

The Book of Acts: Verse By Verse

Acts 9:20-22

After a miraculous recovery of his sight, Saul immediately goes into action at Damascus. Luke tells us, “Saul spent several days with the disciples in Damascus. 20 At once he began to preach in the synagogues that Jesus is the Son of God.”

We can't miss an obvious irony in verse 20. If we go back to the beginning of chapter 9 we find, “Meanwhile, Saul was still breathing out murderous threats against the Lord's disciples. He went to the high priest and asked him for letters to the synagogues in Damascus...” – Acts 9:1-2

Pau's original destination was the synagogues of Damascus, where, armed with arrest and extradition papers, he intended to round up any believers in the “Way” movement. He had a clear commission from the high priest and was zealous to carry it out.

Now Saul has an entirely converse purpose. Instead of searching out and arresting Jesus' followers, he is attempting to convert his fellow Jews to Christ!

As F.F. Bruce puts it, “He appeared as the bearer of a very different commission, issued by a higher authority than the high priest's, and as a disciple and messenger of Jesus he announced his Master's claims.” – F.F. Bruce

After Lord Nelson's victory over the French fleet in the Battle of the Nile, he wrote these words to the British

Admiralty: “Victory is not a large enough word to describe what has happened.”

We have to say the same thing for Saul of Tarsus. To just say he was “saved” hardly describes what really happened to him. Think of the radical transformation that took place in his life.

He was from Cilicia – a city well known for scholars and academics. He called himself a “Hebrew of the Hebrews”. He was a pupil of the greatest Jewish scholar of his day, Gamaliel. He was educated in every known academic discipline. He was an ardent student of Jewish tradition. He was so a Roman citizen. Like other Jews, he was completely convinced of the coming of the Messiah.

But there was another side of Saul. His zeal allowed him to be brutal to non-Jews and the perceived enemies of Judaism. There was a particular viciousness about his persecution of Jesus’ followers. His conscience was not bothered by the suffering he would force them to undergo.

Listen to how Saul describes his attacks on the Way:

“I too was convinced that I ought to do all that was possible to oppose the name of Jesus of Nazareth. 10 And that is just what I did in Jerusalem. On the authority of the chief priests I put many of the Lord’s people in prison, and when they were put to death, I cast my vote against them.

Many a time I went from one synagogue to another to have them punished, and I tried to force them to blaspheme. I was so obsessed with persecuting them

that I even hunted them down in foreign cities.” – Acts 26:10-11

But then everything changed. It was, as it were, a remarkable transformation. John MacArthur describes it this way:

“From a volatile, energetic, dynamic enemy of Jesus Christ – persecutor, blasphemer – came the greater part of the New Testament; came the noblest statements of Christian theology; came the sweetest songs of God’s love. And he became the most saintly, heroic person who ever named the name of Jesus Christ.” – John MacArthur

I think this helps us see why Luke’s account of his attempt to preach in the Damascus synagogues was not only dramatic, but to some, quite traumatic. Just days after his arrival in Damascus, the persecutor, turned preacher, is entering the very synagogues he had targeted, and is now looking to make converts, not arrest them.

We will come back to the response of those who heard Saul. Right now, let’s look at something we might have easily glossed over in verse 20. Luke tells us, “... He began to preach in the synagogues that Jesus is the Son of God.”

As F.F Bruce points out, this is the only time in the entire Book of Acts that the title, “Son of God” is found. That’s it! It is only found one time in Acts – and it’s attached to the subject of Saul’s earliest preaching.

That day on the outskirts of Damascus, it was the Son of God who revealed himself to Saul. Pay attention to that. Now, as he’s preaching to his fellow Jews in the

synagogues, he immediately set out to demonstrate that Jesus is the Son of God.

This will become one of the great hallmarks of all of Saul's preaching and teaching, evidenced by his epistles. For example:

- In Galatians 1:16 he writes of God's intention "... to reveal his Son in me so that I might preach him among the Gentiles, I did not consult any man..."
- In 2 Corinthians 1:19 he writes, "For the Son of God, Jesus Christ, who was preached among you by me and Silas and Timothy, was not "Yes" and "No," but in him it has always been "Yes."
- In Romans 1:4 he declares, "[Jesus] ... through the Spirit of holiness was declared with power to be the Son of God by his resurrection from the dead: Jesus Christ our Lord."

