



The Book of Acts
Bringing in a New Dispensation
Saul Meets Jesus
Acts 9:1-9

We have already been introduced to Saul (Acts 7:58; 8:1-3). In our passage today, we will get a closer look at him and throughout the books of Acts, he will become prominent. We will see over the course of the next several chapters and weeks that Saul will become Paul an Apostle of Jesus Christ.

One of the first questions we should ask is, why was there a need for another apostle? Jesus already had eleven whom He sent out into all the world to preach the gospel, baptizing, and teaching the obedience to His commandments. Those eleven apostles were to be His witnesses (Acts 1:8). The disciples were the little flock Jesus referred to in Luke 12:22,32.

When a replacement was needed for Judas to round out the apostles to twelve, Matthias was selected (Acts 1:26). Why were 12 apostles necessary? It was a future necessity. The twelve apostles will given authority in the kingdom to judge the twelve tribes of Israel. Jesus made that prophecy in Luke 22:30.

“And I will appoint unto you a kingdom, as my Father hath appointed unto me; That ye may eat and drink at my table in my kingdom, and sit on thrones judging the twelve tribes of Israel.”

From that passage we learn several things:

1. The twelve apostles are appointed a Kingdom.
2. Jesus is also appointed a Kingdom.
3. The twelve apostles will eat and drink with Jesus in the Kingdom.
4. The twelve apostles will sit on thrones in the Kingdom.
5. The twelve apostles will judge the twelve tribes of Israel in the Kingdom.

It is clear, there's was a Kingdom promise and ministry. The twelve apostles had to do with the twelve tribes of Israel. While Jesus will judge nations in the Kingdom (Isaiah 2:4), the apostles will judge Israel.

With Judas disqualified, a replacement had to be found. *Why didn't God put Paul into the group of the twelve? Why was a thirteenth added? Was God planning something new?*

We will attempt to answer that question as we move forward in the book of Acts.

Verse 1 —

And Saul. This is the second time we see Saul in the book of Acts (Acts 8:1-3). Between 8:3 and chapter 9:1, Luke wrote of the results of Saul's persecution of the ekklesia. The assembly in Jerusalem was scattered and the word of the Lord, the Gospel of the Kingdom, was preached throughout Judaea, Samaria, and Africa.

Persecution often creates boldness (Acts 4:29) among the persecuted. Therefore, rather than shutting the *movement* down, the word of the Lord spread.

Luke picks up his narrative in 9:1 with **Saul** who was **yet breathing out threatenings and slaughter against the disciples of the Lord**. The word **yet** is *ετι* in Greek, it translates "still." In 8:3, Saul was creating havoc in the assembly and putting men and women into prison. It is difficult to know exactly how much time has past, maybe a year, but now he is still at it. We see here an image of Saul **breathing** anger.

Scripture is filled with these kinds of statements:

- Job writes about God, quoting Eliphaz, "By the blast of God they perish, And by the breath of his nostrils are they consumed." (Job 4:9).
- The Psalmist wrote, "Then the channels of waters were seen, and the foundations of the world were discovered at thy rebuke, O LORD, at the blast of the breath of thy nostrils." (Psalm 18:15).
- King David, in the Psalms (27:12), wrote of false witnesses who came against him, **breathing** out cruelty.
- Ezekiel wrote, "And I will pour out mine indignation upon thee, I will blow against thee in the fire of my wrath, and deliver thee into the hand of brutish men, and skillful to destroy." (Ezekiel 21:31).

I picture Paul's anger like a raging bull, widening his stance, stomping at the dirt, growling and breathing audibly.

The Greek word for **slaughter** is often translated as *murder*. After Paul's transformation, in Romans 1:29, he described those who did not like to keep God in their knowledge as, "Being filled with all unrighteousness, fornication, wickedness, covetousness, maliciousness; full of envy, and **murder**..."

The passage does not state the **disciples of the Lord were slaughtered**, but that the threat was there. And while **threatenings and slaughter** do not suggest that **Saul** actually killed disciples himself, murder, however, certainly seemed to be his intention.

Later in Acts 22:4, Paul said, "*I persecuted this way unto the death, binding and delivering into prisons both men and women.*"

To accomplish his task of destroying the disciples of the Lord, Saul **went unto the high priest** requesting permission to go after those who were *scattered* (8:1). This confirms that these **disciples** were Jews, not Gentiles. The **high priest** would only have authority over Jews.

