

# ***“Amazing Grace”***

***(BC @ AD)***

**Acts 9:1-22**

May 17, 2015

## **INTRO:**

This weekend in Syria, not too far from Damascus, our country sent in our elite, military “Special Forces” to deal with a person & portion of our arch enemies – ISIS. In short, we sent our Special Forces to Syria and took the life of an evil man & evil men... it’s what they do.

(Note cultural response...)

By contrast, when dealing with one of His arch enemies in Syria, not too far from Damascus, our Christ personally went to confront, convict, and convert the equivalent of ISIS (Saul of Tarsus)... In the process, Christ also sent in “special forces” (Ananias). However, don’t miss the difference... Whereas our Special Forces go and “take” life, the Lord’s special forces (Acts 1:8) go to GIVE life, in the name of Jesus... its what WE do.

Hence... we are the people of AMAZING GRACE – Amen!

SAUL / PAUL in Context:

Church history is replete with accounts such as these, which highlight the marvelous power of the gospel to transform sinners. **But no transformation is as remarkable, or has had such far-reaching implications for history, as the conversion of Saul of Tarsus. So significant an event was his conversion that Scripture records it no less than three times** (cf. [Acts 22:1-16](#); [26:4-18](#)).

# PREVIEW: BC @ AD

## I. BC (Before Christ)

- Sinners (vv.1-2)

## II. @ (At Conversion)

- Savior (vv.3-5)
- Surrender (v.6)
- Speechless Support (vv.7-8)
- Seek (v.9)
- Saints (v.10)
- Straight Street Sauls (v.11)
- Specific (v.12)
- Scared (vv.13-14)
- Sent (v.15)
- Suffer (v.16)
- Say (v.17)
- Sight (v.18)
- Strengthened (v.19a)

## III. AD (After Death – to self)

- Servants (v.19b)
- Sharing (v.20)
- Supernatural [transformation] (v.21)
- Single-minded (v.22)

## **I. B.C.** (vv.1-2)

**Person** (Saul vs. Stephen & Philip)

<sup>1</sup> *Now Saul, still breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord...*

**Priest/priests**

*...went to the high priest,*

<sup>2</sup> *and asked for letters from him to the synagogues at Damascus,*

**People of Peace**

*so that if he found any belonging to the Way, both men and women, he might bring them bound to Jerusalem.*

- “Now Saul” = literary tool to redirect our attention...
- “Saul” = focus is now intentionally placed on Saul/Paul (as opposed to Philip in the previous passage)
- “still breathing” = active engagement in the process of...
- “threats & murder” = Saul is “ravaging the church”
- “against the disciples of the Lord” = “Church” (followers)
- Saul “went to the high priest & asked for letters from him to the synagogues at Damascus...” = “The religious often come together against the redeemed.”
- “if he found any belonging to the Way” = hunting Christians!
- “both men & women” = no civilities toward any Christians
- “bound to Jerusalem” = discovered in Damacus, dragged to Jerusalem

## II. @ (vv. 3-19a)

### Prince of Peace

<sup>3</sup> *As he was traveling, it happened that he was approaching Damascus, and suddenly a light from heaven flashed around him;*

<sup>4</sup> *and he fell to the ground and heard a voice saying to him, "Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting Me?"*

<sup>5</sup> *And he said, "Who are You, Lord?" And He said, "I am Jesus whom you are persecuting,*

The use of the human, earthly name "Jesus" ([v. 5](#)) "rather than a divine title would have put everything into focus for Saul,"

- NIV Application Commentary

### Purpose

<sup>6</sup> *but get up and enter the city, and it will be told you what you must do."*

**That a commission is included here is implied by the words "you will be told what you must do" ([v. 6](#); cf. [v. 15](#)).**

In [26:16-18](#) Paul reports that he received a commission as part of his encounter with Christ, and in [22:15](#) that it was communicated by Ananias. This is typical of Luke's style of introducing a concept and developing it later.

Paul later describes his having seen the risen Christ as part of his qualification for apostleship ([1 Cor. 9:1](#)), along with his receiving a specific commission from Christ; both these elements are met through the Damascus experience. **Paul describes elsewhere what he received in Damascus: "Through him and for his name's sake, we received grace and apostleship to call people from among all the Gentiles to the obedience that comes from faith" ([Rom. 1:5](#)).**

- NIV Application Commentary

## Posse

<sup>7</sup> *The men who traveled with him stood speechless, hearing the voice but seeing no one.*

<sup>8</sup> *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.*

## Priorities

<sup>9</sup> *And he was three days without sight, and neither ate nor drank.*

An influential study by K. Stendahl claims that Paul's Damascus experience was a call to be a missionary to the Gentiles, not a conversion. Since then there has been a shift in emphasis from looking at this event as a commission rather than a conversion. Indeed, the accounts in Acts emphasize the call because of Luke's purpose in

describing the Gentile mission. But in Paul's letters when he describes this experience, he emphasizes not the call but the contrast between his former life in Judaism and his present life in Christ ([Gal. 1:13-17](#); [Phil. 3:4-9](#)). **Paul's radical break with Judaism and change in life in Acts can be explained *only* in terms of conversion. We conclude that while the emphasis in Acts is on the call, it also includes a conversion.**

**In Damascus the blinded Saul follows the most intense type of fast, spending three days without eating or drinking ([v. 9](#)). People engaged in such fasts only if they were repenting or seeking God's face. Both are involved here (cf. [v. 11](#), where Ananias is told Paul is praying).**

- NIV Application Commentary

## **Opportunity**

<sup>10</sup> *Now there was a disciple at Damascus named Ananias; and the Lord said to him in a vision, "Ananias." And he said, "Here I am, Lord."*

<sup>11</sup> *And **the Lord said to him, "Get up and go to the street called Straight, and inquire at the house of Judas for a man from Tarsus named Saul, for he is praying,***

CONTEXT:

