

Acts 9

Lesson 6

This chapter begins with Saul breathing “threats” and “murder” against the disciples of Jesus. The words used here to describe Saul in v. 1 call the reader back to 8:1b-3. In Semitic idiom, anger was related to breath. The usage here is intended to convey the great vehemence that Saul feels toward the disciples. It is important to note that while Saul is the central character here the narrator does not want the role of the High Priest and the Sanhedrin in this persecution to drop from view. Saul goes to the High Priest to obtain letters that would assist him in bringing followers of the Way back to Jerusalem.¹

“The Jurisdiction of the Sanhedrin

The issue of Saul’s delegated authority to bring Jews back to Jerusalem creates quite a conundrum. Many argue that there is no good evidence that the Sanhedrin of Jerusalem, or its leader, the high priest, had the power to

¹ J. Bradley Chance, *Acts*, in the Smyth & Helwys Bible Commentary Series (Macon GA: Smyth & Helwys Publishing Incorporated, 2007), p. 145.

reach beyond Judea and round up Jews from other jurisdictions and bring them forcibly to Jerusalem. 1 Macc. 15:15-21 offers perhaps the strongest evidence, aside from Acts itself, that the high priest and Sanhedrin did have such powers of extradition. It records a letter from Lucius Calpurnius Piso, consul of the Romans (140–139 BC) to Ptolemy VII Physcon that says, among other things: “Therefore if any scoundrels have fled to you from their [the Jews’] country, hand them over to the high priest Simon, so that he may punish them according to their law” (v. 21). Verses 22-24 report that the same letter was sent to numerous rulers throughout the empire.”²

Many times issues like this, along with other historical data, have been used by skeptics to cast doubt on the veracity of Luke’s account. These skeptics have often been proven wrong, as more historical and archaeological data has come to light. This certainly would represent a study all on its own, so, it is perhaps best to leave that for now and just give Luke the benefit of the doubt here. Our incomplete

² J. Bradley Chance, *Acts*, p. 146.

knowledge sometimes causes us to focus on things that are, at present, beyond the scope of our knowledge.

The character that will dominate the remainder of Acts now emerges from the shadows. The difficulty for Luke is to explain how a zealous Pharisee bent on the destruction of the church becomes, perhaps, its greatest advocate. Luke will record Paul's conversion account 3 times and with each retelling bringing some further nuance of significance to the forefront. Saul's conversion is the paradigmatic expression of the ironic truth that was spoken by Gamaliel (5:38-39). The failure of Paul to stop this new movement and his transformation stands out for Luke as one of the surest signs available that Jesus was indeed the Messiah and that this movement was from God.³

Verse 3 begins with the powerful intervention of God with a light from heaven flashing around Saul and a voice asking him why he is persecuting Jesus. Saul asks the question that perhaps all people should ask Jesus, "Who are you, Lord?" The answer comes that, "I am Jesus whom you

³ Luke Timothy Johnson, *The Acts of the Apostles*, The Sacra Pagina Series, Vol. 5 (Collegeville MN: The Liturgical Press, 1992), p. 166.

are persecuting.” What a powerful statement filled with tremendous theology. Jesus does not say you are persecuting my people, my children or my followers, he says Saul is persecuting him; he is persecuting Jesus himself. The text here is very emphatic, especially in the Syriac that it is Jesus himself that is being persecuted. Perhaps this is the beginning of much of Paul’s later teaching about the church actually being the “body” of Christ and what is done to the body is actually done to Jesus himself.

Saul is instructed to go into the city await further instructions. Those that were travelling with him saw nothing but heard the “voice,” or a “sound.” It is not clear whether they understood the words that were spoken or if they just heard sound. When he gets up he is unable to see, and for 3 days he remains this way, and neither eats nor drinks. He now understands on a literal level what was certainly true on a spiritual level and that he was blind.

Verse 10 introduces us to Ananias who also has a vision. It is noteworthy that the response of Ananias to his name being called out is very different to the response of

Saul. He responds in a manner that is reminiscent of great persons of faith from the biblical story, his response is: “Here I am Lord” (cf. Genesis 22:1, 11; 1 Samuel 3:4-14; and Isaiah 6:8). Ananias is given his instructions by the Lord and told to go to the place where Saul is staying. God here is answering the prayer of Stephen in a powerful, dramatic and perhaps even shocking fashion (7:60). God does forgive Saul just as Stephen asked in his prayer, and gives him the gift of life and the honor of suffering. It is not at all uncommon for someone who receives a call such as this to offer a question, mild protest, or incredulous comment (cf. Genesis 15:1-3; 17:17; Exodus 3:13; 4:1, 10; Luke 1:18, 34).⁴

