

Day 7 : Acts 9:26-31 – Saul at Jerusalem

Prayerfully read: Acts 22

Understanding

Galatians 1:18 tells us that these events were three years (the “many days” of verse 23) later. We can only guess as to what the church in Jerusalem thought had become of Saul the persecutor – they did not believe the reports that he had become a Christian (verse 26). Forgetting the dramatic change in their own lives, they presumably thought that such was impossible!

Barnabas is the “son of encouragement” who we have met in 4:36. Here again we find him bringing blessing to the church. He sees that the church is doing what they thought was safest or easiest, but in fact was wrong – and he took action to put it right.

Paul's meeting with the apostles is presumably the meeting mentioned with Peter and James in Galatians 1:18-19.

The “Hellenists” (v29) are the Jews who had adopted Greek culture through their ancestors being dispersed from Jerusalem.

Note that the church took steps to avoid Saul being a martyr (verse 30). As it was the Lord's will for him to take the gospel to the Gentiles, it was not the Lord's will for him to be martyred. Here was a decision of wisdom. Tarsus (v30) was Saul's city of birth (9:11, 21:39, 22:3), in Cilicia.

Verse 31 is Luke's summary statement. In verse 1, Saul was a murderous persecutor; now, he is a bold, gifted brother. What glorious, divine grace!

Doctrines (Teachings)

- The Lord is sovereign in all the opposition which the church faces, and though it may be a process of years, yet he will bring good out of it. In Communist China all missionaries were banned, and in the 1960s all religion at all was banned. But in the last 20 years, the church's growth in that land has been phenomenal, and there are an estimated 50 million converts at least. What Satan intends for evil, God uses for good (Romans 8:28-31).

Applying (Make sure that you are detailed and specific!)

- Look at the each element of the description of the Christians and churches in verse 31, and compare it to your own walk.
- What can you do to bring encouragement to a fellow-believer, or the church as a whole?

The Acts Of The Apostles

Daily Bible Reading Notes

Week 7 (Chapter 8:26-9:31)

Grace Church Belper

<http://www.gracebelper.org.uk/>

(For previous weeks' notes, visit
<http://www.gracebelper.org.uk/readingnotes.php>)

Day 1 : Acts 8:26-31 – Philip and the Eunuch

Prayerfully read (above and): Isaiah 52

Understanding

Verse 26 – Gaza was an ancient city (Judges 1:18) in the land of the Philistines, in the south-west of Judea near the Mediterranean coast.

The word “eunuch” here might only mean a high court servant, though it can mean a physical eunuch. “Candace” likewise may be a dynastic title belonging to a chain of rulers – like “Pharaoh” in Egypt or “Caesar” in Rome. The eunuch had adopted the Jewish religion, having come to Jerusalem to worship (v27), and being a student of the prophets (v28). As such, he is not a full Gentile, but neither was he a full Jew (especially if he was a eunuch and could not be circumcised – Deuteronomy 23:1). But he does represent a new advance for the church, for unlike the Samaritans he neither lives within the land of Israel, nor (probably) has immediate Jewish ancestry. The gospel is slowly advancing as promised from Jerusalem to the ends of the earth (Acts 1:8).

Again, this advance happened through God's sovereign intervention – an angel giving a direct instruction, and the Holy Spirit guiding Philip to the chariot. Philip shows us an evangelist's heart – he obeyed the Lord, ran to the chariot, and quickly engaged the man in spiritual conversation (v27, 30).

Doctrines (Teachings)

- The church advances and will continue to advance in the world because it is not a human institution. It is the body of which Christ is the head. Christ is exalted at the right hand of God, and has been given all authority in heaven and in earth (Matthew 28:18). Christ has an unbreakable purpose to build his church, and to see it advance amongst peoples of every nationality and culture (Matthew 16:18, Rev. 7:11).
- God is sovereign, but normally uses means. Instead of an angel appearing to the eunuch, he appeared to Philip who was sent to the eunuch. It is the privilege and responsibility of Christians to be used in the advance of the church.

Applying (Make sure that you are detailed and specific!)

- What involvement do I have in the church's worldwide missionary task? Are there missionaries I pray for, give to, or write letters of encouragement to? Am I looking for the opportunities that God gives me to speak to others of spiritual things, and to direct them to Christ?

Day 6 : Acts 9:20-25 – Saul In Damascus

Prayerfully read: Galatians 1

Understanding

Saul, who had come to the synagogues to track down and take prisoner the believers, instead appears in the synagogues as a believer himself. And not one who needed to be discovered by stealth – but as one who openly, and boldly preached Jesus as the Christ and the Son of God. The change in him was astonishing – so astonishing that those who heard were “amazed” (v21).

