

Research: Conversion of Saul (to Paul)

“. . . this was but a continuation of Saul’s persecuting activity as outlined in Acts 8:3, where we read that he “made havoc of the church” and imprisoned its members; while he had previously concurred in the martyrdom of Stephen (see Acts 8:1). The historical book of I Maccabees (15:15), included among the writings of the Apocrypha, cites a Roman consul’s letter of some two centuries earlier, which, if genuine, authorizes the high priest of that time to extradite Jewish malefactors to Jerusalem for punishment. Such a right of extradition, IB comments, would probably apply to Christians who had fled from Jerusalem rather than to residents of Damascus” (Bible Notes, periodicals).

Acts 9:1–5, 8 (to :), 9–12, 15 G o, 17, 18, 20

1AND Saul, yet breathing out threatenings and slaughter against the disciples of the Lord, went unto the high priest,

“Saul’s fury was no passing outburst, but enduring. Like other indulged passions, it grew with exercise, and had come to be as his very life-breath, and now planned, not only imprisonment, but death, for the heretics.

“Not content with carrying his hateful inquisition into the homes of the Christians in Jerusalem, he will follow the fugitives to Damascus. The extension of the persecution was his own thought. He was not the tool of the Sanhedrin, but their mover. They would probably have been content to cleanse Jerusalem, but the young zealot would not rest till he had followed the dispersed poison into every corner where it might have trickled. The high priest would not discourage such useful zeal, however he might smile at its excess” (MacLaren’s Expositions, www.biblehub.com).

“This very emphatical expression refers to what is related of Saul, Acts 8:3; and it shows that his zeal against the followers of Christ was so outrageous that he could be satisfied with nothing less than their utter destruction. It shows too, that the Jews were now at liberty to put them to death; probably, as Macknight observes, “because between the removal of Pontius Pilate, and the accession of Herod Agrippa, in the second year of the Emperor Claudius, who gave him all the dominions of his grandfather, Herod the Great, there was no procurator in Judea to restrain their intemperate zeal.” Saul, therefore, being thus freed from restraint, and at liberty to pursue his malicious design of endeavoring to effect their extirpation” (Benson Commentary, www.biblehub.com).

2And desired of him letters to Damascus to the synagogues, that if he found any of this way, whether they were men or women, he might bring them bound unto Jerusalem.

“*went to the high-priest* — Whom he knew to be much exasperated against them; and *desired of him letters to Damascus* — It is generally supposed that Caiaphas now filled the office of high-priest; and if so, as he was an inveterate enemy of Christ, and had a principal hand in his

crucifixion, he would doubtless be glad to employ so active and bigoted a zealot as Saul in carrying on the persecution against them, which at this time was very violent and severe. To *the synagogues*—it appears there were more than one in that city, as there were also in divers other cities of the Gentiles. These synagogues, it seems, had a jurisdiction over their own members, in the exercise of which, however, they were sometimes directed, as on this occasion, by the high-priest and council at Jerusalem” (Benson Commentary, www.biblehub.com).

“If he found any of this way.—Literally, *of the way*. We have here the first occurrence of a term which seems to have been used familiarly as a synonym for the disciples of Christ (Acts 19:9; Acts 19:23; Acts 22:4; Acts 24:14; Acts 24:22). It may have originated in the words in which Christ had claimed to be Himself the “Way,” as well as the “Truth” and the “Life” (John 14:6); or in His language as to the “strait way” that led to eternal life (Matthew 7:13); or, perhaps, again, in the prophecy of Isaiah (Isaiah 40:3) cited by the Baptist (Matthew 3:3; Mark 1:3), as to preparing “the way of the Lord.” Prior to the general acceptance of the term “Christian” (Acts 11:26) it served as a convenient, neutral designation by which the disciples could describe themselves, and which might be used by others who wished to speak respectfully. . . (Ellicott’s Commentary, www.biblehub.com).

