yet again—persecution drives his witness *forward*. In parallel to what happened in Damascus, “the brethren learned” of Saul’s dire situation and then kept him alive in order to advance the Lord’s work in him. For that reason, they “brought him down to Caesarea”—a port city by the sea—"and sent him away to Tarsus.” Ironically, “Caesarea” weaves Saul’s story into that of Phillip (8:40), which is part of this building move towards Gentile missions—and Saul’s trip back in “Tarsus” brings him full circle, back to his homeland in a Gentile area (9:11). So the persecutor becomes the persecuted, and God uses the persecution to weave a tapestry together to show Theophilus (and us) how He advanced His gospel to Gentiles who live at the end of the earth.
* **V. 31 –** Luke closes out this story with a wide-angle lens that helps Theophilus see how Saul’s story advances the greater progress of the regional church. The story of Saul serves to support the church in Judea & Samaria, and it does so by showing how God worked in their persecutor to eventually become spiritual brothers with those in the Jerusalem church. In that respect, “the church” is a more primary character than Saul, and Saul is one thread in the larger tapestry of what God is doing for His church.
	+ Luke says “So [therefore] the church throughout all Judea and Galilee and Samaria was having peace, being built up” This not only demonstrates that Saul was the chief aggressor in the entire region—the head of the snake—but also that his conversion brought enough “peace” that they could grow (being built up). This is in direct contrast to Saul’s efforts to “destroy” believers (9:21).
	+ Luke also says that the church went on “in the fear of the Lord,” which is a reversal to how they were formerly “afraid” of Saul (9:26, same root word). The main thing to see here is that their fears are properly calibrated back to the Lord. The Lord has worked in Saul’s life to restore His people’s fear back to Himself. Again, the Lord saved Saul as a gift to His church.
	+ Lastly, Luke says that they went forth in the encouragement of the Holy Spirit, which, ties back to how Barnabas (9:27)—whose name means “son of encouragement” (4:36)—encouraged the disciples to realize that Saul was truly changed by the Lord. Moreover, the point about the “Holy Spirit” could form a literary contrast to how the story began with Saul “breathing” threats and murder (since the same root word for “breathing” is behind “Spirit,” and we see how the Holy Spirit has overcome the spiritual threat once loomed over the church).
* Luke ends by saying that the church “continued to multiply,” which paints a triumphant picture of these believers who have recently been on the run for their lives. Theophilus can see the big picture now. Saul sought to drag believers back to Jerusalem, jail them, and destroy them (v. 2), but in the end, he sees the Lord intervene, draft Saul into service, and use that to multiply His church (v. 31). From this, we see that even persecutors can’t stop the church.

**Day 5 – Questions**

1. Why is it important that Barnabas was the man to defend Saul’s conversion to others?
2. Of the three points Barnabas makes to the apostles, which one is most compelling to you? Why?
3. How does it help you to remember that nothing can stop the Lord’s work in the church?

Graphic 1 – Saul’s Journey in Acts 9:1–31[[10]](#footnote-10)

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1. Peterson, [*The Acts of the Apostles*](https://ref.ly/logosres/pntcacts?ref=Bible.Ac9.15-16&off=405&ctx=for+him+(26%3a16%E2%80%9318).+~In+each+version%2c+the), 308. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Some think they were less-than-official letters telling synagogues to assist in the Sanhedrin’s disciplinary efforts, Polhill, [*Acts*](https://ref.ly/logosres/nac26?ref=Bible.Ac9.1-2&off=229&ctx=+the+Damascus+road.+~Verse+1+picks+up+the), 233; Others see them as official extradition papers, made possible by Rome, Garland, [*Acts*](https://ref.ly/logosres/ttc65ac?ref=Bible.Ac9.1-2&off=1128&ctx=+the+pagan+nations.%0a~The+letters+that+Sau), 95. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Peterson, [*The Acts of the Apostles*](https://ref.ly/logosres/pntcacts?ref=Bible.Ac9.10-19a&off=200&ctx=t+not+in+26%3a12%E2%80%9318).+~The+risen+Lord+Jesus), 306. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. For that reason, it’s possible that bothterms are gathered from and function as a sort of wordplay on Isaiah 40:3—“Make ready the way of the Lord, Make His paths straight” cf. the same Greek terms used when Luke cites it in Luke 3:4. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Schnabel, [*Acts*](https://ref.ly/logosres/exegcommacts?ref=Bible.Ac9.19c-20&off=309&ctx=%CF%85%CE%B9%CC%94%CE%BF%CC%80%CF%82+%CF%84%CE%BF%CF%85%CD%82+%CE%B8%CE%B5%CE%BF%CF%85%CD%82).+~The+next+episode+aft), 451. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Schnabel, [*Acts*](https://ref.ly/logosres/exegcommacts?ref=Bible.Ac9.19c-20&off=4652&ctx=on+in+his+name.2129%0a~Since+Saul+arrested+), 452. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Vaughan, [*Acts*](https://ref.ly/logosres/fsgc65ac?ref=Bible.Ac9.19b-22&off=960&ctx=%3f%E2%80%99%C2%A0%E2%80%9D+(v.+21%2c+nasb).%0a~The+visit+of+Paul+to), 64. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Polhill, [*Acts*](https://ref.ly/logosres/nac26?ref=Bible.Ac9.19b-22&off=1933&ctx=tudent+of+Gamaliel.%0a~Paul+gave+another+pi), 239. In Galatians, Paul says he didn’t consult with flesh and blood or go to the apostles after being saved, but his point is that he did not need human approval for his mission. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Schnabel, [*Acts*](https://ref.ly/logosres/exegcommacts?ref=Bible.Ac9.1-30&off=15261&ctx=e+people+of+Israel.%0a~There+is+a+certain+s), 439. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Graphic from Logos Bible Software [↑](#footnote-ref-10)