**"Straight Street" (v. 11) is still identifiable today.** "The present *Darb al- Mustiqim* ('Straight Street'), otherwise known as *Suq et-Tawileh* ('Long Bazaar'), probably follows the line of that ancient street." Saul is described to Ananias as "a man from Tarsus" (v. 11), which Paul later describes as "no ordinary city" (21:39). **Tarsus was a fortified trading center even before 2000 B.C. It was the principal city of Cilicia, the most southeasterly part of Asia Minor (in pre-sent-day southern Turkey). It was a city of great culture. Though Saul was born there, he was "brought up" in Jerusalem (22:3), but he would have had some acquaintance with Greek culture, which would have prepared him to be the apostle to the Gentiles.** - NIV Application Commentary

**Only** (obedience is personal & specific)

<sup>12</sup> *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."*

ANANIAS WAS A wise choice to help Saul at this time for "he was a devout observer of the law and highly respected by all the Jews living there" (22:12). **As with Peter and Cornelius (10:1-23), God's arrangements are confirmed by a double vision (vv. 10, 12). Visions occur often in Acts when God intervenes to direct the church into some new thing.** The Greek of 9:11b-12 begins with "for behold" (*idou gar*)—an expression used to announce that "something surprising follows, something worthy of note (cf. [Luke 1:44, 48; 2:10; 17:21](#))." As Gaventa points out, "In this instance two developments account for the *idou gar*: (1) Saul is praying, and (2) Saul saw Ananias come so that he might be healed."

- NIV Application Commentary

## Opposition

<sup>13</sup> *But Ananias answered, "Lord, I have heard from many about this man, how much harm he did to Your saints at Jerusalem;*

<sup>14</sup> *and here he has authority from the chief priests to bind all who call on Your name."*

<sup>15</sup> *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;*

Ananias's protest is understandable, considering all that Saul had done to the "saints in Jerusalem" and had been planning to do in Damascus ([vv. 13-14](#)). But his willingness to obey immediately, after the Lord's explanation ([vv. 15-16](#)), is commendable. So is his magnanimous act of "placing his hands on Saul" and addressing him as "brother Saul" ([v. 17](#)). **According to the Lord's description to Ananias of his plans for Saul, the latter will go to "the Gentiles," "their kings," and "the people of Israel" ([v. 15](#)). The order, though different from that in the commission Jesus gave ([1:8](#)), is significant. It "moves from those who receive Paul's preaching (Gentiles) to those who hear without receiving (kings) to those who reject it (sons of Israel)."**

- NIV Application Commentary

<sup>16</sup> *for I will show him how much he must suffer for My name's sake."*

**Right at the start of his spiritual pilgrimage, Saul is informed that he will suffer for the name of Jesus ([v. 16](#)).**

**Suffering is a basic aspect of following Christ. But before Paul experiences this cross, he will experience Christ's power:.**

**Suffering and discipleship.** This became a standard aspect of discipleship teaching in the early church, for Jesus' basic call to discipleship was to a cross (e.g., [Matt. 10:38](#); [16:24](#)).

While Saul encountered more sufferings than many other obedient Christians, we must remember that suffering for Christ is a normal part of Christianity and it should come into standard introductions to Christianity for new believers.

- NIV Application Commentary

## **Obedience**

*<sup>17</sup> So 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.**"*

Ananias says that he has come so that Paul "may see again and be filled with the Holy Spirit" ([v. 17](#)). Though there is no record that he was filled with the Spirit, we have no reason to doubt that this happened.

- NIV Application Commentary

## Outcome

<sup>18</sup> *And immediately there fell from his eyes something like scales, and he regained his sight, and he got up and was baptized;*

<sup>19</sup> *and he took food and was strengthened.*

**The last thing Saul ever intended to do was to become a Christian. But he was, in his own words, "grasped by Jesus Christ" ([Phil. 3:12](#)).**

## III. A.D.

### **Fresh Fruit!**

(vv.19b-22)

**Conversion and Commission always go together!**

*Christian Fellowship*

*Now for several days he was with the disciples who were at Damascus...*

**QUOTE:** A professing Christian who prefers the company of the people of the world is probably still one of them. – John Mac.

## *Proclaim/share the Gospel*

**20** *and immediately he began to proclaim Jesus in the synagogues, saying, “He is the Son of God.”*

**QUOTE:** “Before, he said his prayers, now, he prayed them.”  
- Matthew Henry

## *Amazing Transformation*

**21** *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?”*

**QUOTE :** The Spirit transformed Saul in two fundamental ways. First, He took Saul's natural strengths and refined them. Saul was a gifted natural leader, with strong will power. He was a man of strong convictions, a self-starter, bold, a master at using his time and talents, a motivated individual, and a profoundly gifted thinker and speaker.

The Holy Spirit also eliminated undesirable characteristics and replaced them with desirable ones. He replaced Saul's cruel hatred with love; his restless, aggressive spirit with peace; his rough, hard-nosed treatment of people with gentleness; his pride with humility.

Only the Spirit of God can so thoroughly sanctify a life

## *Applied Apologetics*

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

1. Seek out the lost.
2. Create missional context.
3. Contextualize without compromise.
4. Always be respectful & accept your limitations.
5. Always follow the Holy Spirit's biblical leadings.
6. Remember: Faith comes by hearing the Word of God.
7. Active listening in love-centered conversations is essential.
8. Missional conversations often build missional relationships.
9. Missional relationships under-gird pillars of eternal bridges.
10. Without love, we are clashing cymbals & a resounding gong.

**QUOTE:** Paul's extreme zeal for the traditions of the fathers ([Gal. 1:14](#)) took him to Damascus to arrest followers of a religion that contradicted these traditions. On the way he had an encounter with Jesus and received a commission that took him on a completely opposite path. He became the apostle to the Gentiles. As an apostle he knew he was the bearer of verbally inspired truth. We today can read his letters, which form more than a quarter of the New Testament and give to them the authority we would accord to the words of Christ himself.

