

The Book Of Acts: Verse-by-Verse

Acts 9:7-9

As we finished last time, we heard Jesus say to Saul, “Get up now and go into the city and you will be told what to do.”

Luke no doubt anticipates a question someone could or would have asked: “But what about the Temple guards that were travelling with Saul? What happened to them?”

In verse 7 Luke tells us, “The men traveling with Saul stood there speechless; they heard the sound but did not see anyone.” V. 7

Critics of the Bible often cite this verse, along with Acts 22:9 and Acts 26:14, as proof of the Scripture’s errors. So what are they talking about? Let’s compare three statements that all refer to the same event.

We begin with the Acts 9:7 text we just read: “The men traveling with Saul stood there speechless; they heard the sound but did not see anyone.” V. 7

Now let’s look at Acts 22:9: “My companions saw the light, but they did not understand the voice of him who was speaking to me.”

Then let’s look at Acts 26:14: “We all fell to the ground, and I heard a voice saying to me in Aramaic, ‘Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me? It is hard for you to kick against the goads.’”

One of the reasons Acts 9:7 and 22:9 get called into account is the way the old King James Version states it this way:

9:7 – “And the men which journeyed with him stood speechless, hearing a voice, but seeing no man.

22:9 – “And they that were with me saw indeed the light and were afraid; but they heard not the voice of him that spoke to me.”

The question is, “Did Luke’s Greek grammar actually say that?”

As different scholars point out, before addressing the supposed contradiction, we need to identify what constitutes one. In essence, a contradiction means you cannot have “A” and “non-A” at the same time.

For example you cannot have the same pencil inside a room and outside a room at the same time. That would be a contradiction. So, is this what we have in this case in Acts 9:7 and Acts 22:9?

Very often the alleged contradiction in these verses is explained this way: “While the others heard a sound, they did not distinguish an articulate voice.”

There is an example of this in John 12:29. We read how, when God the Father spoke to Jesus, some bystanders perceived the sound as words, while others only heard thunder.

In that case, it seems that God determined who heard and understood Him based on His purposes (See, also:

Daniel 10:7; John 12:37–40).

As I researched this question, I found a much more convincing explanation by Dr. James White. Here's what he wrote:

In Acts 22:9 Paul is speaking to a crowd in Jerusalem. According to Acts 21:40 Paul addressed the crowd in Hebrew. He mentions to his Hebrew listeners that when Jesus called him, he called him in their own language – Hebrew.

How do we know this? In both Acts 9:4 and in Acts 22:7 Saul is not spelled in its normal form but is spelled in its Hebrew (or Aramaic) form Saoul.

What does this tell us? It tells us that the “voice” spoke in Hebrew. Therefore, Acts 22:9 would be referring to the fact that the men who accompanied Paul did not understand what was said for they could not understand Hebrew!

White goes on to say, “The text supports this very strongly, for Paul modifies his saying “they did not hear (understand) the voice” by adding the vital phrase, “of the one speaking to me.” The emphasis is on the speaking of the voice, which would indicate comprehension and understanding.”

At first, the Temple guards who had been standing with Saul were speechless. They heard the sound of Jesus' voice, but they did not see him or understand what he said. Just the same, after Saul explained to them what had happened, they led him by the hand and took him into the city.

Saul, who had been breathing out threats of slaughter suddenly found himself incapacitated by Christ. The pursuer had suddenly become the pursued. The hunter had become the hunted. He saw the glory of Christ and heard the voice of Christ. In that moment his whole future changed.

Now all of this brings me to a much-needed discussion. This is, obviously, a dramatic encounter between Jesus and Saul. But as many commentators have noted, does Luke intend for us to see Saul's conversion as normative or exceptional?

In other words, was Saul's salvation experience totally unique – having no bearing on our experience? Many people would have to say, "I didn't have a Damascus Road experience like Saul." I must imagine that most of us didn't have that kind of experience.