Ananias is no exception, in reminding the Lord of who Saul is, he also reminds the readers of who he is. God responds back that he has chosen him as his instrument (σκεῦος – “object,” “vessel”) to bring his name to Gentiles, Kings and before the people (υἱῶν - “sons”) of Israel. The Lord goes on to say he will show him how much he must “suffer” (πάσχω) for the sake of my name. Not only is there

⁴ J. Bradley Chance, *Acts*, p. 148.

identification between Jesus and the community in this section but also identification between Saul and Jesus is established in the “mystical encounter” recorded here.⁵

Whereas Saul had served as an “instrument” or “vessel” of the Sanhedrin he will now serve as an “instrument” or “vessel” (cf. 2 Corinthians 4:7-12) of the Lord. He had caused those who believed upon Jesus to suffer, he will now suffer on behalf of the name that he once persecuted. It is important to note that so often we think of Saul as apostle to the Gentiles and certainly he is, but he also has a mission to testify before rulers and the sons of Israel. It may be the case that Ananias is the one who communicates this mission to Saul (this is a tentative conclusion that seems to be confirmed by Saul’s retelling of this story at 22:15).⁶

Ananias wastes no time in fulfilling his mission to go to Saul. He confirms him as a “brother” and explains his mission and informs him that will regain his sight and that he will be filled with the Holy Spirit (v. 17). His physical

⁵ Luke Timothy Johnson, *The Acts of the Apostles*, p. 168.

⁶ J. Bradley Chance, *Acts*, p. 149.

blindness ends and with it also goes his spiritual blindness. He is now initiated into the community of faith through immersion.⁷

The next section is introduced with the very familiar Lukan terminology “For several days.” This narrative device is used to give the story a sense of narrative movement while at the same time informing the readers that the faith community in Damascus accepted him. Some have advocated the view that the “several days” is used in order to instruct Saul in the faith more fully, but care should be taken with such an assumption, as Luke does not give any indication of this here. Saul begins preaching “immediately” (εὐθέως) in the synagogues proclaiming him to be the “son of God.”⁸

The preaching of Saul amazes the people of Damascus because they knew that he had been sent from Jerusalem where he had created havoc among the believers there. He continues to confound the Jews of Damascus not only because they are puzzled by his conversion but also because

⁷ J. Bradley Chance, *Acts*, p. 150.

⁸ J. Bradley Chance, *Acts*, p. 150.

he proves to them that Jesus is the “Messiah.” A very predictable pattern has now begun to develop in Luke’s narrative and the Jews follow that pattern here and seek to take the life of Saul, but the disciples lower him down through an opening in the wall by night to safety.

Saul leaves Damascus and returns to Jerusalem where he tries to join the disciples there, but they were afraid of him because they believed that this was some form of trick, perhaps in order to trap them. Barnabas comes onto the scene and plays the role of intermediary explaining to them about Saul’s conversion. We are given no information about why Barnabas went to Saul; we are simply told that he did. Saul then begins to preach boldly in Jerusalem in the name of the Lord. It is not long before his arguing brings the now familiar response of persecution and the threat of death, this time from the Hellenists, perhaps even the same ones who had been behind the murder of Stephen. The believers once again intervene and evacuate him from the city, first to Caesarea and then off the Tarsus.

Luke breaks off in his narrative regarding Saul and

reports on the church throughout Judea, Galilee and Samaria noting that they were enjoying a time of peace and being “built up.” It is also of note that Luke chooses to highlight the fact that they are “Living in the fear of the Lord and the comfort of the Holy Spirit.” It is of interest that Luke usually uses the term “church” (ἐκκλησία) to refer a congregation in the singular, but here he refers to the sum of Jewish believers who encompass a large area that corresponds to the boundaries of ancient Israel as “church”.⁹ The continuing theme is repeated of the church increasing in numbers. Luke apparently equates the increase in numbers with the continuing success of the mission as outlined by Jesus at 1:8.

The narrative now shifts to Peter who is travelling and while doing so not only preaching but also powerful miracles are being used to prove to the people that this message that he brings is from God. Peter is thus validated once again as an authentic representative of the line of the

⁹ David C. Peterson, *The Acts of the Apostles*, in *The Pillar New Testament Commentary series* (Grand Rapids MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2009), p. 317.

prophets who work signs and wonders among the people. Just to give a geographical reference point Lydda is a city about twenty-five miles northwest of Jerusalem.¹⁰

The next story offers and even more powerful demonstration of the power that surrounds the ministry of Peter. We are introduced to a “woman disciple” (μαθήτρια) named Tabitha who was known for her “good works.” She dies and those that had prepared her body for burial summon Peter to the nearby town of Joppa. There is no indication in the text as to what those who sent for Peter expected him to do. Does it imply that they held to the popular Jewish belief that on the third day the soul passed permanently into Sheol, the realm of the dead? Luke gives us no clues regarding this mystery, he simply recounts the story.¹¹

It is of interest that usually when Jesus performed a great miracle he would ask his audience not to reveal what had been done. Such is not the case with Peter. Peter puts the people out of the room, prays, and then orders Tabitha

¹⁰ J. Bradley Chance, *Acts*, pp. 160-161.

