

May 28 Lesson 13 (NIV)

Saul of Tarsus

Devotional Reading: Philippians 3:1–14

Background Scripture: Acts 9:1–31

Acts 9:9–17

⁹ For three days he was blind, and did not eat or drink anything.

¹⁰ In Damascus there was a disciple named Ananias. The Lord called to him in a vision, “Ananias!”

“Yes, Lord,” he answered.

¹¹ The Lord told him, “Go to the house of Judas on Straight Street and ask for a man from Tarsus named Saul, for he is praying. ¹² In a vision he has seen a man named Ananias come and place his hands on him to restore his sight.”

¹³ “Lord,” Ananias answered, “I have heard many reports about this man and all the harm he has done to your holy people in Jerusalem. ¹⁴ And he has come here with authority from the chief priests to arrest all who call on your name.”

¹⁵ But the Lord said to Ananias, “Go! This man is my chosen instrument to proclaim my name to the Gentiles and their kings and to the people of Israel. ¹⁶ I will show him how much he must suffer for my name.”

¹⁷ Then Ananias went to the house and entered it. Placing his hands on Saul, he said, “Brother Saul, the Lord—Jesus, who appeared to you on the road as you were coming here—has sent me so that you may see again and be filled with the Holy Spirit.”

Key Text

Ananias went to the house and entered it. Placing his hands on Saul, he said, Brother Saul, the Lord—Jesus, who appeared to you on the road as you were coming here—has sent me so that you may see again and be filled with the Holy Spirit.

—Acts 9:17

Jesus Calls Us

Unit III: The Birth of the Church

Lessons 9–13

Lesson Outline

Introduction

- A. "I Once Was Blind ..."
- B. Lesson Context: Damascus
- C. Lesson Context: Saul

I. Saul's Waiting (Acts 9:9–12)

- A. Days of Fasting (v. 9)
- B. Disciple of Damascus (v. 10)
Responsive? Hiding? Fleeing?
- C. Directive by the Lord (vv. 11–12)

II. Ananias's Objection (Acts 9:13–16)

- A. Fear of Saul (vv. 13–14)
- B. Plans for Saul (vv. 15–16)
Heads Up!

III. The Lord's Healing (Acts 9:17)

- A. Obedience (v. 17a)
- B. Facts (v. 17b)

Conclusion

- A. Conversion, Call, or Both?
- B. Prayer
- C. Thought to Remember

How to Say It

AnaniasAn-uh-nye-us.

CiliciaSih-lish-i-uh.

DamascusDuh-mass-kus.

DecapolisDee-cap-uh-lis.

GamalielGuh-may-lih-ul or Guh-may-lee-al.

JosephusJo-see-fus.

JudeaJoo-dee-uh.

LeviLee-vye.

PhariseesFair-ih-seez.

PentecostPent-ih-kost.

rabbincruh-*bin*-ihk.

Sanhedrin*San*-huh-drun or *San*-heed-run.

Tarsus*Tar*-sus.

Zechariah*Zek*-uh-**rye**-uh.

Introduction

A. "I Once Was Blind ..."

John Newton was an eighteenth-century Englishman who served as captain for ships that transported captured Africans to North America as slaves. The horrendous nature of that occupation included not only the acceptance of slavery but also the imposition of the inhuman conditions on the ships. To do this, one needed a callous soul.

In 1748, Newton was in a terrifying storm in a ship off the coast of Ireland. Fearing for his life, he began praying in a way that led to his conversion to Christ, eventually becoming a minister in 1764. He began writing about his faith, and in 1772 he published the words to "Amazing Grace," a semi-autobiographical account of how God had "saved a wretch like me."

One of the most memorable lines in the hymn is "[I] was blind, but now I see." While this phrase is drawn from the story of Jesus' healing of the blind man in John 9:25, it also fits the story of Saul in Damascus.

B. Lesson Context: Damascus

Even in Paul's day, Damascus was an ancient city, having been inhabited for at least 3,000 years (see Genesis 14:15). It figures prominently in Old Testament narratives, mentioned there 44 times in Hebrew. It lies about 150 miles north of Jerusalem.