Verse 23 tells us that “many” days past. Galatians 1:18 tells us that actually a full three years past before he went to Jerusalem (verse 26 onwards).

2 Corinthians 11:32,33 tell us that the Jews had gained the help of the Nabatean king, Aretas, to apprehend Paul.

Doctrines (Teachings)

- Christ gives gifts to his church – in fact, to every believer (see Romans 12, 1 Corinthians 12). The ability to perform some act of spiritual service, whether public or private, is through the Holy Spirit. Saul did not require many years of training or instruction before he was able to preach Christ. Undoubtedly, though, he received a far greater measure of the Holy Spirit's power and influence, which enabled him to make progress in the Christian faith at a far faster rate than any man since. As none of us have met the ascended Christ physically and been given a personal commission to preach to the nations, in the churches today it is right that preaching gifts should be tested, cautiously. Paul himself warned that no novice should be suddenly thrust into the ministry (1 Timothy 3:6). Nevertheless, as soon as a person is converted, he should seek to use his gifts to do good to and for the church.

Applying (Make sure that you are detailed and specific!)

- If you are converted, then how are you serving Christ? What abilities has he given you? What has he especially given you a heart for, or an interest in, in his kingdom? Are you being obedient? It was normal in Paul's letters for the use of our gifts to be almost the *first* thing that he starts talking about when he talks about the Christian life (e.g. Romans 12, Ephesians 4).
- A converted person is a dramatically different person to an unconverted person- unless they backslide into the world, or are never fed from their birth. How about you? Where do you need to be more different?

Day 5 : Acts 9:10-19 – Saul Is Baptised

Prayerfully read: 1 Corinthians 15:1-34

Understanding

“Straight Street” is still the main east-west street running through Damascus.

The one sent to Saul to open his eyes, give him the gift of the Holy Spirit and to baptise him was not an apostle or one of the deacons, but an ordinary Christian, Ananias. This made it clear that Saul was not dependent on the other twelve apostles, but was appointed independently and was a full apostle in his own right – see the argument in Galatians 1, where he has to refute those who believed otherwise.

Saul and his coming to Damascus were things that Ananias already knew about – so he found the Lord's commandment puzzling! But the Lord explained to Ananias that Saul was chosen – to witness to “Gentiles, kings, and the children of Israel” (v15), and to suffer very greatly for the Lord's sake (v16).

So we find Saul, instead of persecuting the disciples at Damascus, spending time with them, now as a brother and fellow believer (v19).

Doctrines (Teachings)

- Saul was a full apostle of the faith, though appointed in a unique and extraordinary way. This was because he would have a unique commission – to be the “apostle to the Gentiles”, through whom the gospel would make its eventual advance to the heart of the empire, Rome.
- Whilst the Lord normally chooses to use means to accomplish his purposes, he is not dependent upon them. When he pleases, he can do away with them and work in a different way – just as here, no apostle was sent from Jerusalem to give Paul the Spirit (as had happened in Samaria), but instead an ordinary Christian from Damascus was used.

Applying (Make sure that you are detailed and specific!)

- What does it take for you to obey the Lord's commands? The obedience which the Lord delights in is obedience which is quick, complete, and joyful – done as to him. Are there areas in which you are resisting, and want more explanations before you do what you know the Lord has commanded?
- Do you have faith that the Lord may do extraordinary things through “ordinary” people? Ask the Lord for more faith!

Day 2 : Acts 8:32-40 – A Eunuch Trusts Christ

Prayerfully read: Isaiah 53

Understanding

The eunuch was reading from Isaiah 53. Isaiah 53 is one of the Old Testament's most famous and clearest descriptions of the sufferings which the Messiah would suffer. The Jews looked for a Messiah who would have a career of glorious conquest, like his ancestor King David. The Scriptures predicted that too. But the Jews, in their desire for earthly rule, overlooked what was written about his sufferings and death.

Isaiah 53 is also one of the clearest parts of the Old or New Testament in speaking about the purpose of the Messiah's sufferings. He died for sins which were not his own. Isaiah wrote of things far beyond his own experience – hence the eunuch's question, wondering just who it could be that he had in mind. Philip had learnt that the Old Testament is a book of witness to the coming Christ, and so preached him to him. He must also have preached the necessity of repentance and of baptism to express that repentance (v36).