¹¹ J. Bradley Chance, *Acts*, pp. 162-164.

“to get up.” The same word for “to get up” (ἀνίστημι) used here at verse 40 is also used when he tells Aeneas to get up at verse 34. The usage of this word (ἀνίστημι) at both verses 34 and 40 not only links these 2 stories it also symbolizes a rising to new life. It is important to recognize that Luke’s motivation in telling these 2 stories is not to focus upon the individuals in the stories but to demonstrate the continual unfolding of the fulfillment of the mission set for the church by Jesus at 1:8. Aeneas and Tabitha serve as living advertisements for the truth of the gospel message and whole regions are converted as a result of the power of these miracles.¹²

Luke draws this section to a close and prepares for the next phase of his story, which will involve Cornelius.

“Because tanners, by necessity, worked with dead animals, they were chronically unclean. The Mishnah compares the tanner’s uncleanness to that of persons afflicted with boils or polyps or who collected dogs’ excrement. Some rabbis even required tanners and others

¹² Richard I. Pervo, *Acts*, in the Hermenia series (Minneapolis MN: Fortress Press, 2009), p. 253.

who lived in such uncleanness to “put away their wives”; that is, they did not require women to remain married to such men (see m. Ket. 7.10). For readers who know this, Peter’s residing with “Simon the Tanner” ironically sets up the following scene where Peter appears so scrupulous about matters of ritual cleanness. Peter’s residence may also foreshadow his eventual association with another group of “unclean people,” the Gentiles.”¹³

The central focus continues from Acts 1:8 **But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.”**¹⁴ Luke intends to convey the emphasis that the church, and especially its Apostles are fulfilling the charge given to them by Jesus Christ and this is being done under the power and direction of Jesus Christ.

¹³ J. Bradley Chance, *Acts*, p. 163.

¹⁴ *The Holy Bible: New Revised Standard Version*. 1989 (Ac 1:8). Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers.

Synopsis

Luke continues to focus intently, in this chapter, upon the mission of the church (1:8). He is virtually compulsive in this focus. He begins with Saul seeking to destroy the church as the agent of the high priest. The struggle between the church and Israel continues, but in this chapter the very prophetic words of Gamaliel about fighting against God surely have come back to haunt the council. God takes the instrument of the High Priest commissioned with the task of destroying the church and transforms that instrument into his instrument for proclaiming his message. This surely had to give the council nightmares.

With the same zeal that Saul had shown in persecuting the church he now proclaims the gospel message and defends it. Jesus reaches out and touches Saul and brings about this transformation through his mighty hand. After his conversion Saul “immediately” begins to proclaim the gospel message. It should be noted at this point that contrary to the proclamation of the Gospel by

Peter there is no indication of anything miraculous, other than perhaps Saul's ability to argue. At this point the contrast between the proclamation of Saul and Peter differ in a fashion that is startling. Peter's ministry is dominated by the miracles that surround it. It is also noteworthy that the outcome of these 2 ministries is strikingly different. We are not told what the outcome of the ministry of Saul is directly, but repeatedly the outcome of the ministry of Peter is an increase in the numbers of those turning to the Lord (vss. 35, 42). The growth of the church cited at verse 31 is not directly linked with the ministry of Saul.

The purpose of the miracles is to reach people. The focus is on the mission even as people are healed and raised from the dead.

Main Points

1. Threats against the church are thwarted by the hand of God that transforms the threat into an asset.
2. Saul, the instrument of the High Priest now becomes and instrument of the true High Priest, Jesus Christ.
3. The church continues to grow and prosper, living in fear of the Lord and in the comfort of the Holy Spirit.
4. Miracles act as a powerful instrument in proclaiming the gospel message through the ministry of Peter.
5. It should be notes that Saul, up to this point performs no miracles.

Questions

1. Why do you think Saul is so intent upon destroying the church?
2. What do you think causes religious people have such strong feelings against those that disagree with them?
3. What do you think Saul contemplated during his 3 days of blindness in Damascus?
4. At verse 16, what do you think it means for the Lord to say that, "I myself will show him how much he must suffer for my name"?
5. How do you think the Jews would have felt when they realized that Saul had become a Christian?
6. Why do you think the church grew in numbers "Living in the fear of the Lord"?
7. What do you think the "comfort of the Holy Spirit" is?
8. Why do you think the miracles of Peter's ministry had such a powerful affect on people?

9. What would you think today if someone were raised from the dead in the way that Tabitha was by Peter?