In Saul's case we have some rather dramatic, supernatural elements such as the flash of lightning and an audible voice calling his name. I've never met anyone who had that experience, although I have met some who had what we might call "unique" salvation markers.

John Stott puts it this way: "In order to be converted, it is not necessary for us to be struck by divine lightning, or fall to the ground, or hear our name called out in Aramaic, any more than it is necessary to travel to precisely the same place outside Damascus. Nor is it possible for us to be granted a resurrection appearance or a call to an apostleship like Paul's."

I think John Stott makes a clear point. No, we cannot all expect or be required to have the same dramatic

elements in our born again experience that Paul had. In that sense, Paul's Damascus Road salvation was and is not normative; it's exceptional.

I confess that I do not understand how all this works in each individual's life. As for Saul, this is definitely an unusual situation. How do we explain Saul's unique situation?

Some have suggested that Jesus forced Saul to become a Christian and his ambassador to the Gentiles. Is this compatible with everything else we know about salvation from the Bible? Hardly.

Certainly, God can orchestrate circumstances to cause us to make a decision, but that is not the same as forcing us to become a Christian.

How did the subject of this unique salvation story describe salvation for us? He said, "God saved you by his grace when you believed. And you can't take credit for this; it is a gift from God." – Ephesians 2:8

Clearly, the cause of Saul's conversion was God's sovereign grace. But was it irresistible? I like how John Stott answers that question. He writes:

"Sovereign grace is gradual grace and gentle grace. Gradually, and without violence, Jesus pricked Saul's mind and conscience ... then he revealed himself to him by the light and the voice, not in order to overwhelm him, but in such a way as to enable him to make a free response. Divine grace does not trample on human personality." – John Stott

I find that, all too often, well-meaning believers and even preachers and teachers demand uniformity in the experiential side of salvation. Let me give you an example:

Decades ago, I was talking to someone in my church about a man who had started attending our church. He had a rough past; spiritual progress did not come easily for him.

This brother said to me, “The problem is, he hasn’t had a crisis of faith. That’s what ... (and he named a radio preacher) says has to happen. Until he has a crisis of faith he won’t really be saved.”

Let me ask you, does everyone have to have a crisis of faith to be saved?

- How would we define that?
- What experiential parameters should we enforce to guarantee that?

Does every believer have to have a Damascus Road crisis like Saul to be confident of salvation?

Allow me to illustrate what I mean by relating to you the experiences of two very different 20th-century Christian preachers. One is Sadhu Sundar Singh, the other is C.S. Lewis.

• **Sadhu Sundar Singh**

Sadhu Sundar Singh was born in 1889 to a Sikh family in Punjab where he grew up questioning Christianity & Hinduism. Sikhism is a sect within Hinduism that teaches

belief in one God and rejects the caste system and idolatry.

Sundar attended an American Presbyterian Mission school where the New Testament was read daily as a textbook. He refused to read it because he thought it was false.

When he was fourteen, his mother passed away. He was very close to his mother and her passing left a deep void in his heart, he desperately longed for peace, and in his outrage, he even burned a Bible.

In the early morning of December 18, 1904, as Singh prayed, like Saul of Tarsus, he saw a brilliant light. He wrote this about his experience:

“Then as I prayed and looked into the light, I saw the form of the Lord Jesus Christ. It had such an appearance of glory and love. If it had been some Hindu incarnation I would have prostrated myself before it. But it was the Lord Jesus Christ whom I had been insulting a few days before.

I felt that a vision like this could not come out of my own imagination. I heard a voice saying in Hindustani, ‘How long will you persecute me? I have come to save you; you were praying to know the right way. Why do you not take it?’

The thought then came to me, ‘Jesus Christ is not dead but living and it must be He Himself.’ So I fell at His feet and got this wonderful Peace which I could not get anywhere else.”

- **C.S. Lewis**

Now listen to C.S. Lewis' account of his salvation experience:

"I became aware that I was holding something at bay or shutting something out. Or, if you like, that I was wearing some stiff clothing, like corsets, or even a suit of armour, as if I were a lobster. I felt myself being, there and then, given a free choice. I could open the door or keep it shut; I could unbuckle the armour or keep it on. Neither choice was presented as a duty; no threat or promise was attached to either, though I knew that to open the door or to take off the corset meant the incalculable.

