

Acts of the Apostles: Bible Study Outline #3

Overview / Outline

- **G. The Witnessing Spreads to Samaria and Beyond; Saul's Conversion (8:1–9:43)**

Summary: With the death of Stephen and the demoralizing impact it must have had on many of the saints in Jerusalem, the high priest and the Sanhedrin became even more embolden to pursue the course of persecution. The one who would lead the persecution against the church was a devout Pharisee, Saul of Tarsus. His efforts to eradicate all who proclaimed Jesus as the Christ would result in great harm to the church in Jerusalem. Luke records: As for Saul, he made havoc of the church, entering every house, and dragging off men and women, committing them to prison. (Acts 8:3)

The word "havoc" means to cause immense pain and suffering; to ravage or devastate. It is a word used to describe the merciless attack of a wild beast as it tears its prey to pieces. Saul attempted to utterly destroy the church in Jerusalem by "entering every house, and dragging off men and women, committing them to prison." Although the Sanhedrin had no power to exercise the death penalty under Roman occupation, they had the power to imprison those who were found guilty of crimes against Jewish religious and civil law. However, to keep peace, the Romans would often concede to the demands of the high priest and the council and execute those who were deemed as troublemakers. Anyone who proclaimed Jesus Christ is Lord and Savior, and that He had been resurrected from the dead would be charged with blasphemy and inciting civil unrest. Unless they renounced their faith in Christ their fate would be imprisonment and death. From Saul's (Paul's) own words, we find many did renounce their faith. "Indeed, I myself thought I must do many things contrary to the name of Jesus of Nazareth. This I also did in Jerusalem, and many of the saints I shut up in prison, having received authority from the chief priests; and when they were put to death, I cast my vote against them. And I punished them often in every synagogue and compelled them to blaspheme; and being exceedingly enraged against them, I persecuted them even to foreign cities." (Acts 26:9-11)

It may seem strange that a man like Saul could be so vicious and merciless in persecuting others – especially a man who, as a student of Gamaliel, had been educated to be a gentleman and a scholar. And yet his background as a Pharisee and his fanatical devotion to the traditions of the fathers compelled Saul to eradicate every semblance of Christianity from off the face of the earth.

However, Saul's persecution had just the opposite effect. Rather than destroy the disciples of Jesus Christ, those who fled from Jerusalem and the surrounding countryside would take the message of a risen Savior with them everywhere they went. Saul's persecution against the church did more to spread of Christianity than it did to stamp it out. In fact, Saul single-handedly helped fulfill the prophecy of Jesus Christ. The gospel of Christ had already spread throughout the city of Jerusalem and the surrounding towns and villages as the apostles performed great signs and wonders. The irrefutable message that Jesus Christ had risen from the dead and was now at the right hand of God had persuaded countless thousands, including many of the priests. And now, with the persecution of Saul, the gospel would be taken into Samaria through the preaching of Philip (Acts 8:4-25), . And eventually into all the world beginning with the conversion of the Ethiopian eunuch, the treasurer of Candace, queen of the Ethiopians (Acts 8:26-40).

- Persecution breaks out in Jerusalem; the local congregation is dispersed (8:1-4)
- Philip's fruitful ministry in Samaria (8:5-13)
- Peter and John sent to Samaria; the Samaritans receive holy spirit (8:14-17)
- The former magician Simon tries to buy the free gift of holy spirit (8:18-24)
- Philip sent to preach to an Ethiopian eunuch (8:25-40)

When we come to the ninth chapter of Acts we find Saul, "still breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord" (Acts 9:1). He had set out for the city of Damascus, with letters from the high priest, to purge the synagogues there of every man or woman who was of "the Way." His purpose was to bring them bound back to Jerusalem where they would stand trial and face an almost certain death. However, Saul never completed his mission.

Jesus, whom Saul had believed was just another messianic imposter, spoke to him from a blinding light out of heaven, proclaiming "I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting" (Acts 9:5).