**1 Corinthians 2:6-13** climaxes with these words: "This is what we speak, not in words taught us by human wisdom but in words taught by the Spirit, expressing spiritual truths in spiritual words."

This is why Paul could claim absolute authority for his teachings. He said, "If anyone does not obey our instruction in this letter, take special note of him. Do not associate with him, in order that he may feel ashamed" ([2 Thess. 3:14](#)).

*FYI... next week (vv.23-35) = **Persistent Persecution!***

### **Features typical of biblical conversions.**

(1) Conversion comes as a result of a divine initiative.

(2) There is a personal encounter with Christ ([vv. 4-6](#)). We all meet Jesus in different ways; but if we are converted, we have met him and entered into a personal relationship with him. Jesus said that eternal life is to know God and Jesus Christ ([John 17:3](#)). D. A. Carson comments on this verse, "Eternal life is not so much everlasting life as personal knowledge of the Everlasting One."

(3) Paul surrendered to the Lordship of Christ.... Roy Clements says he does not "use the phrases 'decided for Christ' or 'committed to Christ,' though decision and commitment are certainly involved... Conversion is at root not a decision, nor a commitment, but a surrender to the supreme authority of Jesus."

(4) We see the important place of the body of Christ in the conversion process. Stott says, "It must have been music to his ears." The archenemy of the church was welcomed as a brother; the dreaded fanatic was received as a member of the family... There you see the love of the encourager reaching out to a new believer in spite of his past.

(5) Though Saul's conversion is individual, it is not individualistic. Gaventa points out that he "is not converted in order to savor the experience but in order to witness." ... Thus, along with his conversion came a commission to witness. Though we may not receive a specific commissioning to apostleship as Paul did, all Christians are called to be witnesses for Christ. Once we come to him, we become his ambassadors ([2 Cor. 5:20](#)) and have the responsibility and high privilege of representing him on earth and communicating his message to the world.

**(Per John MacArthur):** From the dramatic story of Saul's conversion emerge seven features of the transformed life:

1. Faith in the Savior,
2. Fervency in supplication,
3. Faithfulness in service,
4. Filling of the Spirit,
5. Fellowship with the saints,
6. Fervency in speaking,
7. Fearlessness in suffering.

**NOTE:** As Paul said in [1 Timothy 1:16](#), the fact that the worst of sinners could be converted is a sign that the least likely people can be saved. Such realities should encourage us to dream about, pray for, and work toward the conversion of resistant people and enemies of the gospel

## CLOSE:

At a young age, **John Newton** went to sea. Like most sailors of his day, he lived a life of rebellion and debauchery. For several years, he worked on slave ships, capturing slaves for sale to the plantations of the New World. So low did he sink that at one point he became a slave himself, captive of another slave trader. Eventually, he became the **captain of his own slave ship**.

On his tombstone is inscribed the following epitaph, written by Newton himself: "John Newton, clerk, once an infidel and Libertine, a servant of slavers in Africa, was, by the rich mercy of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, preserved, restored, pardoned, and appointed to preach the Faith he had long labored to destroy." When he penned the beloved hymn "Amazing Grace," he knew (like Saul who became Paul...) firsthand the truths his song proclaims.

# Let's Pray!

## BRIDGING CONTEXTS:

Paul's conversion is sometimes described as a typical biblical conversion. But it has many atypical features. It was triggered by a post-resurrection appearance of Christ. It was a sudden turnaround in direction with no evidence that he had been moving toward Christianity (as is the case with most converts). His was a conversion like that of C. S. Lewis, who said, "I gave in and admitted that God was God and knelt and prayed: perhaps, that night, the most dejected and reluctant convert in all England." The last thing Saul ever intended to do was to become a Christian. But he was, in his own words, "grasped by Jesus Christ" ([Phil. 3:12](#)). In the features given below, however, his conversion is typical of biblical conversions.

### **Features typical of biblical conversions.**

(1) Conversion comes as a result of a divine initiative. Jesus initiated the encounter that resulted in Paul's conversion ([vv. 3-6](#)). Paul had no qualms about admitting that he did nothing to merit salvation. On the contrary, he was, in his words, "the worst of sinners" ([1 Tim. 1:16](#)). But, he goes on to say, he was shown mercy so that he might be an example of the unlimited patience of God. Thus, no one can boast of salvation as something he or she has achieved or deserved ([Eph. 2:9](#)). Paul explains the process of conversion in a way reminiscent of his own experience when he says, "For God, who said, 'Let light shine out of darkness,' made his light shine in our hearts to give us the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ" ([2 Cor. 4:6](#)).

(2) There is a personal encounter with Christ ([vv. 4-6](#)). We all meet Jesus in different ways; but if we are converted, we have met him and entered into a personal relationship with him. Jesus said that eternal life is to know God and Jesus Christ ([John 17:3](#)). D. A. Carson comments on this verse, "Eternal life is not so much everlasting life as personal knowledge of the Everlasting One."

(3) Paul surrendered to the Lordship of Christ. While the word *kyrios* in [verse 5](#) can mean either "Lord" or "sir," there is no doubt that what we have here is a deep surrender of Saul's life to Christ. This is evidenced by his total fast for three days, indicating that until he completed the process that began on the road, he was not going to cease from his intense quest for God. Such surrender is indeed the norm for all followers of Jesus. Paul's later radical calls to discipleship imply nothing short of total surrender to the Lordship of Christ. Roy Clements says he does not "use the phrases 'decided for Christ' or 'committed to Christ,' though decision and commitment are certainly involved... Conversion is at root not a decision, nor a commitment, but a surrender to the supreme authority of Jesus."