The choice appeared to be momentous, but it was also strangely unemotional. I was moved by no desires or fears. In a sense I was not moved by anything. I chose to open, to unbuckle, to loosen the rein. I say, 'I chose,' yet it did not really seem possible to do the opposite. On the other hand, I was aware of no motives.

You could argue that I was not a free agent, but I am more inclined to think this came nearer to being a perfectly free act than most I have ever done." – C.S. Lewis

Having said all this, are there any aspects of Paul's experience that *are* applicable to all of us?

Again, John Stott's insights are helpful. He says we must "... distinguish between the historically particular and the universal, between the dramatic outward accompaniments and the essential inward experience." – John Stott

Let's ask the question a different way. What do all conversion experiences have in common? What do the Scriptures state are the basic elements in all salvation encounters?

What did Peter tell the crowd on the Day of Pentecost and in the moments after the lame man at the gate called Beautiful was healed?

In the first case, in Acts 2:38 Peter told the crowd, "Repent and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins. And you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. 39 The promise is for you and your children and for all who are far off—for all whom the Lord our God will call."

In the second situation, Peter said, "Repent, then, and turn to God, so that your sins may be wiped out, that times of refreshing may come from the Lord, and that he may send the Christ, who has been appointed for you—even Jesus." – Acts 3:19-20

Two things stand out clearly in these passages. Salvation involves a reception of the Gospel message and a surrender to Christ. But, what about baptism? Is it a requirement for salvation?

Sam Storms answers the questions about belief, faith, and water baptism in perspective when he writes:

"... We see that forgiveness and justification are God's gift to those who believe. We are justified by faith alone! Second, the normal, routine, virtually unspoken expectation was that everyone who believed would be baptized. Why?

Because baptism is the outward expression of an inward faith Baptism symbolized everything that faith secured. Baptism visibly and publicly proclaimed everything that faith invisibly and privately achieved.” – Sam Storms

Nowhere in Acts or the rest of the New Testament is baptism presented as the sole condition for forgiveness and justification. However, faith and repentance are constantly referenced. Here are some examples of this:

- Luke 2:47: “... And that repentance for the forgiveness of sins should be proclaimed in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem.”
- Acts 2:21: “And it shall come to pass that everyone who calls upon the name of the Lord shall be saved.”
- Acts 10:43: “To him all the prophets bear witness that everyone who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins through his name.”
- Acts 16:30-32: “Then he brought them out and said, “Sirs, what must I do to be saved?” And they said, “Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved, you and your household.” And they spoke the word of the Lord to him and to all who were in his house.”

Let’s pick up with verses 8-9:

“Saul got up from the ground, but when he opened his eyes he could see nothing. So they led him by the hand into Damascus. 9 For three days he was blind, and did not eat or drink anything.”

The Greek word Luke uses for Saul “opening” his eyes is a combination of two words, “ana” which means, “again” and “oigo” which means to open. So the combination suggests someone opening their eyes again.

I point this out because Paul is going to use this same word when he gives his testimony in Acts 26:18. He will say that God called him to the Gentiles to “open their eyes so that they may turn from darkness to light and from the dominion of Satan to God, that they may receive forgiveness of sins and an inheritance among those who have been sanctified by faith in Me.” - Acts 26:18

Here in Acts 9:8 Luke uses “anoigo” in the perfect tense, meaning Saul's eyes were opened and remained open physically, but he was unable to see anything. A. T. Robertson picks up on this Greek word and writes this:

“The blindness was proof that something had happened to him and that it was no hallucination that he had seen the Risen Christ. And though his eyes were open, he could see nothing - The irony is inescapable.

