

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](#).

4. Saul and Barnabas: his introduction to the apostles in Jerusalem (9:26–31)

Saul's experience in Jerusalem was similar to his experience in Damascus. On his arrival in the capital city, *he tried to join the disciples*, since he knew he was one of them, but they were filled with scepticism and fear: *they were all afraid of him, not believing that he really was a disciple* (26). Presumably they had not heard of him for three years. But this time Barnabas came to the rescue. True to his disposition and his name, *he took him and brought him to the apostles* (in particular to Peter and James according to Gal. 1:18–20), and told them how he *had seen the Lord, the Lord had spoken to him, and in Damascus he had preached fearlessly in the name of Jesus* (27). As a result of this testimonial, Saul was accepted as a Christian brother. He *stayed with them and moved about freely in Jerusalem* during the two weeks we know that he spent there.³⁸

Thus Saul was clear about his membership of the new society of Jesus. First in Damascus, then in Jerusalem, he sought out 'the disciples' (19, 26). True, both groups hesitated, but their initial scepticism was overcome. Thank God for Ananias who introduced Saul to the fellowship in Damascus, and for Barnabas who did the same thing for him later in Jerusalem. But for them, and the welcome they secured for him, the whole course of church history might have been different.

True conversion always issues in church membership. It is not only that converts must join the Christian community, but that the Christian community must welcome converts, especially those from a different religious, ethnic or social background. There is an urgent need for modern Ananiases and Barnabases who overcome their scruples and hesitations, and take the initiative to befriend newcomers.

In addition to his new reverence for God, and new relationship to the church, Saul recognized that he had a new responsibility to the world, especially as a witness. According to his own account of his conversion, it was already on the Damascus road that Jesus appointed him 'as a servant and as a witness' and indeed as the apostle to the Gentiles (26:16ff.). Jesus then confirmed to Ananias that Saul was his 'chosen instrument' (15), and Ananias passed on to Saul Jesus' commission to 'be his witness to all men' of what he had seen and heard (22:15). Several characteristics of his witness are noteworthy.

³⁸ Gal. 1:18.

First, it was Christ-centred. In Damascus Saul both ‘preached’ that Jesus was the Son of God (20) and ‘proved’ that he was the Christ (22). The arguments from Old Testament Scripture and from his own experience coincided. They both focused on Christ, and this is the task of the Christian witness. Testimony is not a synonym for autobiography. To witness is to speak of Christ. Our own experience may illustrate, but must not dominate, our testimony.

Secondly, Saul’s witness to Christ was given in the power of the Holy Spirit (17), so that he ‘grew more and more powerful’ (22). No wonder, for the supreme function of the Spirit is to bear witness to Christ.³⁹

Thirdly, his witness was courageous. Twice Luke alludes to the ‘boldness’ of his preaching, first in Damascus (27), in the very synagogues to which the high priest had addressed letters authorizing Saul to arrest Christians (2, 20), and then in Jerusalem itself (28), the seat of the Sanhedrin from whom the authority had come. He also debated with the Grecian Jews or Hellenists (29), like Stephen and perhaps in the same synagogue (6:8ff.).

Fourthly, Saul’s witness was costly. He suffered for his testimony, as Jesus had warned that he would: ‘I will show him how much he must suffer for my name’ (16). Already in Damascus he went in danger of his life (23–24) so that, when all the city’s exits were sealed, he had to make that ignominious escape in a basket (25).⁴⁰ In Jerusalem too some Hellenists tried to kill him (29), so that Jesus warned him to leave the city immediately (22:17–18). So his Christian brothers personally *took him down to Caesarea* on the coast and from there *sent him off by ship to Tarsus*, his home town, where he stayed incognito for the next seven or eight years.

Thus the story of Saul’s conversion in Acts 9 begins with him leaving Jerusalem with an official mandate from the high priest to arrest fugitive Christians, and ends with him leaving Jerusalem as a fugitive Christian himself. Saul the persecutor has become Saul the persecuted. And in the rest of the Acts story Luke tells us more of his hero’s sufferings, how he was stoned in Lystra and left for dead, beaten and imprisoned in Philippi, the centre of a public riot in Ephesus, arrested and imprisoned in Jerusalem, shipwrecked in the Mediterranean, and finally held in custody in Rome. Witness to

³⁹ E.g. Jn. 15:26–27.

⁴⁰ Cf. 2 Cor. 11:32–33.

Christ involves suffering for Christ. It is not an accident that the Greek word for witness (*martyrs*) came to be associated with martyrdom. ‘Suffering, then, is the badge of true discipleship’, wrote Bonhoeffer.⁴¹

Yet the world’s opposition did not impede the spread of the gospel or the growth of the church. On the contrary, Luke ends his narrative of Saul’s conversion, which culminated in his providential escape from danger, with another of his summary verses (31). He describes the church, which has now spread throughout *Judea, Galilee* and *Samaria*, as having five characteristics—peace (free from external interference), strength (consolidating its position), encouragement (enjoying *paraklēsis*, the special ministry of the Holy Spirit, the Paraclete), growth (multiplying numerically) and godliness (*living in the fear of the Lord*).

Conclusion

We have been considering the cause and effects of Saul’s conversion. Our overall impression has been of the grace of God which could be the cause of such great effects, laying hold of such an obstinate rebel and completely transforming him ‘from a wolf to a sheep’.⁴² Luke’s story should persuade us to expect more from God in relation to both the unconverted and the newly converted.

As for the unconverted, there are many Sauls of Tarsus in the world today. Like him they are richly endowed with natural gifts of intellect and character; men and women of personality, energy, initiative and drive; having the courage of their non-Christian convictions; utterly sincere, but sincerely mistaken; travelling, as it were, from Jerusalem to Damascus instead of from Damascus to Jerusalem; hard, stubborn, even fanatical, in their rejection of Jesus Christ. But they are not beyond his sovereign grace. We need more faith, more holy expectation, which will lead us to pray for them (as we may be sure the early Christians prayed for Saul) that Christ will first prick them with his goads and then decisively lay hold of them.

But we should never be satisfied with a person’s conversion. That is only the beginning. The same grace which brings a person to new birth is able to transform him or her into Christ’s image.⁴³ Every new convert becomes a changed person, and has new titles

⁴¹ *The Cost of Discipleship* by Dietrich Bonhoeffer (Macmillan, 1963), p. 100.

⁴² Calvin, II, p. 273.

to prove it, namely a ‘disciple’ (26) or ‘saint’ (13), newly related to God, a ‘brother’ (17) or sister, newly related to the church, and a ‘witness’ (22:15; 26:16), newly related to the world. If these three relationships—to God, the church and the world—are not seen in professed converts, we have good reason to question the reality of their conversion. But whenever they are visibly present, we have good reason to magnify the grace of God.

⁴³ E.g. 2 Cor. 3:18.