(4) We see the important place of the body of Christ in the conversion process. While Paul was eager to show that the gospel he received had not been taught to him by any human but was given by the Lord himself ([Gal. 1](#)), others in the body of Christ played an important role in his conversion and early Christian life. Through baptism he was incorporated to this body ([Acts 9:18](#)). Then he "spent several days with the disciples in Damascus" ([v. 19](#)). The thing that stands out in our passage is the role of the two encouragers, Ananias and Barnabas. Probably the first words Saul heard from a Christian after his conversion were, "Brother Saul" ([v. 17](#)). Stott says, "It must have been music to his ears." The archenemy of the church was welcomed as a brother; the dreaded fanatic was received as a member of the family... There you see the love of the encourager reaching out to a new believer in spite of his past.

(5) Though Saul's conversion is individual, it is not individualistic. Gaventa points out that he "is not converted in order to savor the experience but in order to witness." Thus, along with his conversion came a commission to witness. Though we may not receive a specific commissioning to apostleship as Paul did, all

Christians are called to be witnesses for Christ. Once we come to him, we become his ambassadors ([2 Cor. 5:20](#)) and have the responsibility and high privilege of representing him on earth and communicating his message to the world.

Paul was eager to show that he did not depend on human instruments to receive his basic message ([Gal. 1](#)) since, as an apostle, he also was a revelatory spokesman. Note his claim for verbal inspiration in [1 Corinthians 2:6-13](#), which climaxes with these words: "This is what we speak, not in words taught us by human wisdom but in words taught by the Spirit, expressing spiritual truths in spiritual words."

This is why Paul could claim absolute authority for his teachings. He said, "If anyone does not obey our instruction in this letter, take special note of him. Do not associate with him, in order that he may feel ashamed" ([2 Thess. 3:14](#)). Again, "But even if we or an angel from heaven should preach a gospel other than the one we preached to you, let him be eternally condemned!" ([Gal. 1:8](#)). He separated his personal opinions from the teaching of the Lord when speaking about the complex subject of marriage ([1 Cor. 7:10, 22](#)). Daniel Fuller says, "The absolute authority that Paul ascribed to his teaching should not be charged off as the rantings of an eccentric egotist but should be taken as a sober recognition of the fact that in all his teaching, none other than Jesus Christ, the Son of God, is speaking." [

**QUOTE:** Paul's extreme zeal for the traditions of the fathers ([Gal. 1:14](#)) took him to Damascus to arrest followers of a religion that

contradicted these traditions. On the way he had an encounter with Jesus and received a commission that took him on a completely opposite path. He became the apostle to the Gentiles. As an apostle he knew he was the bearer of verbally inspired truth. We today can read his letters, which form more than a quarter of the New Testament and give to them the authority we would accord to the words of Christ himself.

#### CONTEMPORARY SIGNIFICANCE:

THE SIGNIFICANCE OF divine initiative in salvation. In our study of [Acts 4:12](#) we noted that our inability to do anything for our salvation should cause us to be humble; no genuine Christian has any reason for arrogance.

According to the Christian scheme, salvation is a gift of God; we do not deserve it and it is freely given to us by God, who takes the initiative by seeking us and bringing us to himself. In other words, we have no grounds for feeling superior to anyone. This truth we must demonstrate in an age when Christian belief about full assurance of salvation is considered arrogant by pluralists, who see the pursuit of salvation as something generated from within.

Another significant inference from the fact that God takes the initiative to save the least likely people, such as Saul the persecutor, is that we cannot pronounce anyone hopeless as far as conversion is concerned. As we face irreligious people or the followers of New Age thinking or any other religion, we may think that they are impossible to bring to Christ. As Paul said in [1 Timothy 1:16](#), the fact that the worst of sinners could be converted is a sign that the least likely people can be saved. Such realities should encourage us to dream about, pray for, and work toward the conversion of resistant people and enemies of the gospel.

**Leading people to personal encounter with Christ.** Our task as witnesses is to lead people to Jesus so that they will encounter him as their Savior and Lord.

**\*\*\* Avoiding the trap of individualistic conversion \*\*\*** Given the great blessings that come from conversion, it is possible to place so much emphasis on these that converts forget that they are people under a commission. For Saul conversion and commission went together. We must teach converts about Christian service and get them active the moment they come to Christ.

The conversion of the great Indian evangelist Sadhu Sundar Singh (1889-1929) was remarkably similar to that of Saul. He too was a young man who vehemently opposed Christianity until he had a vision of Christ that transformed his life. When his family members, who were Sikhs, realized that the conversion he professed was not a passing fancy, they poisoned him and sent him away from home. He landed at the doorstep of the home of a pastor, desperately ill. The doctor who saw him gave up hope that he would recover. "But as he lay, there came to him the profound belief that God had not called him out of darkness to die without witnessing to his faith in Christ, so he began to pray with all his remaining powers." He recovered and launched out on a life of witness. Donning the garb of an Indian holy man, he traveled the length and breadth of India barefoot, preaching the gospel. This earned him the name "the apostle of the bleeding feet," for his feet, unprotected from the hostile elements, sometimes bled. His realization as he lay dying was that he was "saved to tell others" the gospel.

**God's redemptive acts and the pluralist attitude.** The notion of the absolute authority of Paul's writings goes against the grain of the contemporary mood. Modern-day pluralists hold, like the Hindus held

for centuries, that truth is subjective. They place little stock in historical events like the commissioning of Paul. To them ideas are important, not events. Events may illustrate ideas, but they do not win salvation and endow a person with authority.

As we look at Scripture, we see that God's approach to salvation is through events. Theologians speak of "salvation history" and of "the God who acts." The Bible teaches that God acts decisively through key redemptive events, such as the Exodus, the giving of the law, the Conquest, the incarnation and life of Christ, his death, his resurrection, his ascension, Pentecost, the conversion/call of Paul, and the second coming of Christ. We must seriously reflect on these basic dealings of God with humankind if we are to be biblical in this pluralistic age. We must see that Christianity is based on objective historical events.