3And as he journeyed, he came near Damascus: and suddenly there shined round about him a light from heaven:

“There shined round about him a light from heaven.—As in Acts 26:13, “above the brightness of the sun.” Three accounts of the event that thus turned the current of the life of Saul of Tarsus meet us in the Acts. (1) This, which gives the writer’s report of what he could hardly have heard from any lips but St. Paul’s; (2) St. Paul’s narrative before the Sanhedrin (Acts 22:6-11); (3) that which he gives before Agrippa (Acts 26:13-18). They present, as will be seen, considerable variations, such as were natural in the records of a manifestation which was partial to some, and complete to one only. Those that were with him heard a voice but did not distinguish words (Acts 22:9). They saw, as stated here (Acts 9:7), the light, but did not perceive the form of Him who spoke. The phenomena, in this respect, stand parallel to those of the voice from heaven, in which some heard the words, ascribing them to an angel, while others, hearing only the sound, said it thundered (see Note on John 12:29). It is not possible in such a history to draw a hard and fast line between the objective and the subjective. The man himself cannot say whether he is in the body or out of the body (2Corinthians 12:2-3). It is enough for him that he sees what others do not see, and hears what *they* do not hear, while they too hear and see enough to prove both to themselves and to him that something has occurred beyond the range of ordinary phenomena” (Ellicott’s Commentary, www.biblehub.com).

“There shined round about him a light from heaven (Acts 9:3)

The Greek verb here rendered "shined round about" is directly derived from the noun *astrape* (lightning), thus clearly suggesting the peculiar vividness of the light which surrounded Saul at the moment of his conversion" (Bible Notes, periodicals).

4And he fell to the earth, and heard a voice saying unto him, Saul, Saul, why persecutest thou me?

"And he fell to the earth,... Not being able to bear the light, and still less the divine glory and majesty which he perceived was present; and therefore, in great confusion, amazement, and fear, he fell with his face to the ground, and lay there prostrate and so did also those that were with him, Acts 26:14 and heard a voice, saying unto him, Saul, Saul, why persecutest thou me? this voice was the real voice of Christ in his human nature, and who visibly and in person appeared, and was seen by the apostle; Acts 26:16 the language he spoke in was the Hebrew tongue, and he calls him by his Hebrew name Saul, and which is doubled to denote vehemency and affection" (Gill's Exposition, www.biblehub.com).

5And he said, Who art thou, Lord? And the Lord said, I am Jesus whom thou persecutest: it is hard for thee to kick against the pricks.

"*And he said, Who art thou, Lord?*] Saul is sensible of the Divine nature of the vision, and shews this by his address. The appearance of Christ, though in a glorified body, must have been like that which He wore in His humanity, and since Saul does not recognize Jesus, we may almost certainly conclude that he had not known Him during His ministerial life.. .

"Paul gives the fuller form of the sentence, "I am Jesus of Nazareth." By using this name, the being whose Divine nature Saul has already acknowledged by calling him "Lord," at once and for ever puts an end to Saul's persecuting rage, for he is made to see, what his master Gamaliel had before suggested (Acts 5:39), that to persecute Jesus was to "fight against God" (Cambridge Bible, www.biblehub.com).

"What were the "pricks" against which he had been "kicking"? The answer is found in what we know of the facts of his life. There had been promptings, misgivings, warnings, which he had resisted and defied. Among the causes of these, we may well reckon the conversion of the friend and companion of his youth (see Note on Acts 4:36), and the warning counsel of Gamaliel (Acts 5:34-39), and the angel-face of Stephen (Acts 6:15), and the martyr's dying prayer (Acts 7:60), and the daily spectacle of those who were ready to go to prison and to death rather than to renounce the name of Jesus. In the frenzy of his zeal he had tried to crush these misgivings, and the effort to do so had brought with it discomfort and disquietude which made him more "exceedingly mad" against the disciples of the Lord. Now he learnt that he had all along, as his master had warned him, been "fighting against God," and that his only safety lay in the surrender of his own passionate resolve to the gracious and loving Will that was seeking to win him for itself" (Ellicott's Commentary, www.biblehub.com).