Doctrines (Teachings)

- Christ died as a “penal substitute”. This means that he died instead of others – instead of sinners, and that what he did instead of them was to take the penalty which God's justice demanded of them. The primary reason for his death was not as an example, or in order to influence men, but rather to make an atonement for men's sins, in order to satisfy the righteous requirements of God. This is the heart of the gospel.
- Baptism is the first act of obedience for the new Christian. Whilst today we often make it public and have it many months later, there is no necessary reason for this. The eunuch was baptised immediately with only his chariot driver and any other servants to witness.

Applying (Make sure that you are detailed and specific!)

- Did Christ die for your sins? Have you rested in him and the perfection of what he did at Calvary? Has he become more than a mere example or encouragement to you – has he also become your own personal Saviour? If so, have you obeyed his first commandment to you in the Christian life – to go under the water and come up again in Christian baptism?
- What do you do when aware of sin? Do you try to cover over it, or carry a burden of guilt – or do you take it straight to Jesus and confess it?

Day 3 : Acts 9:1-9 – The Conversion of Saul

Prayerfully read: Acts 22

Understanding

We do not hear of Philip again until Acts 21. Luke's attention now begins to turn to the story of how the Gentiles were brought into the church, and how the gospel advanced from Jerusalem and Judea and the world inhabited by Jews at large to the centre of the empire, Rome. Paul will be a major figure in this advance, and Luke now tells us about his conversion.

Saul was complicit in the murder of Stephen, and a major, energetic figure in the persecution of the church (8:1-3). That is the frame of mind in which we find him again. The church was now more scattered, but Saul was so full of hatred to it that he was quite willing to make long journeys in order to fight against it. Damascus was beyond the north of Israel's borders, but Roman law allowed the Jews to police their own people even there. Maybe some Christians fled especially to Damascus to escape the persecution.

If this event was before AD 36 (which is probably so), then the “high priest” (v1) was still Caiaphas, a determined enemy of the church.

In verse 2, Christianity is called “the Way” for the first time.

Though this conversion was sudden, and though outwardly Saul was quite unwavering in his hatred of Christianity, he tells us in Romans 7:7-13 that there had been a battle going on within for some time. Though outwardly he was obedient to the law (Philippians 3:6), the law also commanded a right heart attitude – not to covet – which was beyond Saul's control.

Doctrines (Teachings)

- The Lord is sovereign in conversion. He may convert who he wishes, when he wishes, how he wishes. Even the most violent and determined hater of Christianity may be brought to his knees in a moment – if the Lord will. Some of us will have testimonies of sudden conversions; others will have testimonies of a long, drawn out process.

Applying (Make sure that you are detailed and specific!)

- Are you converted? Is your attitude to Jesus Christ still one of resistance, or have you yielded to him as Lord? Has the Lord been making you aware of your sin, but you are “kicking against the goads” (v5)?
- Are there unconverted people who you do not pray for, because you think it is too hard for the Lord? List them, and pray for them!

Day 4 : Acts 9:1-9 – Conversion of Saul (2)

Prayerfully read: Acts 26

Understanding

There are three accounts in Acts of Saul's conversion, and each gives us new details. Plus, Paul speaks of it in other places. At this time, Saul saw the risen Christ (9:17, 27, 22:14, 26:16, 1 Cor. 9:1, 15:8), but the glory of the vision blinded him (v8). His companions saw only the light (9:7, 22:9), and heard a sound, but did not understand the conversation.

Note that Christ asked “why are you persecuting *me*” - not “*them*”.

“Lord” in verse 5 may only mean “sir”, a respectful term of address.

Note the irony – Saul was intending to enter Damascus in a display of power and authority, appear suddenly and drag away the Christians as if slaves. However, instead the Lord appears suddenly to him, and has him led as a helpless slave into Damascus. The would-be conqueror is conquered!

Doctrines (Teachings)

- Christ is united with his people. When they suffer, he suffers. When they are persecuted, he is persecuted. Christians face nothing alone – the Lord is not only near, but united to them (1 Cor. 12:26-27).
- The Lord's enemies are totally within his power. In a moment he may completely disable them, if he pleases. If, then he has enemies who are not disabled, then it can only be because the Lord has some purpose in his wisdom and sovereignty which he wishes to accomplish through allowing them to continue.
- Every person has a conscience, and God's law makes appeals not only to our outward behaviour but to our conscience too. The only way to be exposed to God and yet remain untroubled by our inability to meet his demands is to resist him, as Saul did (v5).

Applying (Make sure that you are detailed and specific!)

- What difference does Christ's unity with his people make to you, if you are a believer? How does it affect your attitudes to other believers, and to the church? According to Jesus, what is done to his church, is done to him (v4).
- If you are a Christian, how do you view your difficulties in life? How does this chapter teach the church to view those who oppose it? Do you do so? What might you do differently?