## - NIV Application Commentary

### INTRO:

At a young age, John Newton went to sea. Like most sailors of his day, he lived a life of rebellion and debauchery. For several years, he worked on slave ships, capturing slaves for sale to the plantations of the New World. So low did he sink that at one point he became a slave himself, captive of another slave trader. Eventually, he became the captain of his own slave ship. The combination of a frightening storm at sea, coupled with his reading of Thomas á Kempis's classic *Imitation of Christ*, planted the seeds that resulted in his conversion. He went on to become a leader in the evangelical movement in eighteenth-century England, along with such men as John and Charles Wesley, George Whitefield, and William Wilberforce. On his tombstone is inscribed the following epitaph, written by Newton himself: "John Newton, clerk, once an infidel and Libertine, a servant of slavers in Africa, was, by the rich

mercy of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, preserved, restored, pardoned, and appointed to preach the Faith he had long labored to destroy" (Kenneth W. Osbeck, *101 Hymn Stories* [Grand Rapids: Kregel, 1982], 28). When he penned the beloved hymn "Amazing Grace," he knew firsthand the truths it proclaimed.

Mel Trotter was a barber by profession and a drunkard by perversion. So debauched had he become that when his young daughter died, he stole the shoes she was to be buried in and pawned them for money to buy more drinks. One night he staggered into the Pacific Garden Mission in Chicago and was marvelously saved. Burdened for the men of skid row, he opened a rescue mission in Grand Rapids, Michigan. He went on to found more than sixty more missions and became supervisor of a chain of them stretching from Boston to San Francisco (Elgin S. Moyer, *Who Was Who in Church History* [New Canaan, Conn.: Keats, 1974], 411).

### SAUL / PAUL in Context:

Church history is replete with accounts such as these, which highlight the marvelous power of the gospel to transform sinners. But no transformation is as remarkable, or has had such far-reaching implications for history, as the conversion of Saul of Tarsus. So significant an event was his conversion that Scripture records it no less than three times (cf. [Acts 22:1-16](#); [26:4-18](#)).

It is fitting that such a unique individual would have a unique conversion. Saul was by birth a Jew, by citizenship a Roman, by education a Greek, and purely by the grace of God a Christian (cf. [Phil. 3:4-9](#)). He was a missionary, theologian, evangelist, pastor, organizer, leader, thinker, fighter for truth, and lover of souls. Never has a more godly man lived, except our Lord Himself.

Saul was born in Tarsus, an important city ([Acts 21:39](#)) in the Roman province of Cilicia. Tarsus was located near where Asia Minor and Syria meet, not far from Antioch. It was famous for its university, which ranked with those of Athens and Alexandria as among the most honored in the Roman world. Saul's father must have been a Roman citizen, since Saul was himself a citizen of Rome by birth ([Acts 22:28](#)). His Jewish credentials were equally impeccable. Like his father before him, he was a Pharisee ([Acts 23:6](#)), who studied in Jerusalem under the most respected rabbi of his day, Gamaliel ([Acts 22:3](#)). Since he had apparently never met Jesus, he must have returned to Tarsus to live after completing his studies.

Saul makes his first appearance in Scripture in connection with Stephen. As noted in the discussion of [Acts 6:9](#) in [chapter 15](#), Saul may have been one of the Hellenists who unsuccessfully debated him. When Stephen was executed, Saul guarded the robes of those involved in the stoning. His position so close to the action suggests he was deeply involved with the whole affair.

There is no question as to Saul's role in the persecution that broke out after Stephen's death—he was its mastermind and ringleader. As noted in the discussion of [Acts 8:1-3](#) in [chapter 18](#), Saul was terrifyingly adept at persecuting believers. The Jerusalem fellowship broke up under the force of his attacks. Many of the Hellenist believers, who apparently bore the brunt of the persecution, fled Jerusalem. As the events of this chapter unfold, Saul is hot on the trail of those who fled to Damascus.

QUOTE: In his testimony to Agrippa ([Acts 26:9-11](#)) he articulated the fierceness of his assault:

*So then, I thought to myself that I had to do many things hostile to the name of Jesus of Nazareth. And this is just what I did in Jerusalem; not only did I lock up many of the saints in prisons, having received authority from the chief priests, but also when they were being put to death I cast my vote against them. 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.*

#### PASSAGE (Ch. 9) CONTEXT:

After the interlude of [chapter 8](#), which describes the ministry of Philip, the scene shifts back to Jerusalem. **Saul**, Luke notes, **was still breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord**. Persecuting

Christians consumed him; it had become his whole life. The very air he was **breathing** was that of **threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord**. The term **disciples** refers to all believers, not merely the twelve apostles. Every Christian is a follower of and learner from the Lord Jesus Christ. Saul wanted every one he could lay his hands on.

Hearing of a group of Christians in Damascus, Saul driven by deadly ambition and twisted religious zeal, **went to the high priest, 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**. The **high priest**, in his capacity as president of the Sanhedrin, was viewed by the Romans as head of the Jewish state. He thus had authority over Jewish internal matters such as this one. Accordingly, Saul needed **letters from him to the synagogues at Damascus** to have authority to apprehend Christians. He intended, **if he found any belonging to the Way** (whether **men** or **women**), to **bring them bound to Jerusalem**.

The description of Christianity as **the Way** appears several times in Acts ([19:9](#), [23](#); [22:4](#); [24:14](#), [22](#)). It apparently derives from Jesus' description of Himself as "the way, and the truth, and the life" ([John 14:6](#)). **The**

**Way** is an apropos title for Christianity, since it is the way of God ([Acts 18:26](#)), the way into the Holy Place ([Heb. 10:19-20](#)), and the way of truth ([2 Peter 2:2](#)).

Having obtained the necessary papers, Saul and his entourage set out for Damascus. The normal route north and east would cause them to pass through Samaria. The revival there, led by Philip, Peter, and John, may have infuriated Saul all the more. With intense hostility he approached Damascus and the encounter that would turn his world upside down.