Verse 2 —

Therefore Saul requested **letters to Damascus to the synagogues**. The **letters** would give him access to the synagogues, and give him legal permission to arrest and extradite the *Jesus* believers (See also Acts 22:5; 26:10,11). Saul was not acting as a rogue agent, rather he was on official business, sanctioned by the ruling religious leaders. He believed he was advancing in Judaism, doing something honorable and required under the law of Moses (Galatians 1:14).

Often teachers explain how Saul went into the churches to find the Christians, but the **disciples** were not in *churches* as we understand churches today. The **disciples Saul** was after were all Jews.

Where did they congregate and worship? In the **synagogues**. These new believers still lived under the Law of Moses, and still went to the Jewish synagogue.

The Synagogue was completely Jewish. (Note: In his letters Paul never uses the word synagogue):

- Synagogue worship meetings were on the Sabbath, and the second and fifth days of the week. Later the believers probably met in homes. But here the synagogue was the center of their lives.
- Synagogue practiced judicial functions. They could decide legal matters and they would decide matters among themselves (There was a problem with this later in Corinth; 1 Corinthians 6:1).
- The Synagogue is what gave character to the Jewish faith. It was a gathering place where important community affairs would be discussed.¹

If he found any of this way, that is, any who believed in Jesus as the Messiah. These faithful Jews Saul was after taught that belief in Jesus as Messiah, along with obedience to the law of Moses was *the only way* to enter the Kingdom. These Jews followed the doctrine (teaching) of the twelve Apostles who were taught by Jesus (Matthew 28:19,20).

Saul was determined to arrest these believers in Jesus as the Messiah, both men, and women, and bring them bound to Jerusalem. Jerusalem was the center of Jewish religious power, governed by the Sanhedrin, or council. The believers in **this way** would face trial there and potentially be put to death.

Why did **Saul** harbor so much hatred for these Jewish believers? Maybe he was so steeped in his Jewish tradition that he failed to at least consider whether Jesus was the Christ (Messiah). Tradition is not always a bad thing. Some traditions are good, but tradition can often blind us to the truth. We should make it a habit of questioning our traditional assumptions.

Verse 3 —

¹ Feinberg, C. L. "Synagogue." Ed. D. R. W. Wood et al. *New Bible dictionary* 1996 : n. Print.

As he journeyed. The Greek word for **journeyed** is often translated as *walked*. **He came near Damascus.** This city, often called the oldest city in the world, was about 135 miles north of Jerusalem. It still exists today. Many of the Jews who were scattered in Jerusalem made their way there because it was a fairly large and wealthy city, and perhaps many of them had relatives who lived there. There are some who estimate that thirty to forty thousand Jews lived there during this period, and there were multiple synagogues in Damascus (Acts 9:20).

The journey would have taken about six days by foot. The narrative doesn't state if **Saul** and his entourage walked; or did they ride horses? It is unlikely horses were used, as most Jews did not ride horses. Evidence leans toward walking (as we will see later). It doesn't change the account, either way, but often we see paintings of Saul on the Damascus road and he is riding a horse.

On the way to **Damascus, suddenly there shined round about him a light from heaven.** Literally, a light *flashed around*. The Greek word is *peristrapto*: *peri* = *around*, *astrapō* = *to lighten*.

Verse 4 —

With the flash of light around him, Saul **fell to the earth** (this is where artists often have Saul falling off his horse!). To see what is actually happening here we only have to look at Scripture to see that falling prostrate, often in terror was a standard response to encounters with God.

- Ezekiel saw the appearance of the likeness of the glory of the LORD. When he saw it, he described that he “fell upon my face...” (Ezekiel 1:28).
- Daniel saw an angel and wrote “when he came near, I was afraid, and fell upon my face.” (Daniel 8:17).
- Peter, James, and John, were enveloped by a “bright cloud” and heard a “voice” from heaven, and when “they heard it, they fell on their face and were greatly afraid.” (Matthew 17:56)

Typically in the case of these encounters the one who falls down is told immediately to get up, or the one who is afraid is told to not fear. But no command like that is given to Saul. In verse 6 he will be told to get up, but first Jesus has stern words for him.