As a rabid persecutor of the disciples of Jesus, his eyes were wide open and able to see his innocent victims physically, at the same time being spiritually blinded to the truth that Jesus was their Messiah. Now at conversion the irony is that he cannot see with his physical eyes, but his spiritual eyes have now been opened wide!”

Having said all this, there is a question that often gets asked: “Did Saul actually see Jesus since the text does not indicate that?” You may remember that when the

apostles were looking for a replacement for Judas Peter said, “For one of these must become a witness with us of his resurrection.” – Acts 1:22

Peter stated that one of the requirements was that Judas’ replacement had actually seen the resurrected Christ. Again, did Saul actually see Jesus? If we compare some other Scriptures, the answer becomes clear. Let’s look at them:

- 1 Corinthians 9:1 “Have I not seen Jesus our Lord?”
- 1 Corinthians 15:8 “... And last of all, as to one untimely born, He appeared to me also.
- Acts 9:17 “So Ananias departed and entered the house, and after laying his hands on him said, “Brother Saul, the Lord Jesus, who appeared to you on the road by which you were coming, has sent me so that you may regain your sight and be filled with the Holy Spirit.”
- Acts 9:27 But Barnabas took hold of him and brought him to the apostles and described to them how he had seen the Lord on the road, and that He had talked to him, and how at Damascus he had spoken out boldly in the name of Jesus.

Here in Acts 9 two witnesses (Ananias and Barnabas) testify that Saul had actually seen the resurrected Jesus. The fact that Saul testifies to having literally seen Jesus, indicates that his blindness could not have been immediate or otherwise how could he have seen the resurrected Jesus?

Picking up at verse 9 we find, “For three days he was blind, and did not eat or drink anything.”

One commentator noted, “A raging bull became a docile lamb!” Steven Cole put it this way:

“Just as Jonah was three days and nights in the belly of the great fish, so Saul was three days and nights in the dark. When the scales fell from his eyes, he saw everything in a new light, the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in Christ. Every truly converted person can say, “I once thought that I saw, but I was blind. Now, by God’s grace, I see.”

During those three days Saul did not eat or drink. His blindness continued for the same period. What did Saul do during those days? If we look at Saul’s recollection of those events, we find he spent those days in prayer and fasting.

In Acts 26, Saul is explaining to Herod Agrippa what happened to him. He includes information that is not in Luke’s account. He tells Agrippa that Jesus told him, “I have appeared to you to appoint you as a servant and as a witness of what you have seen and will see of me. I will rescue you from your own people and from the Gentiles. I am sending you to them to open their eyes and turn them from darkness to light, and from the power of Satan to God, so that they may receive forgiveness of sins and a place among those who are sanctified by faith in me.”

Since none of this is in Luke’s account, two possibilities exist. One, is that Luke just left out that part of the conversation. The other is that Jesus said this to Saul while he was in his three-day pause of sight and food.

I suspect it was the latter. Here’s why: In Acts 9:11-12 we find Jesus saying this to Ananias: “Go to the house of

Judas on Straight Street and ask for a man from Tarsus named Saul, for he is praying. In a vision he has seen a man named Ananias come and place his hands on him to restore his sight.”

That vision must have come during those three days Saul was blinded and was fasting.

Can I point out another irony in this story? Saul has a vision of a man from Damascus coming to pray for him and restoring his sight. Here, Saul had gone to Damascus to round up anyone confessing Christ as their Savior. Now, he's waiting on a believer to come pray for him to regain his sight!

Let me close with one more quote, this time from Dr. Simon Kistemaker:

"What a reversal of events! Paul, who desired to dash the believers to the ground, is lying face down on the ground. He, who wished to bring prisoners bound from Damascus to Jerusalem, now is led as a prisoner of blindness into Damascus. He, who acted with the authority of the high priest, now breaks his ties with the Jerusalem hierarchy. He, who came to triumph over the Christian faith, now submits to the Captain of this faith.

Note the symbolism of the three days Paul spent in solitary confinement. "He is crucified with Christ, and the three days of darkness are like the three days in the tomb." – Dr. Simon Kistemaker