

3. Saul and Ananias: his welcome into the church in Damascus (9:10–25)

Following the story as Luke tells it, we turn from the causes to the consequences of Saul's conversion. It is wonderful to see the transformation of his attitudes and character which immediately began to be apparent, and especially of his relationships to God, to the Christian church and to the unbelieving world.

First, Saul had a new reverence for God ³¹. Ananias, instructed to go and minister to the new convert, was told 'behold, he is praying' (11, RSV). Three days had elapsed since his encounter on the road with the risen Lord, during which he *did not eat or drink anything* (9). Presumably, then, he spent those days in fasting and praying, that is, abstaining from nourishment in order to give himself without distraction to prayer. Not that he had never fasted and prayed before. Like the Pharisee in Jesus' parable, he will have gone up to the temple to pray, and like him too could probably have claimed, 'I fast twice a week.'³¹ But now through Jesus and his cross Saul had been reconciled to God, and consequently enjoyed a new and immediate access to the Father, as the Spirit witnessed with his spirit that he was the Father's child.³² What was the content of his prayers? We can guess that he prayed for the forgiveness of all his sins, especially his self-righteousness and his cruel persecution of Jesus through his followers; for wisdom to know what God wanted him to do now; and for power to exercise whatever ministry he was to be given. No doubt also his prayers included worship, as he poured out his soul in praise that God should have had mercy on him. The very same mouth, which had been 'breathing out murderous threats against the Lord's disciples' (1), was now breathing out praises and prayers to God. 'The raging lion has been changed into a bleating lamb.'³³

Still today the first fruit of conversion is always a new awareness of the fatherhood of God, as the Spirit enables us to cry 'Abba, Father',³⁴ together with a gratitude for his mercy and a longing to know, please and serve him better. This is 'godliness', and no

³¹ Lk. 18:10, 12.

³² Rom. 8:16.

³³ Lenski, p. 360.

³⁴ Rom. 8:15.

claim to conversion is genuine if it does not issue in a godly life.

Secondly, Saul had a new relationship to the church , into which Ananias now introduced him. No wonder William Barclay calls Ananias ‘one of the forgotten heroes of the Christian church’.³⁵ At first, however, when told to minister to Saul, Ananias demurred. He was very reluctant to do any ‘follow-up work’ (to use the modern jargon), and his hesitation was understandable. To go to Saul would be tantamount to giving himself up to the police. It would be suicidal. For he had *heard many reports about this man and all the harm he had done to Jesus’ people in Jerusalem (13)*. Ananias also knew that Saul had come to Damascus *with authority from the chief priests to arrest all believers (14)*. But Jesus repeated his command ‘Go!’ and added that Saul was his *chosen instrument to carry his name before the Gentiles and their kings and before the people of Israel (15)*—a ministry which would involve him in much suffering for the sake of the same name (16).

So Ananias went to *Straight Street (11)*, which is still Damascus’ main east-west thoroughfare, and to the house of Judas, indeed to the very room where Saul was. There he placed his hands on him (17), perhaps to identify with him as he prayed for the healing of his blindness and for the fullness of the Spirit to empower him for his ministry. Even more, I suspect that this laying-on of hands was a gesture of love to a blind man, who could not see the smile on Ananias’ face, but could feel the pressure of his hands. At the same time, Ananias addressed him as ‘Brother Saul’ or ‘Saul, my brother’ (NEB). I never fail to be moved by these words. They may well have been the first words which Saul heard from Christian lips after his conversion, and they were words of fraternal welcome . They must have been music to his ears. What? Was the arch-enemy of the church to be welcomed as a brother? Was the dreaded fanatic to be received as a member of the family? Yes, it was so. Ananias explained how the same Jesus, who had appeared to him on the road, had sent him to him so that he might both recover his sight *and be filled with the Holy Spirit (17)*. Immediately *something like scales fell from Saul’s eyes, and he could see again* (Dr Luke uses some medical terminology here). After this he *was baptised (18)*, presumably by Ananias, who thus received him visibly and publicly into the community of Jesus. Only then did he take *some food*, so that after his three-day fast *he regained his strength (19a)*. Did Ananias prepare and serve the meal, as well as baptize him? If so, he recognized that the young convert had physical as well as

³⁵ Barclay, p. 74.

spiritual needs.

The next thing we are told is that *Saul spent several days with the disciples in Damascus (19b)*. He knew that he now belonged to the very company which he had previously been trying to destroy, and he showed this plainly by beginning to *preach in the synagogues that Jesus is the Son of God (20)*. It is amazing that he was accepted. Indeed, the people who heard him preach were *astonished* ('staggered', *JBP*), asking if he was not *the man who caused havoc in Jerusalem among believers and who had come to Damascus to take them as prisoners to the chief priests (21)*. Luke does not tell us how their anxious questions were answered, but perhaps Ananias helped to reassure them. Meanwhile, Saul himself *grew more and more powerful* as a witness and apologist, to such an extent that he *baffled the Jews ... in Damascus by proving that Jesus was the Christ (22)*.

Saul did not settle down with the Damascus Christians for any length of time, however. Luke goes on to describe how he left the city *after many days had gone by (23a)*. It is an intentionally vague time reference, but we know from [Galatians 1:17–18](#) that these 'many days' actually lasted three years ³⁶, and that during this period Saul was in Arabia. He need not have travelled far, because at that time the north-west tip of Arabia reached nearly to Damascus. But why did he go to Arabia? Some think he went on a preaching mission, but others suggest more cogently that he needed time to be quiet, and that [Jesus](#) now revealed to him those distinctive truths of Jewish-Gentile solidarity in the body of Christ which he would later call 'the mystery made known to me by revelation', 'my gospel' and 'the gospel ... I received by revelation from [Jesus Christ](#)'.³⁶ Some have even conjectured that those three years in Arabia were a deliberate compensation for the three years with [Jesus](#) which the other apostles had had but Saul had not. At all events, after his time in Arabia Saul returned to Damascus.³⁷ Not for long, though. For *the Jews conspired to kill him (23b)* and *day and night ... kept close watch on the city gates in order to kill him (24)*. Somehow or other Saul *learned of their plan*, and in the end *his followers* (an interesting indication that his leadership was already recognized and had attracted a following) *lowered him in a basket through an opening in the wall (25)*, so that he escaped to Jerusalem.

³⁶ E.g. [Eph. 3:3](#); [Rom. 16:25](#); [Gal. 1:11–12](#).

³⁷ [Gal. 1:17](#).