From the dramatic story of Saul's conversion emerge seven features of the transformed life:

8. Faith in the Savior,
9. Fervency in supplication,
10. Faithfulness in service,
11. Filling of the Spirit,
12. Fellowship with the saints,
13. Fervency in speaking,
14. Fearlessness in suffering.

### **Contact**

*And it came about that as he journeyed, he was approaching Damascus, and suddenly a light from heaven flashed around him; ([9:3](#))*

Saul was still charging full speed for **Damascus** when he was **suddenly** stopped dead in his tracks. **A light from heaven flashed around him,** and Saul and his companions fell into the dirt ([Acts 26:14](#)).

Confronted with the appearance of the blazing glory of Jesus Christ, Saul, the hardened persecutor of Christians, was speechless with terror. Luke's other accounts of this event ([Acts 22, 26](#)) fill in more of the details. From [Acts 22:6](#) we learn that the encounter took place about

noon. The **light from heaven** was not anything from the material creation, since it transcended in brilliance even the bright Middle Eastern sun ([26:13](#)). Those who traveled with Saul heard the voice of the Lord as he did, yet did not understand the words spoken (cf. [v. 7](#) with [22:9](#); [John 12:29](#)), because the Lord's words were for Saul's ears only. Saul actually saw Jesus in glorious brilliance as he repeatedly testifies ([Acts 9:17, 27](#); [22:14](#); [26:16](#); [1 Cor. 9:1](#); [15:8](#)) while his co-persecutors saw only the light ([Acts 22:9](#)).

Ironically, the last person till then to have seen the resurrected, glorified Christ was Stephen. Here is yet another connection between the ministries of Stephen and Paul (cf. [chapter 15](#) of this commentary). It is a testimony to the power of God's grace that the man involved in Stephen's death would be the next to see Jesus Christ.

Although He does not do it so dramatically, God always initiates the contact in salvation (cf. [John 6:37, 44](#); [10:27-29](#); [17:2, 6, 9, 11, 24](#); [2 Cor. 4:6](#); [Phil. 1:29](#); [James 1:18](#)). As noted in [chapter 20](#) of this volume, the Holy Spirit sovereignly arranged the circumstances leading to the Ethiopian eunuch's conversion. That was, and is, necessary, since unbelieving men, being dead in their trespasses and sins ([Eph. 2:1](#)), cannot come to God on their own (cf. [Rom. 3:10-12](#); [1 Cor. 2:14](#); [Eph. 2:4-10](#); [Col. 2:13](#)).

That salvation is initiated by God is nowhere more powerfully stated than by Paul to Titus:

For we also once were foolish ourselves, disobedient, deceived, enslaved to various lusts and pleasures, spending our life in malice and envy, hateful, hating one another. But when the kindness of God our Savior and His love for mankind appeared, He saved us, not on the basis of deeds which we have done in righteousness, but according to His mercy, by the washing of regeneration and renewing by the Holy Spirit. ([Titus 3:3-5](#))

## Conviction

*and he fell to the ground, and heard a voice saying to him, "Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting Me?" ([9:4](#))*

Prostrate on **the ground**, Saul **heard a voice saying to him, "Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting Me?"** The repetition is emphatic, as elsewhere in Luke's writings (cf. [Luke 10:41](#); [13:34](#); [22:31](#)). Here it marks a rebuke of Saul, intended to bring anguish of soul, so Saul would realize how wrong he had been, and guilt would overwhelm him. He was one who had hated Jesus Christ without cause ([John 15:25](#)).

Our Lord's words "**Why are you persecuting Me?**" reflect the inseparable link between Himself, as head of the body, and its members. No blow struck on earth goes unfelt in heaven by our sympathetic High Priest. By persecuting Christians, Saul inflicted blows directly on their Lord.

Saul, who had been so violent, was violently brought face to face with the enormity of his crimes—not against Christians but against Christ.

As Saul himself was later to write, "If anyone does not love the Lord, let him be accursed" ([1 Cor. 16:22](#)). Jesus said the Holy Spirit would convict men "concerning sin, because they do not believe in Me" ([John 16:9](#)). The crime of all crimes for which men will be eternally damned is to refuse to love and follow the Lord Jesus Christ.

True salvation must include conviction of this damning sin, since it is this very sin and no other that finally separates man from God. Saul knew enough about the Christian faith to hate it and persecute it. He knew the claims of Jesus and the true history of God's redemption as Stephen had preached it. He knew the apostles and their associates Stephen and Philip had miraculous power over disease and demons. All that the Spirit had laid as the groundwork in Saul's life. When Jesus confronted Saul, the conviction must have been overwhelming. He knew about the truth; here he was crushed into the dust and made to believe it.

## Confused or Converted?

*And he said "Who art Thou, Lord?" And He said, "I am Jesus whom you are persecuting, ([9:5](#))*

## Consecration

*"but rise, and enter the city, and it shall be told you what you must do." And the men who traveled with him stood speechless, hearing the voice, but seeing no one. 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. ([9:6-8](#))*

In response to Saul's inquiry, Jesus told him to **rise and enter the city of Damascus, and it shall be told you what you must do**. Luke notes that **the men who traveled with him stood speechless, hearing the voice, but seeing no one**. This incident was no subjective projection of Saul's mind but an actual historical occurrence. **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**. His entry into the city was very different than he had anticipated. Instead of barging in as the conquering hero, the scourge of Christians, he entered helplessly blinded, being led by the hand.

God crushed Saul, bringing him to the point of total consecration. From the ashes of Saul's old life would arise the noblest and most useful man of God the church has ever known.

## Communion

*And he was three days without sight, and neither ate nor drank. ([9:9](#))*

During his **three days without sight**, when he **neither ate nor drank**, God led him through the process of reconstructing everything he was and did. Although salvation is an instantaneous transformation from death to life, darkness to light, it takes time to plumb the depths of its meaning and richness. Saul began that process.