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We can only imagine the thoughts that must have raced through Saul's mind at that moment. He came face to face with the Savior whom he had denied, and whose disciples he had sought to annihilate. Despite the claims made by many in the denominational world, Saul was not saved on the road to Damascus. He was told to go into the city of Damascus and there he would be told what he must do. But there is no disputing the fact that in one brief moment of time, Saul went from unbeliever to believer.

Three days later Saul met Ananias, a disciple of the Lord, who told the former enemy of Christ what he must do to be saved. There was no need to tell Saul to believe or repent. His encounter with Jesus on the road to Damascus was clearly enough to produce faith in Jesus was the Christ. And the fact that he had neither eaten nor drank for three days suggests the immense depth of Saul's sorrow – godly sorrow that would lead any man to repentance. All Ananias need to say to Saul was, "Arise and be baptized, and wash away your sins, calling on the name of the Lord" (Acts 22:16). If Saul's encounter with Jesus Christ was not enough to convince a skeptic that Jesus had been resurrected from the dead, the events at the close of chapter nine would offer additional undeniable proof. Her name was Tabitha, which is also translated Dorcus. She was known for her good works of charity. When her friends heard that the apostle Peter was in the vicinity, they called for him. Upon arriving and seeing how many were weeping over the passing of their friend, Peter sent them out of the room, knelt down to pray, and then said, "Tabitha, arise" (Acts 9:40). She did. The impact was immediate and widespread – "many believed on the Lord" (Acts 9:42). Tabitha was living, walking, and talking proof of the power of the resurrection. And more than that, she was evidence that the power of the resurrected Christ had been bestowed on His apostles.

- Saul travels to Damascus to persecute the disciples (9:1, 2)
- In a light from heaven, Jesus reveals himself to Saul (9:3-9)
- The disciple Ananias sent to help Saul (9:10-19a)
- In Damascus, Saul preaches about Jesus (9:19b-25)
- Saul visits Jerusalem and speaks boldly in Jesus' name (9:26-30)
- The congregation throughout the whole of Judea, Galilee, and Samaria enters a period of peace (9:31)
- Peter ministers in the cities of the coastal plain; heals Aeneas in Lydda (9:32-35)
- Peter resurrects generous Dorcas in Joppa (9:36-43)

• H. The Witnessing Reaches Uncircumcised Gentiles in Caesarea (10:1-48)

Summary: Up to this time in the history of the early church the disciples of Jesus Christ had only been Jews or Jewish proselytes (Gentiles who converted to Judaism). However, there are numerous prophecies in the Old Testament, as well as a number of teachings of Jesus that point to a time when Gentiles will become part of the family of God. Many Jews who read these Old Testament prophecies assumed it meant Gentiles would convert to Judaism when the Messiah came to establish a kingdom on earth – which was a common misconception among Jews during the last two centuries leading up to the time of Christ. The kingdom for which many Jews hoped for was an earthly kingdom over which the Messiah would rule from His throne in Jerusalem, and that He would subdue all the nations, and they would convert to Judaism.

It's not until we come to the tenth chapter of the book of Acts do we find the fulfillment of all the prophecies concerning the conversion of Gentiles. Peter would be the man whom God chose to take this message to the household of a prominent Godfearing Gentile, Cornelius – a Roman centurion. However, to prepare Peter for this mission, the Lord revealed to Peter in a vision that nothing the Lord has "cleansed" from this time forward shall be considered "unclean" – foods was a metaphor for people. Peter soon realized: "In truth I perceive that God shows no partiality. But in every nation whoever fears Him and works righteousness is accepted by Him." (Acts 10:34-35)

- Army officer Cornelius sees a vision and sends for Peter (10:1-8)
- Peter's vision of cleansed animals (10:9-16)
- Peter visits Cornelius, and Cornelius tells about his vision (10:17-33)
- Peter proclaims the good news to Gentiles; "God is not partial" (10:34-43)
- Gentiles receive holy spirit and get baptized (10:44-48)