The title, "Son of God" is used several ways in the Old Testament:

1. It's sometimes used as a title for the people of Israel. See: Exodus 4:22; Hosea 11:1

2. It is used of the anointed king of Israel. See: 2 Samuel 7:14; Psalms 89:26–27

3. It is used of the future Messiah of David's line. See: Psalm 2:7; Ezra 7:28-29; 13:32; 14:9

Saul's Jewish contemporaries held a definite belief that the coming Messiah was, in a very unique sense, the son of God. This is evident by the high priest's question to

Jesus during his trial. He asked him, “Are you the Messiah, the Son of the Blessed One?” - Mark 14:61

Hang with this for a moment, and we will see just how powerful that question really was. In the Greek, the word used for “Blessed One” is “Eulogētou”. In the Greek, this adjective is described as a genitive masculine singular. It’s only ever used of God.

I think the Contemporary English Version brings this across a little better when it reads, "Are you the Messiah, the Son of the glorious God?"

The high priest knew exactly what he was asking. He was trying to get Jesus to say that he was the Son of God – the Messiah – the Son of the Glorious God. Using the same translation, look at Jesus’ response in Mark 14:62:

"Yes, I am!" Jesus answered. "Soon you will see the Son of Man sitting at the right side of God All-Powerful, and coming with the clouds of heaven."

That’s all the high priest needed to condemn Jesus to death. To display his horror at Jesus’ blasphemy he tore his clothes and asked, “Why do we need any other witnesses?” In other words, Jesus had just condemned himself by his claim to be God’s Son.

Saul’s preaching of Jesus as the “Son of God” sets him aside from all other humans. In Judaism, it designates him as God’s anointed king. It further marks him as the God’s sole representative. As the writer of Hebrews puts it:

“Long ago God spoke many times and in many ways to our ancestors through the prophets but in these last days

he has spoken to us by his Son, whom he appointed heir of all things, and through whom also he made the universe.” – Hebrews 1:1-2

What I’m trying to get at is this: Saul’s preaching that Jesus is the Son of God expresses his unique relationship to the Father.

As John MacArthur points out, “Son of God is an incarnate title. Jesus is not called Son of God before His incarnation.... He is only called “Son” in the sense that as the second person of the Trinity He came to earth.” – John MacArthur

All of this brings into sharp focus why Saul’s preaching about Jesus being the Son of God was truly a dramatic reversal. The One he had persecuted was now the very subject of his ministry!

Let’s look at verse 21:

“All 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?”

The response of the synagogue members was predictable. Luke says, “those who heard him were astonished”. Luke uses the word “existano”, which we find throughout his Gospel when he is describing the recipients of Jesus’ ministry. He is saying that Saul’s hearers were amazed and continued to be amazed.

The news of Saul’s original reason for coming to Damascus was well known throughout the city – and especially among the Jews living there. Now, just a few

days after his arrival he was confusing the synagogue attendees.

His reputation was well known. They 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?"

Two things stand out in those verses. Saul's Jewish listeners were deeply suspicious of him. Many probably considered this turn of events to be a ploy that Saul was employing to net even more of Jesus' followers. Others must have thought he had taken leave of his senses.

Again, what is the only thing that could adequately explain this dramatic change? It could only be Saul's personal, transformative experience of Christ.

Despite the crowds' suspicions, note what Luke says in verse 22 about Saul's preaching: "Yet Saul grew more and more powerful and baffled the Jews living in Damascus by proving that Jesus is the Christ."

Luke's statement that "Saul grew more and more powerful" can be understood several ways. Luke may mean that Saul was growing stronger in spiritual understanding. He may mean Saul was growing in boldness as he went along.

There is also a sense in which Saul's preaching and teaching was gaining depth. Some Greek manuscripts say, "he was more strengthened in the word", implying his ability to look back into the Jewish Scriptures and see Christ was deepening.

This would definitely become more pronounced as time

went by. Saul would have a clearer understanding of how the scriptures related to Christ – and how to more clearly relate this to his audiences.

As F.F. Bruce puts it: “... By joining and knitting passages of Scripture in the Old Testament together, by producing and citing express testimonies from thence, and by comparing the prophecies and the characters of the Messiah in them with Jesus of Nazareth, he proved to a demonstration that he must be the Messiah.” – F.F. Bruce

The results of Saul’s preaching was that the Damascene Jews were unable disprove his arguments. There is an echo from Acts 6:10 about Stephen’s words: “These men began to argue with Stephen, but could not resist the wisdom and spirit with which he spoke” – Acts 6:10

Jesus’ statement to Ananias, “I will show him how much he can suffer for my name” was about to have its first of many fulfillments.