A question is asked of him from a **voice he heard “Saul, Saul, why persecutest thou me?”** In Scripture when a person is named twice, **Saul, Saul**, He hears the question, but has no idea who is speaking.

Verse 5 —

Who art thou, Lord? He is not using the word *lord* because he knows it is Jesus. He clearly doesn't know, which is why he asks. When we use the word Lord, we are referring to God, or Jesus. Here the word Saul uses is *kurios* which is equivalent to us saying “Sir.” is a word of respect. The voice identifies himself as **Jesus whom thou persecutest.** To persecute *this way* is to persecute Jesus.

Then Jesus makes the statement, **it is hard for thee to kick against the pricks.** This is believed to be an ancient proverb that Saul would have recognized. The word can be translated as *goads*. “It is hard to kick

against the *goads*." A goad was a sharp stick used to move oxen along. As the oxen were prodded, or *goaded by the sharp stick, they would kick against it*.

You may remember Saul's teacher *Gamaliel*, in chapter 5, had warned the Jewish leaders to leave these believing Jews alone because if the movement was *of God, you cannot overthrow it* (Acts 5:39).

One cannot fight the Jesus movement without fighting God. Saul undoubtedly had heard this remark from his teacher, and yet, he kicks against it and therefore fights God. I think what we see here in this statement is Jesus informing Saul that he is fighting against God.

Verse 6 —

Luke says that upon hearing this from Jesus himself, he was **trembling and astonished**, or literally he was overcome with dread and terror. As we have seen, through Scripture, when someone received a supernatural revelation, which are few and far between, they were nearly always in awe, or afraid, and they typically fell on their faces. As we have seen in the passages we looked at above about the response to seeing an appearance of God, or an angel, or Christ's glory, we shouldn't be so cavalier by saying things like, "God spoke to me..."

Saul realized he had met his match.

It is at this point where most evangelicals say that **Saul** became a believer by grace through faith. But notice his question, **what wilt thou have me to do?** If this was the moment of salvation by grace through faith and not of works, we should expect the response of Jesus to be, "Do? What do you mean, Saul? Why there is nothing you must do, I am giving you a gift." Jesus says nothing of the sort. He doesn't say, believe in me and you will have everlasting life. His reply was, **Arise, and go into the city, and it shall be told thee what thou must do.** *There was no evangelistic message given to Saul.*

Verse 7 —

Luke adds a bit of commentary on the men who were with Saul. They **stood speechless, hearing a voice, but seeing no man**. The Greek used here for the word voice carries the idea of hearing a sound, but not understanding.

Later when *Paul* recounts this Damascus road encounter (22:9), he says, *they heard not the voice*. It appears to be a contradiction. Did they hear a voice or not? The word **voice** means to "hear with understanding" and they heard "not." While it gets a bit lost in English, both 9:7 and 22:9 are saying the same thing. They heard something but did not distinguish the words spoken. The point being, the message was only given to Saul.

Verse 8 —

After he got up, as instructed, he was blind. **He saw no man**, even though his **eyes were opened**.

There are miraculous blindings in Scripture for judgment against the wrongdoers.

- Genesis 19:11
- 2 Kings 6:17-20

Saul is under a judgment from God. God is forcing him into something. What it is, he does not know. He has no choice but to obey.

But they led him by the hand, which may indicate none of them were on horseback, **and brought him to Damascus**. We see a great irony here in that Saul had come to “lead” the followers of Jesus “bound” from Damascus as captives (9:2,21), now vanquished, Saul must be “led by the hand” and be “brought by hand into Damascus.” God works in mysterious ways.

How far they were from the city we don’t know, nor are we told how long it took them to lead Saul there.

Verse 9 —

And he was three days without sight, and neither did eat nor drink. This fasting could be his form of *repentance*, which was necessary for the kingdom gospel. Repentance does not mean to *be sorry for sin*, it means, to *have a change of mind*. Did it take Saul three days without food or water to have a changed mind? Some have said that the three days represents the three days with the time between Jesus’s death and the resurrection. That is not implausible, but it seems more likely to connect the resurrection with Saul receiving his sight (not just the duration of his blindness).

We do not want to build a doctrine of fasting from a historical event. While the practice might be profitable Christians in the dispensation of grace are not instructed or commanded to fast. Neither is there any command to tell us not to fast. Nonetheless, for a Jew, fasting could be for a sign of mourning.