## Fervency in Supplication

*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." 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, 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." ([9:10-12](#))*

While Saul waited, blinded and fasting, thinking deeply about what had occurred, God was dealing with another man. The **certain disciple at Damascus named Ananias** was obviously not the same Ananias executed by God in [chapter 5](#). [Acts 22:12](#) describes him as "devout" and "well spoken of by all the Jews who lived" in Damascus. He was likely

one of the spiritual leaders of the Damascus church. If so, he also, ironically, would have been one of Saul's main targets. **The Lord told him in a vision to arise and go to the street called Straight and inquire at the house of Judas for a man from Tarsus named Saul.** That was a severe test of Ananias's faith, since Saul's fearsome reputation was widely known (cf. [vv. 13-14](#)). Ananias would have had no way of knowing of Saul's conversion, since the Lord did not reveal it to him.

The footnote **for behold, he is praying** informs us of what Saul did during his three days without sight. Prayer is the spontaneous response of the believing heart to God. Those truly transformed by Jesus Christ find themselves lost in the wonder and joy of communion with Him. Prayer is as natural for the Christian as breathing. Paul became a man of unceasing prayer.

While he waited for Ananias, God gave Saul a **vision** that Ananias would **come and lay his hands on him, so that he might regain his sight.** God, in His tender kindness to this persecutor, did not want him to be in any unnecessary sorrow, so He gave Saul hope for receiving his sight. A pair of visions were about to bring together two men who had been poles apart.

### Faithfulness in Service

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

*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; for I will show him how much he must suffer for My name's sake." 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," ([9:13-17a](#))*

In answer to Saul's prayer, God directed Ananias to go to him. As already noted, that command provided a severe test for Ananias's courage. Understandably, he balked at going, protesting, "**Lord, I have heard from many about this man, how much harm he did to Thy saints at Jerusalem; and here he has authority from the chief priests to bind all who call upon Thy name.**" Since the word from the believers in Jerusalem had arrived before Saul, the church at Damascus knew he was coming and why. So Ananias said in effect, "Lord, do You know what You are asking?" The request no doubt appeared to him to be suicidal. His life was at stake, and so was the ministry he had in the church. He was asking if the Lord really meant to end both.

Ananias's protest was overruled, as God explained **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.**" The call to the ministry is not based on the whims of men but on the sovereign choice of God. Ananias understood that truth clearly, and so did Saul. In [Galatians 1:1](#) he wrote, "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)" (cf. [1 Tim. 2:7](#); [2 Tim. 1:11](#)). To the Colossian church he said, "I was made a minister," and that "by the stewardship of God bestowed on me" ([1:23](#), [25](#)). He also understood that though he often preached to the Jews first ([Acts 13:14](#); [14:1](#); [17:1](#), [10](#); [18:4](#); [19:8](#)), his primary calling was to minister to the **Gentiles** ([Rom. 11:13](#); [15:16](#)). Further, he was privileged to **bear** witness to his Lord **before kings**, such as Agrippa ([Acts 25:23ff.](#)), and, most likely, Caesar (cf. [2 Tim. 4:16-17](#)).

Those trials were only a small portion of **how much** Saul would **suffer for Jesus' name's sake**. [First Corinthians 4:9-13](#), [2 Corinthians 11:23-29](#), and [12:7-10](#) catalog the suffering Saul endured for the sake of His Lord. And his suffering, which never stopped until an ax severed his

devout head from his faithful body, didn't wait long to begin — only a few days.

Strengthened by the direct word from the Lord, and overcoming his fears, Ananias **departed and entered the house of Judas, 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."** As [Acts 22:14-15](#) reveals, this was Saul's commissioning for service: "And [Ananias] said, 'The God of our fathers has appointed you to know His will, and to see the Righteous One, and to hear an utterance from His mouth. For you will be a witness for Him to all men of what you have seen and heard.'"

The stories of both Ananias and Saul illustrate the truth that the transformed life demands service to Christ. As Saul was later to write, "Let a man regard us in this manner, as servants of Christ, and stewards of the mysteries of God" ([1 Cor. 4:1](#)).

## The Filling of the Spirit

*and be filled with the Holy Spirit. ([9:17b](#))*

It is significant that unlike the Jews ([Acts 2:1-4](#)), the Samaritans ([Acts 8:14-17](#)), and soon the Gentiles ([Acts 10:44-46](#)), Saul had received the Spirit and his commissioning to service with no apostles present. Saul was a Jew, so there was no need to repeat the initial coming of the Spirit that occurred at Pentecost. Also, he was an apostle in his own right and did not derive his authority from the other apostles ([Gal. 1:1](#); cf. [1 Cor. 9:1](#); [2 Cor. 11:5](#); [12:11](#); [Gal. 1:15-17](#)), nor was he subject to their authority. Like them, he was chosen personally by the Lord Jesus Christ and received the Spirit for his commissioning and power directly from Him.

**QUOTE :** The Spirit transformed Saul in two fundamental ways. First, He took Saul's natural strengths and refined them. Saul was a gifted natural leader, with strong will power. He was a man of strong convictions, a self-starter, bold, a master at using his time and talents, a motivated individual, and a profoundly gifted thinker and speaker.

The Holy Spirit also eliminated undesirable characteristics and replaced them with desirable ones. He replaced Saul's cruel hatred with love; his restless, aggressive spirit with peace; his rough, hard-nosed treatment of people with gentleness; his pride with humility.

Only the Spirit of God can so thoroughly sanctify a life.

### Fellowship with the Saints

*And immediately there fell from his eyes something like scales, and he regained his sight, and he arose and was baptized; and he took food and was strengthened. Now for several days he was with the disciples who were at Damascus, ([9:18-19](#))*

**Immediately** after Ananias's words, **there fell from Saul's eyes something like scales, and he regained his sight.** In response to Ananias's exhortation (cf. [Acts 22:16](#)), Saul arose and was baptized. By that act he openly united with the very people he had hated and persecuted. His hated enemies became his friends, while his former friends instantly became his enemies (cf. [v. 23](#)). In keeping with the consistent pattern of believers' testimonies in Acts, Saul's baptism followed his conversion.