As for the New Testament era, the book of Acts mentions the city of Damascus 13 times. It was a city of many ethnicities. It had become part of the Greek world after the conquest by the forces of Alexander the Great (356–323 BC). Under later Roman influence, Damascus was designated as one of the cities of the Decapolis, meaning "10 cities" (see Matthew 4:25; Mark 5:20; 7:31). Jesus performed miracles near those cities (Matthew 8:28–33; Mark 5:1–17; 7:31–37), although not in Damascus itself. Greco-Roman ruins are extant in Damascus today. These include a section of an impressive boulevard that is likely "Straight Street" of Acts 9:11.

Damascus had many Jewish residents and synagogues in the first century AD. The historian Josephus (AD 37–100) records that thousands of Jews were killed by the Romans in Damascus during the first Jewish Revolt (about AD 66). This testifies to a large presence with many houses of worship in that city. It is no wonder that Saul would travel there, expecting to find synagogues where Jews had embraced Christianity.

We are not told how or when the gospel message reached Damascus. A reasonable speculation is that it occurred as a result of the Day of Pentecost, as people returned home (see

Acts 2:5–11). By the time of today’s lesson, at least a couple of years had passed since that event, the stoning of Stephen, and the beginning of Saul’s persecution. Acts 8:1 records that the Jerusalem church was scattered at that time, although only the destinations of Judea and Samaria are mentioned there.

C. Lesson Context: Saul

We first meet Saul—later known as Paul, beginning in Acts 13:9—when he acted as a witness to the stoning of Stephen in Acts 7:58; 8:1 (see also 22:20). He is presented elsewhere as an ambitious young man who was building a career in the rabbinic tradition of Jerusalem and as a trusted servant of the temple officials and religious leaders (Galatians 1:14; Philippians 3:4–6). He could never have been a priest, because he was from the tribe of Benjamin rather than the priestly tribe of Levi (see Deuteronomy 18:1; Hebrews 7:5; etc.). But he could have become one of the greatest of the Pharisees, like his teacher Gamaliel (Acts 5:34; 22:3).

The climb up this career ladder accelerated when Saul oversaw a direct assault on the believers in Jerusalem, where he searched for them house to house and threw into prison those he found (Acts 8:3; 26:10). He apparently did effective work at that, for the high priest agreed to authorize him to go to Damascus to find Christians and bring them back to Jerusalem for trial and punishment (9:1–2; 22:19; 26:9–11). His ambitious trip to Damascus was the occasion of the resurrected Jesus appearing to Saul and asking, “Why do you persecute me?” (9:4).

This Damascus Road story is told three times in Acts: once as narrated by author Luke (Acts 9:1–19) and twice as told by Saul/Paul himself (22:3–16; 26:9–18). As today’s text opens, Saul had been struck blind by the Lord on that road. Subsequently, Saul was led by the hand into the city (9:1–8).

I. Saul’s Waiting

(Acts 9:9–12)

A. Days of Fasting (v. 9)

9. For three days he was blind, and did not eat or drink anything.

We certainly can imagine what Saul was thinking for the *three days he was blind* and went without food or drink! Acts 9:11 (below) fills this in, but only in general terms.

B. Disciple of Damascus (v. 10)

10a. In Damascus there was a disciple named Ananias.

Luke, the author of the Gospel of Luke and the book of Acts, uses the word *disciple* dozens of times in his two works. In Luke’s Gospel, a disciple is a dedicated student of Jesus the teacher. In Acts, a disciple is a committed follower of the risen Lord. In that regard, *Ananias* may be much like many Christians today who serve the Lord faithfully in relative anonymity.

We gain a bit more information about this *disciple* in Acts 22:12. There Paul (formerly the Saul of today’s lesson) described Ananias as “a devout observer of the law and highly respected by all

the Jews living there.” We take care, of course, not to confuse this Ananias with two others by the same name in Acts 5:1 and 24:1.

Regarding the city of *Damascus*, see Lesson Context: Damascus, above.

10b. The Lord called to him in a vision, “Ananias!” “Yes, Lord,” he answered.

How surprised *Ananias* must have been to experience *a vision* in which *the Lord* communicated with him personally! The word *vision* implies a supernatural origin. It involves seeing things not normally seen, but it may also consist of hearing things not normally heard, as in the calling of Samuel (1 Samuel 3:1–14). The same may be the case here. But unlike the calling of young Samuel, Ananias recognized what was happening immediately. So he answered *Yes, Lord*, implying that Ananias was listening.