“ . . . it was also employed to signify the iron goad or spur with which oxen were urged forward, hence its metaphorical use in Acts 9:5, where the apostle is likened to a stubborn animal, kicking against the goads which discipline it. This was a proverbial expression. A plowman would carry a long pole or goad, which often had a sharp metal point. He would hold it in such a way as to prick an ox that kicked or did not move along. The prick thus urged the beast forward. This clause is not in the original except in some manuscripts. It seems to have been inserted from the parallel account of Paul's conversion found in Acts 26:12-18 at a slightly different point in the story. JFB comments: "The metaphor of an ox, only driving the goad deeper by kicking against it, is a classic one, and here forcibly expresses, not only the vanity, of all his [Paul's] measures for crushing the Gospel, but the deeper wound which every such effort inflicted upon himself." (Bible notes, periodicals)

8 And Saul arose from the earth; and when his eyes were opened, he saw no man: but they led him by the hand, and brought him into Damascus.

“And when his eyes were open, he saw no man — He was incapable of discerning objects; for his nerves had been so affected with the glory of that light which had shone from the body of Jesus, that he had lost the power of sight, Acts 22:11; *but they* — That were with him; *led him by the hand* — For as they had not looked so earnestly and steadfastly, as Saul had done, on the glorious light wherewith the person of Christ was surrounded, but had lain with their faces on the ground, their eye-sight remained. *And he was three days without sight* — By scales growing over his eyes, not only to intimate to him the blindness of the state he had been in, but to impress him also with a deeper sense of the almighty power of Christ, and to turn his thoughts inward, while he was rendered less capable of conversing with external objects” (Benson Commentary, www.biblehub.com).

“The vision had struck him blind. He opened his eyes, but their power had been taken away. Thus his physical condition becomes a fit representation of the mental blindness which he afterwards (Acts 26:9) deplores: “I verily thought with myself that I ought to do many things contrary to the name of Jesus of Nazareth” (Cambridge Bible, www.biblehub.com).

9 And he was three days without sight, and neither did eat nor drink.

Saul was blind for 3 days.

10 ¶ And there was a certain disciple at Damascus, named Ananias; and to him said the Lord in a vision, Ananias. And he said, Behold, I am here, Lord.

“To him said the Lord in a vision.—It is clear from Acts 9:16 that the writer is speaking of the Lord Jesus. The ready acceptance of the command seems to imply either personal discipleship or previous visions of the same nature” (Ellicott’s Commentary, www.biblehub.com).

“A certain disciple - A Christian. Many have supposed that he was one of the 70 disciples. But nothing more is certainly known of him than is related here. He had very probably been some time a Christian Acts 9:13, and had heard of Saul, but was personally a stranger to him. In Acts 22:12, it is said that he was a devout man according to the Law, having a good report of all the Jews which dwelt there. There was wisdom in sending such a Christian to Saul, as it might do much to conciliate the minds of the Jews there toward him.

“Said the Lord - The Lord Jesus is alone mentioned in all this transaction. And as he had commenced the work of converting Saul, it is evident that he is intended here. See the notes on Acts 1:24.

“In a vision - Perhaps by a dream. The main idea is, that he revealed his will to him in the case. The word "vision" is often used in speaking of the "communications" made to the prophets, and commonly means that future events were made to pass in review before the mind, as we look upon a landscape” (Barnes’ Notes, www.biblehub.com).

“He said, Behold, I am here, Lord; thereby showing his willingness to be sent on God’s message, and to do as God should bid him, as Samuel to Eli, **1 Samuel 3:5**” (Matthew Poole’s Commentary, www.biblehub.com).

11 And the Lord said unto him, Arise, and go into the street which is called Straight, and inquire in the house of Judas for one called Saul, of Tarsus: for, behold, he prayeth,

“Saul, of Tarsus.—The passage is memorable as the first mention of the Apostle’s birth-place. For an account of the city.

