

*Acts 9:1-18¹*1. Paul's New Witness to Christ ([9:1–31](#))

It would be hard to overestimate the significance of Paul's conversion, not only for the subsequent narrative of Acts but for the history of Christianity as a whole. He was, in his own words, called to be a missionary to the Gentiles (cf. [Gal 1:16](#)), and Acts certainly confirms that picture. For Luke and for Paul (cf. [1 Cor 15:9f.](#)) there was no more certain evidence of God's power and grace than in his transformation of the church's persecutor into its greatest witness. Paul's was a radical conversion experience, a total turnabout accomplished by Christ himself. Its importance for Luke is evidenced by the fact that he told the story in some detail three times in Acts—here in [9:1–30](#), then in Paul's speech before a Jewish crowd in the temple area ([22:3–21](#)), and finally in Paul's defense before the Jewish King Agrippa ([26:2–23](#)).

[Acts 9:1–30](#) emphasizes the complete transformation of Paul from the persecutor of the church to the one who was persecuted for his witness to Christ. Scholars have often pointed to various stories that at certain points offer analogies to Paul's experience, such as that of Heliodorus's vision and resulting blindness as related in [2 Macc 3](#) or the radical repentance and conversion of Asenath in the story of Joseph and Asenath. The closest affinities of Paul's conversion account, however, are to be found in the many Old Testament allusions and strong flavor of Old Testament language that permeates the narrative. The closest "parallel" is to be found in the emphasis on visions and the divine leading in the story of Cornelius's conversion in the next chapters of Acts. Both incidents are essential to the Gentile mission, and both are wholly due to God's direct intervention. Paul's conversion account falls into two main parts: vv. [1–22](#) relate the story of his transformation from persecutor of the church to witness for Christ, and vv. [23–31](#) show how the former persecutor became the one persecuted for bearing the name of Christ.

(1) Paul the Converted ([9:1–22](#))

¹Meanwhile, Saul was still breathing out murderous threats against the Lord's disciples. He went to the high priest ²and asked him for letters to the synagogues in Damascus, so that if he found any there who belonged to the Way, whether men or women, he might take them as prisoners to Jerusalem. ³As he neared Damascus on his journey, suddenly a light from heaven flashed around him. ⁴He fell to the ground and heard a voice say to him, "Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?"

⁵"Who are you, Lord?" Saul asked.

"I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting," he replied. ⁶"Now get up and go into the city, and you will be told what you must do."

⁷The men traveling with Saul stood there speechless; they heard the sound but did not see anyone. ⁸Saul got up from the ground, but when he opened his eyes he could see nothing. So they led him by the hand into Damascus. ⁹For three days he was blind, and did not eat or drink anything.

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

"Yes, Lord," he answered.

1. John B. Polhill, *New American Commentary – Volume 26: Acts*, (Nashville, TN: Broadman Press, 1992), WORDsearch CROSS e-book, 230-237.

¹¹The 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. ¹²In 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 saints in Jerusalem. ¹⁴And he has come here with authority from the chief priests to arrest all who call on your name.”

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

¹⁷Then 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.” ¹⁸Immediately, something like scales fell from Saul’s eyes, and he could see again. He got up and was baptized, ¹⁹and after taking some food, he regained his strength.

Saul spent several days with the disciples in Damascus. ²⁰At once he began to preach in the synagogues that Jesus is the Son of God. ²¹All those who heard him were astonished and asked, “Isn’t he the man who raised havoc in Jerusalem among those who call on this name? And hasn’t he come here to take them as prisoners to the chief priests?” ²²Yet Saul grew more and more powerful and baffled the Jews living in Damascus by proving that Jesus is the Christ.

The first half of Paul’s conversion account divides into three main sections: the appearance on the Damascus road (vv. [1–9](#)), the ministry of Ananias to Paul (vv. [10–18a](#)), and the final confirmation of Paul’s conversion through his bold witness in the Jewish synagogues of Damascus (vv. [18b–22](#)).

CHRIST’S APPEARANCE TO PAUL ([9:1–9](#)).

[9:1–2](#). The first two verses provide the chronological and geographical setting. More significantly, they picture the preconversion Paul, which contrasts radically with the picture of Paul after the encounter on the Damascus road. Verse [1](#) picks up the picture in [8:3](#). Paul was still the church’s number one enemy, still raging against it, “breathing out murderous threats.” Paul’s role was not one of executioner but of arresting officer. His intent was to stamp out the new movement; and when it did come to a question of execution of Christians, he did not hesitate to vote for the death penalty (cf. [26:10](#)). Originally, Paul’s activity had primarily been directed at the Christians in and around Jerusalem ([8:3](#); [26:10](#)). Evidently, some had fled the city and taken refuge in Damascus. Paul approached the high priest, who probably was still Caiaphas at this time. He requested not official extradition papers but more likely introductory letters from the Sanhedrin to the synagogues of Damascus in order to secure their support in his efforts to apprehend the Christian fugitives and return them to Jerusalem for trial.