C. Directive by the Lord (vv. 11–12)

11a. The Lord told him,

The Lord may refer to God in the general sense that does not distinguish among members of the Trinity. In this case, however, it refers to the risen Jesus in particular, as Acts 9:17b (below) makes clear.

11b. “Go to the house of Judas on Straight Street and ask for a man from Tarsus named Saul, for he is praying.

The instructions are detailed—there can be no doubt regarding where and to whom Ananias is to go. *Straight Street* is the grand boulevard of Damascus. This may indicate that this particular *Judas*, the homeowner, is a well-connected person of some wealth. His may have been the sort of place with whom a person authorized by the high priest for his task (like *Saul* was; Acts 9:1–2) might find lodging.

Saul’s hometown of *Tarsus* was a well-known city about 250 miles north-northwest of Damascus and 355 miles due north of Jerusalem (straight line). Tarsus became the capital city for the Roman province of Cilicia in AD 72 (about 40 years after the events under consideration). Saul (as Paul) would later mention his civic pride in his hometown (Acts 21:39).

12. “In a vision he has seen a man named Ananias come and place his hands on him to restore his sight.”

With this information, *Ananias* learned he was not the only one to have received *a vision*. Saul himself had preceded Ananias in that regard, even though Saul had been blinded (Acts 9:8–9). Ananias learned something else as well: he was to be God’s chosen instrument for Saul to *restore his sight*. The picture is remarkable: powerful Saul, a Roman “citizen of no ordinary city” (21:39; compare 22:26–29), in the house of wealthy Judas, praying and blind.

The outcome determined by the Lord could have been accomplished easily by the Lord himself in some other way. But he chose instead to work through a human as he often did—and still does (compare and contrast Ezekiel 22:30).

II. Ananias’s Objection

(Acts 9:13–16)

A. Fear of Saul (vv. 13–14)

13–14. “Lord,” Ananias answered, “I have heard many reports about this man and all the harm he has done to your holy people in Jerusalem. And he has come here with authority from the chief priests to arrest all who call on your name.”

Saul’s reputation had preceded him—*Ananias* knew all about the notorious persecutor of the church and his plans. And Ananias was exactly the type of person Saul had come to arrest and haul back to *Jerusalem*.

We note in passing that Ananias referred to Jesus’ disciples as *holy people* and *all who call on your name* rather than “Christians” at this point in time; the latter designation was not to become reality until Acts 11:26. Ironically, the designation *holy people* eventually became a favorite of Saul’s (when better known as Paul) when referring to Christians in his letters (see Romans 1:7; 1 Corinthians 1:2; Ephesians 1:1).

Acts 22:19 and 26:9–11 shed light on what *to arrest all who call on your name* entailed. Saul entered synagogues to find believers in Jesus in order to have them beaten, imprisoned, and/or put to death. So zealous was Saul that he went out of his way to punish this new and (to his prior way of thinking) heretical sect.

B. Plans for Saul (vv. 15–16)

15. But the Lord said to Ananias, “Go! This man is my chosen instrument to proclaim my name to the Gentiles and their kings and to the people of Israel.

The Lord could have chosen to discipline Ananias for questioning the directive given to him. Instead, the Lord revealed part of his plans for Saul. Henceforth, Saul was to be a *chosen instrument* to the Lord rather than a vessel of the religious authorities in Jerusalem. That reassignment would involve being the apostle to *the Gentiles* (see Acts 13:46; 14:27; 18:6; 22:21; Romans 11:13; 15:16; Galatians 1:16; 2:8; Ephesians 3:8), including *their kings* (Acts 25:13–26:23). The book of Acts ends with Paul’s awaiting his hearing before the Roman emperor himself.

Even so, the regular practice of Saul (as Paul) would also be to try to convince his fellow Jews—*the people of Israel*—that Jesus was their promised Messiah (example: Acts 13:14–45). Indeed, preaching Jesus to fellow Jews would be his first order of business wherever Saul went (13:46–48; 18:5–6). By contrast, the task of the apostle Peter was something of a mirror image of that practice: Peter was the designated apostle to the Jews (Galatians 2:8–9), although he witnessed also to Gentiles (Acts 10:1–11:18).