Behold, he prayeth.—The thoughts which the words suggest belong to the preacher rather than the commentator. We can but think of the contrast between the present and the recent past—between the threatening and slaughter which the persecutor breathed out as he drew near to Damascus, and the prayer of humble penitence in which he was now living. Estimating that prayer by that which came as the answer to it, we may think of it as including pardon for the past, light and wisdom for the future, strength to do the work to which he was now called, intercession for those whom he had before persecuted unto the death” (Ellicott’s Commentary, www.biblehub.com).

12 And hath seen in a vision a man named Ananias coming in, and putting his hand on him, that he might receive his sight.

15But the Lord said unto him, Go thy way: for he is a chosen vessel unto me, to bear my name before the Gentiles, and kings, and the children of Israel:

“ *But the Lord said, Go thy way* — Do not tell me how bad he has been; I know it well; but go with all speed, and execute that message of mercy with which I have charged thee; *for* — How great and aggravated soever his former transgressions may have been, I assure thee he *is a chosen vessel* — Or instrument; *unto me, to bear my name* — That is, to testify of me, and bear witness of my truth; *before the Gentiles* — *before nations*, namely, heathen nations; *and kings* — King Agrippa and Cesar himself; and *the children of Israel* — To thousands of whom, as well in the Gentile countries as in Judea, he shall testify the gospel of my grace” (Benson commentary, www.biblehub.com).

“Though the first noun commonly means a "vessel," or dish, it may refer more generally to a piece of equipment, an instrument”

17And Ananias went his way, and entered into the house; and putting his hands on him said, Brother Saul, the Lord, *even Jesus*, that appeared unto thee in the way as thou camest, hath sent me, that thou mightest receive thy sight, and be filled with the Holy Ghost.

“ *But the Lord said, Go thy way* — Do not tell me how bad he has been; I know it well; but go with all speed, and execute that message of mercy with which I have charged thee; *for* — How great and aggravated soever his former transgressions may have been, I assure thee he *is a chosen vessel* — Or instrument; *unto me, to bear my name* — That is, to testify of me, and bear witness of my truth; *before the Gentiles* — *before nations*, namely, heathen nations; *and kings* — King Agrippa and Cesar himself; and *the children of Israel* — To thousands of whom, as well in the Gentile countries as in Judea, he shall testify the gospel of my grace:” (Ellicott’s Commentary, www.biblehub.com).

“*The Lord, even Jesus* — That same Jesus *that appeared unto thee in the way* — And convinced thee of thy sin in persecuting him; *hath sent me* — To thee, to comfort thee: his light struck thee blind, but he hath sent me that *thou mightest receive thy sight* — For his design was not ultimately to blind the eyes of thy body, but to open the eyes of thy soul; and that thou mightest *be filled with the Holy Ghost* — Which shall be poured out upon thee, not only in his sanctifying graces, but in his miraculous gifts, before I leave this place” (Benson Commentary, www.biblehub.com).

18And immediately there fell from his eyes as it had been scales: and he received sight forthwith, and arose, and was baptized.

“*something like scales*, an emblem of the darkness and prejudice which before had veiled his eyes; and their *falling off* intimated the clear views of divine things which he should henceforth enjoy. *And he received his sight forthwith* — That is, immediately on the scales falling from his

eyes: the cure was sudden, to show that it was miraculous. *And he arose and was baptized* — And thereby submitted himself to the government of Christ, and cast himself upon his grace. Saul is now a disciple of Christ, and not only ceases to oppose him, but devotes himself entirely to his service and honour” (Benson Commentary, www.biblehub.com).

20 And straightway he preached Christ in the synagogues, that he is the Son of God.

“And straightway - Immediately. It was an evidence of the genuineness of his conversion that he was willing at once to avow himself to be the friend of the Lord Jesus.

He preached Christ - He proclaimed that Jesus was the Christ” (Barnes’ Notes, www.biblehub.com)

“And straightway he preached Christ in the synagogues, that he is the Son of God.

“Paul begins immediately to execute the office which was given and commanded to him, never consulting with flesh and blood” (Geneva Study Bible, www.biblehub.com).