Saul enjoyed his first taste of Christian fellowship as **he took food and was strengthened.** He remained **for several days with the disciples**

**who were at Damascus**, allowing them to celebrate his conversion with him and minister to his needs. One can imagine the overwhelming joy of those days and the incessant praise to God.

One sure mark of a transformed life is the desire to be with fellow Christians. [First John 3:14](#) reads, "We know that we have passed out of death into life, because we love the brethren. He who does not love abides in death." Believers are those who do "not walk in the counsel of the wicked, nor stand in the path of sinners, nor sit in the seat of scoffers" ([Ps. 1:1](#)). They can say with the psalmist, "I am a companion of all those who fear Thee, and of those who keep Thy precepts" ([Ps. 119:63](#)).

That does not mean, of course, that Christians are to have no contact with unbelievers ([1 Cor. 5:9-10](#)).

**QUOTE:** A professing Christian who prefers the company of the people of the world is probably still one of them.

### Fervency in Speaking

*and immediately he began to proclaim Jesus in the synagogues, saying, "He is the Son of God." 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?" But Saul kept increasing in strength and confounding the Jews who lived at Damascus by proving that this Jesus is the Christ.*  
([9:20-22](#))

Those transformed by the saving grace of God cannot stop speaking about it ([Acts 4:20](#)), and Saul was no exception. After a few days of fellowship with the saints, he **immediately began to proclaim Jesus in**

**the synagogues.** To the shocked Christians, surprised by his conversion, can be added the shocked Jews, who were expecting him to take Christians prisoner, not preach Jesus Christ in their synagogues. From the beginning he felt that courageous compulsion that later caused him to exclaim, "Woe is me if I do not preach the gospel" ([1 Cor. 9:16](#)).

In the very **synagogues** to which he had come with warrants for the arrest of Christians, Saul now **began to proclaim Jesus.** The content of that preaching was that Jesus is the Son of God, a title for our Lord that speaks of His deity (cf. [John 10:31-36](#)). (For a discussion of the issue of the sonship of Jesus Christ, see [Hebrews, MacArthur New Testament Commentary](#) [Chicago: Moody, 1983], 26ff.)

The shock and consternation Saul's preaching produced is inconceivable for us. The most zealous defender of Judaism now became the most zealous evangelist for Christianity. Not surprisingly, **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?"** They could not comprehend the drastic change in Saul.

Far from wilting under the pressure of confusion turning into hostility, **Saul kept increasing in strength and confounding the Jews who lived at Damascus by proving that this Jesus is the Christ.** Like Stephen before him, he met the Jews in open debate about the deity and messiahship of Jesus. Saving faith "comes from hearing, and hearing by the word of Christ" ([Rom. 10:17](#)).

That Saul was **confounding the Jews** in this dialogue should surprise no one. He had the finest education first-century Judaism could offer, and they could not hope to match his knowledge of the Scripture. Once he understood who Jesus was, he had the key that unlocked the whole Old Testament. He was then able to use his vast knowledge of those Scriptures and his Spirit-controlled brilliance, as well as the truth of

Jesus' miracles, words, death, and resurrection, to prove **that this Jesus** was indeed the long-awaited Messiah.

**- MacArthur New Testament Commentary**

### *The Conversion of Saul ([9:1-9](#))*

So ill informed was Saul, that he thought he ought to do all he could against the name of Christ, and that he did God service thereby; he seemed to breathe in this as in his element. Let us not despair of renewing grace for the conversion of the greatest sinners, nor let such despair of the pardoning mercy of God for the greatest sin. It is a signal token of Divine favour, if God, by the inward working of his grace, or the outward events of his providence, stops us from prosecuting or executing sinful purposes. Saul saw that Just One, [Acts 22:14](#); [Acts 26:13](#). How near to us is the unseen world! It is but for God to draw aside the veil, and objects are presented to the view, compared with which, whatever is most admired on earth is mean and contemptible. Saul submitted without reserve, desirous to know what the Lord Jesus would have him to do. Christ's discoveries of himself to poor souls are humbling; they lay them very low, in mean thoughts of themselves. For three days Saul took no food, and it pleased God to leave him for that time without relief. His sins were now set in order before him; he was in the dark concerning his own spiritual state, and wounded in spirit for sin. When a sinner is brought to a proper sense of his own state and conduct, he will cast himself wholly on the mercy of the Saviour, asking what he would have him to do. God will direct the humbled sinner, and though he does not often bring transgressors to joy and peace in believing, without sorrows and distress of conscience, under which the soul is deeply engaged as to eternal things, yet happy are those who sow in tears, for they shall reap in joy.

### *Saul Converted Preaches Christ (9:10-22)*

A good work was begun in Saul, when he was brought to Christ's feet with those words, Lord, what wilt thou have me to do? And never did Christ leave any who were brought to that. Behold, the proud Pharisee, the unmerciful oppressor, the daring blasphemer, prayeth! And thus it is even now, and with the proud infidel, or the abandoned sinner. What happy tidings are these to all who understand the nature and power of prayer, of such prayer as the humbled sinner presents for the blessings of free salvation! Now he began to pray after another manner than he had done; **before, he said his prayers, now, he prayed them**. Regenerating grace sets people on praying; you may as well find a living man without breath, as a living Christian without prayer. Yet even eminent disciples, like Ananias, sometimes stagger at the commands of the Lord. But it is the Lord's glory to surpass our scanty expectations, and show that those are vessels of his mercy whom we are apt to consider as objects of his vengeance. The teaching of the Holy Spirit takes away the scales of ignorance and pride from the understanding; then the sinner becomes a new creature, and endeavours to recommend the anointed Saviour, the Son of God, to his former companions.

**- Matthew Henry Concise Bible Commentary.**