Much debate centers on whether the Sanhedrin would have jurisdiction in such cases, but there is some evidence the high priest was given the right of extradition in an earlier time. The possibility remains open that the Romans still granted him similar rights. How much autonomy the Jewish synagogues enjoyed during the Roman period with regard to discipline of their members for religious offenses is unclear. Paul himself spoke of his receiving scourgings from the synagogues on five occasions ([2 Cor 11:24](#)). His very desire to go to Damascus betrays his searing rage against the Christians, especially if one remembers that Damascus was a good six-day foot journey from Jerusalem. The detail that the Christians were referred to as those who belonged to “the way” (v. [2](#)) perhaps reflects an early self-designation of the Jewish Christian community in which they saw themselves as the “true way” within the larger Jewish community.

9:3–6 As Paul approached the gates of Damascus, suddenly a great light from heaven flashed around him. The light must have been intense, for the time of the occurrence was “around midday” (cf. [22:6](#); [26:13](#)). The light represents the heavenly epiphany, the divine glory that enveloped the little caravan. At the sight the awe-struck Paul fell to the ground, a reaction found in the Old Testament from those who experienced a similar divine visitation. Then a voice came from heaven, “Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?” Paul answered, “Who are you, Lord?” Some note that at this point Paul did not recognize Jesus as the one speaking to him and that his reference to “Lord” need not mean more than a polite “sir,” a meaning the Greek word *kyrie* often has. But Paul did recognize the voice of a heavenly messenger and probably intended “Lord” in that sense (cf. [Exod 3:13](#)). In any event, he quickly learned who the “Lord” was: “I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting.” It would be hard to imagine how these words must have struck Paul. They were a complete refutation of all he had been. He had persecuted Christians for their “blasphemous lie” that Jesus was risen, that he was the Lord reigning in glory. Now Paul himself beheld that same Jesus and the undeniable proof that he both lived and reigned in glory.

From this point on, Paul said nothing. He was completely broken. How could he respond? He had not persecuted a band of miscreant messianists. In persecuting the church, he had persecuted the risen Lord himself. It is unlikely that the concept of the body of Christ is behind the expression here, but surely the germ of Paul’s later theology of the church is. Christ is identified with his disciples. When they suffer, he suffers (cf. [Luke 10:16](#)). Jesus’ final words to Paul were not a commission but a directive. He was to go into the city and await further instruction. There was no elaboration of Paul’s vision. All the emphasis was on the fact that Paul saw the Lord—nothing more. This is very much in keeping with Paul’s own testimony about his conversion, which concentrated on one fact— that he *saw* the Lord (cf. [1 Cor 9:1](#); [15:8](#); [Gal 1:16](#)). And that was enough. The certainty of the resurrection turned Paul from Jesus’ most zealous persecutor to his most ardent witness.

9:7–9 Paul’s traveling companions served as authenticators that what happened to Paul was an objective event, not merely a rumbling of his inner psyche. They heard a sound, but they did not see the vision of Jesus. [Acts 22:9](#) says that they saw the light but did not hear the voice of the one who spoke with Paul. The two accounts are not contradictory but underline the same event. Paul’s companions heard a sound and saw a light. They could verify that an objective heavenly manifestation took place. They did not participate in the heavenly communication, however, neither seeing the vision of Jesus nor hearing the words spoken to Paul. The revelation was solely to Paul. So powerful was that revelation that Paul was totally blind when he rose to his feet and opened his eyes. The miracle was not a punitive one, as with Elymas the magician ([Acts 13:11](#)). Rather, the picture is of Paul in his brokenness and helplessness. The radiance of his vision had blinded him. Reduced to total powerlessness, he had to be led by others into the city. That he neither ate nor drank for three days could be an expression of penitence on Paul’s part but is more likely the result of his shock, confusion, and utter brokenness of will. The raging persecutor had been reduced to a shambles.

THE CALL TO BE PERSECUTED ([9:10–18a](#)).

9:10a The second scene in Paul’s conversion story took place in Damascus and revolved around a disciple named Ananias. Damascus was an ancient city, dating back at least into the second millennium B.C. It was an oasis city on the border of the Arabian desert and along the main trade route linking Egypt and Mesopotamia. From 64 B.C. it had been under Roman influence and belonged to the association of ten Hellenistic cities known as the Decapolis. It had a large Jewish population, as is attested by the many Jews Josephus reported were killed there during the Jewish war with Rome.

How Christians first reached Damascus is unknown. Ananias seems to have been a disciple in Damascus before the current stream of refugees from Paul's persecution arrived. Luke gave a selective, not a complete, picture of the geographical spread of Christianity. The evidence of Acts itself would indicate the early spread of the Christian witness to places like Damascus and Rome, perhaps through normal social routes such as trade, military service, and the like.