As if receiving a vision from the Lord wasn’t enough of a shock to Ananias in and of itself, the revealed mission to the Gentiles was probably incomprehensible to him (compare Acts 11:18). Even more so was the predicted mission to kings, who were all Gentiles.

16. “I will show him how much he must suffer for my name.”

We continue to be in awe of God’s revealing his plans for Saul to Ananias, a revelation that God was certainly not obligated to provide. The fulfillment of the prediction in this verse is seen in 2 Corinthians 6:3–10; 11:23–29; and elsewhere. Paul’s suffering culminated in his execution (see 2 Timothy 4:6–7).

III. The Lord’s Healing

(Acts 9:17)

A. Obedience (v. 17a)

17a. Then Ananias went to the house and entered it. Placing his hands on Saul, he said,

The actions of *Ananias* in this half verse harmonize with actions required of him in Acts 9:11b, considered above.

B. Facts (v. 17b)

17b. “Brother Saul, the Lord—Jesus, who appeared to you on the road as you were coming here—has sent me so that you may see again and be filled with the Holy Spirit.”

This half verse ties things together and clarifies. *The Lord* of the visions had been none other than *Jesus* himself. It was none other than he who had *appeared* to *Saul* on the road (compare Acts 9:5; 22:8; 26:15) and who had spoken to Ananias in Damascus.

As Saul was just about to *see again*, Ananias announced something we have not yet read about in the visions from the Lord: Saul was to *be filled with the Holy Spirit*. This phrase occurs eight times in the New Testament, all in the writings of Luke. Persons involved in the other seven cases are John the Baptist (Luke 1:15), his mother and father (1:41, 67), the apostles on the Day of Pentecost (Acts 2:4), Peter before the Sanhedrin (4:8), a gathering of believers (4:31), and Saul himself (13:9).

Saul’s first action after having his sight restored was to be baptized, even before he broke his three-day fast from food (see Acts 9:18–19). He was strengthened in his soul and in his body. Later texts tell us that others sought to kill Saul, even enlisting the support of the city’s governor to arrest him (see 2 Corinthians 11:32). Instead, Saul’s life was saved in a surprising way (see Acts 9:25; 2 Corinthians 11:33).

Regarding our current lesson, that final case is particularly interesting for at least two reasons. First, it was the time when Saul began to be referred to as Paul. Second, it is ironic in that the one who had been struck blind as an enemy of Jesus became the instrument by which a “child of the devil” and an “enemy of everything that is right” (Acts 13:10) was himself struck blind (13:11).

Conclusion

A. Conversion, Call, or Both?

The story of Saul’s experience on the way to Damascus is usually portrayed as his “conversion.” That is a valid description in that the episode shows a life transformed from an unbeliever into a believer, one who was baptized and received the Holy Spirit. But was that Luke’s intent in documenting this story? Is Saul’s conversion experience, with its spectacular visions and drama, intended to be some sort of model or expectation for conversions today?

Certainly many conversions over the centuries have been dramatically sudden and powerful. I have heard the stories, and so have you. But I have never heard of an unbeliever being called in a vision to the sort of mission to which Saul was called. He was a young man (Acts 7:58) whom Jesus simply had to have as his servant. Jesus did not have to stir up passion in Saul; he was already passionate. Jesus did not have to infuse Saul with a great knowledge of Scripture; he

already had it. Jesus did not have to put an obedient spirit in Saul; he already had one. Unbeknownst to Saul, he had been preparing his whole life to be redirected and used by Jesus!

Jesus can still redirect a person's life while using all that person's life experiences in kingdom service. We should be on the lookout for such people—people whose life experiences, education, etc., could result in their being massively influential in service to the risen Lord! Which would be easier: (1) to create zeal in an apathetic person or (2) to take an already zealous person and redirect that zeal for Christ? Think of people you know or have heard about whose lives were transformed by the gospel and redirected to do great things for Christ. How does your own story mesh with theirs? How might it?

B. Prayer

Heavenly Father, it is sobering to think how well you know us. Thank you for the inspiring stories of your zealous ones! Empower and guide us to have similar zeal in doing great things for you. We pray in the name of Jesus Christ. Amen.

C. Thought to Remember

Christ calls us not only *to* him but also *for* him.¹