9:10b–12 The “Lord” appeared to Ananias in a vision. That it was Jesus and not God who was so designated is clear from vv. **14–16**. Ananias responded with, “Here am I, Lord” (“Yes, Lord,” NIV), words reminiscent of the response of Old Testament characters to a vision of God, such as Abraham (**Gen 22:1f.**; **11**) and the boy Samuel (**1 Sam 3:4–14**). Jesus instructed Ananias to seek out Paul. His instructions were precise, giving the exact location Paul was to be found. He was staying with a man named Judas who lived on “Straight Street.” This street can still be seen today, though somewhat farther to the north from the ancient street, and is now known as the Darb-el-Mostakim. It runs in an east-west direction, and in Paul's day it had colonnades on both sides and large gates at both ends. One is intrigued by Jesus' informing Ananias of Paul's vision—a vision within a vision! The information was necessary for Ananias to know that Paul was prepared for him. Further, it emphasized the centrality of the divine leading in the entire episode.

This was the third vision in the story of Paul's conversion. The Lord was behind every detail in the story. Ananias learned of his own role through the vision of Paul. He was to enter Judas's house and lay his hands upon Paul so that Paul might recover his sight (v. **12**). Ananias in no way established the legitimacy of Paul. There was no “succession” through the laying on of his hands. He was merely a pious, but otherwise unknown, Jewish Christian of Damascus whom Jesus commissioned as his agent in the healing and baptism of Paul.

9:13–14 Ananias at first protested the commission. He was all too aware of who Paul was. Perhaps he had learned of Paul's reputation as a persecutor from some of the Christians who had fled Jerusalem and taken refuge in Damascus. Word was even out that he had papers from the Sanhedrin authorizing him to arrest any and every Christian. Surely Jesus did not want him to go to *this* man. Ananias's reaction is understandable and should not be seen as his refusing the Lord. Much more it underlines once again the sheer miracle of Paul's radical turnabout from his former role as persecutor.

9:15–16 Verses **15–16** comprise the heart of Ananias's vision, as the Lord outlined Paul's future role. He was the Lord's “chosen instrument.” The expression is an unusual one and finds its closest New Testament parallels in Paul's own writings. The emphasis on Paul's being “chosen” recalls his own strong sense of the divine call, which set him apart from birth (**Gal 1:15**). His call was described here in terms of his bearing Jesus' name before Gentiles, kings, and the sons of Israel. His mission “to the ends of the earth” immediately comes to mind, but the reference probably is to Paul's appearance in trial before these entities. The expression of bearing one's witness “before” is the language of giving one's testimony in a legal setting and is a fulfillment of Jesus' words in **Luke 12:11f.** and **Luke 21:12**. It is thus a picture of Paul on trial before Gentile rulers like Felix and Festus (chaps. **24–25**), before kings like Agrippa (chap. **26**), before local Jewish synagogues and even the Sanhedrin (chap. **23**). Verse **15** is thus closely linked to v. **16**. Paul would *suffer* for the name of Christ. The one who once was the church's most vehement persecutor would now be the one who would willingly accept persecution for the sake of the name (cf. **5:41**). This is the core point of the Pauline conversion narrative. It reappears at its conclusion as Paul is shown persecuted by the Jews both in Damascus (**9:23**) and in Jerusalem (**9:29**). In nothing is his conversion more clearly illustrated than in his transformation from persecutor to persecuted.

9:17–19a Ananias fulfilled his commission, going to Paul and laying his hands upon him as he had been instructed. Ananias’s greeting is striking: “Brother Saul.” He could have said this as a fellow Jew, but it was surely as a brother in Christ that Ananias greeted Paul. Something of a “conversion” had taken place in his own heart through *his* vision of the Lord, so that now he could receive as a fellow disciple the one whom he so shortly before had feared and distrusted. Ananias told Paul that the Lord had sent him with a dual purpose, the recovery of his sight and his receipt of the Spirit. The first occurs immediately as Ananias performed the healing gesture of laying his hands upon Paul. Something “like akes” fell from his eyes. Paul’s receipt of the Spirit is not narrated. It did not seem to have come with Ananias’s laying his hands on Paul. Recovery of his sight followed that. Perhaps it accompanied his baptism, since the two generally are closely connected in Acts. Certainly Paul did receive the Spirit, as his boldness in witness indicates in the following narrative. Paul’s bold witness, like the Ethiopian’s joy, expands the picture of the evidence of the Holy Spirit in believers’ lives. All believers should give evidence of the Spirit’s presence in their lives, but there is no normative evidence of that presence. The scene in Judas’s house concluded with Paul’s receiving nourishment and recovering his strength. Paul’s recovery was now complete. More than that, his conversion was now complete.