

## The Book of Acts: Verse-by-Verse

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### Study Notes: Acts 9:23-25

Verses 23-25: Luke truncates his history of Saul's early days as a believer. On the surface, Luke's timeline appears to be relatively short, but this is not the case. The Greek wording of "after many days" is "sufficient days," – "a considerable period".

Multiple references about the same events: See: Acts 9:23-25, 2 Corinthians 11:32–33, and Galatians 1:17-18. Let's look at those verses:

A helpful outline of the full story of this three-year period:

- Saul spends a few days preaching in Damascus.
- Saul leaves Damascus and goes to Arabia for three years.
- Saul returns to Damascus to resume his preaching ministry.
- Saul flees Damascus and goes with Barnabas to Jerusalem.

#### • The Arabian Period:

Saul did not stay in Damascus for an extended period of ministry. Galatians 1:17-18: "I did not go up to Jerusalem to see those who were apostles before I was, but I went into Arabia. Later I returned to Damascus." (A three-year hiatus).

In the first century, the north-west tip of Arabia's geographical footprint extended almost to Damascus. Saul needn't have gone that far from Damascus. The larger question: Why, after such an explosive start at evangelism, did Saul choose to go to Arabia?

Possible Explanations: 1. Saul went to Arabia to continue his preaching ministry. 2. Jesus directed Saul to go to Arabia, where he taught him the greater principles of the Gospel. See: Galatians 1:11-12; 3:2-3; Romans 16:25-26; I Corinthians 11:23.

While we do not have any specific biblical references for this, it may well be part of the story. We will see why a little later.

Another explanation is that Jesus directed Saul to go to Arabia. The suggestion is that this was a three-year period in which Jesus revealed to Saul the major teachings of the Gospel.

Saul speaks of this in several of his epistles. For example, in Galatians 3:2-3 he writes, "... God gave me the special responsibility of extending his grace to you Gentiles .... God himself revealed his mysterious plan to me."

In Romans 16:25-26 he says, "Now to him who is able to establish you in accordance with my gospel, the message I proclaim about Jesus Christ, in keeping with the revelation of the mystery hidden for long ages past, but now revealed and made known through the prophetic writings by the command of the eternal God."

Perhaps the clearest statement of this is in Galatians 1:11-12, where, as Paul defends his apostolic calling, he writes:

"For I certify to you, brothers, that the gospel I preached was not devised by man. I did not receive it from any man, nor was I taught it; rather, I received it by revelation from Jesus Christ."

These distinctive truths that Saul learned from Christ included a ground-breaking realization of the new relationship of the Jews and Gentiles in Christ's Body of believers.

There is third theory about Saul's time in Arabia. Since the original apostles spent some three years under Christ's tutelage, Saul's three years in Arabia may have been designed to match them.

There are even some suggestions that Saul not only sought the solitude of the desert but travelled to Mount Horeb as Moses and Elijah had done during their lifetimes.

- **Saul's Return To Damascus: vv. 23-25**

After three years, Saul returned to Damascus. He must have had a much clearer, more cohesive understanding of the Gospel he was called to preach.

“After many days had gone by, the Jews conspired to kill him, but Saul learned of their plan. Day and night they kept close watch on the city gates in order to kill him. But his followers took him by night and lowered him in a basket through an opening in the wall.”

Luke and Saul give different insights into these events. 2 Corinthians 11: “In Damascus the ethnarch of King Aretas was guarding the city of the Damascenes in order to seize me, but I was let down in a basket through a window in the wall and escaped his hands.”

### **Historical Notes:**

The “ethnarch” of King Aretas:

Greek word, “Ethnarch”: Combination of “Ethnos” (a tribe or nation), and “Archon” (a leader or ruler). Ethnarch: a political leader over a common ethnic group or homogeneous kingdom.

“King Aretas”: Aretas IV, who ruled the Nabataean kingdom, from 9 B.C. to 40 A.D.

Nabataeans: One of the first-century nomadic Bedouin tribes that roamed the Arabian Desert. These Arab nomads may have originated what we know as the Hejaz area of Arabia, which includes the modern cities of Mecca, Medina, and Jeddah.

The Nabataeans shared many of the gods of the Hejaz.

The Nabataeans generated great wealth from transporting frankincense, myrrh, and other spices from the southwest region of Arabia to the European markets.

- **Saul's Peril: 2 Corinthians 11:**

"In Damascus the ethnarch of King Aretas was guarding the city of the Damascenes in order to seize me..."

Saul may have attempted to preach the gospel in Arabia. The degree of hostility on the part of the Nabataean authority indicates that Saul had done something to agitate them. It likely included Saul's preaching of the gospel.

The Nabataeans were the ancestors of modern-day Arabs. They were polytheistic: "Al Qaum" - the warrior god who guards the caravans; "Al Kutbay" - the god of learning, commerce, writing, and divination; "Allat" - the goddess of spring and fertility; "Al Uzza" - the powerful and Manawat - the god of destiny or fate.

Paul's preaching of Christ is the logical reason the Nabataean ethnarch to have opposed Saul to the point of preparing to capture him and, presumably, send him to King Aretas for judgment.

- **Did The Jews Collude With The Nabataeans?**

In 2 Corinthians 11, Saul/Paul leaves out any mention of the Jewish collusion. In Acts 9, Luke reports on the Jewish opposition in Damascus but doesn't mention the Nabataeans.

Luke's account: "The Jews conspired to kill him, but Saul learned of their plan. Day and night they kept close watch on the city gates in order to kill him. But his followers took him by night and lowered him in a basket through an opening in the wall."

Both groups were involved in the plot to arrest and even kill Saul. His life was in danger from both the Jews and Nabataeans.

- A New Word in Luke's Narrative: Saul's "followers". Saul's powerful teaching and preaching was now gaining him followers.

- **Saul's Rescue: v. 24-25**

One of Saul's supporters had a house built into the wall of the city. (See: Joshua 2:15 – Rahab's house) Knowing that the guards were watching the city gates, Saul's friends put him in a basket, swung him out a window of the house, and lowered him to ground.

A silly statement by a well-known preacher: "And you'll notice that the age of miracles begins to fade at this point and things have to be more contrived than previous. Although some miracles still continue on. They don't always occur."

Was the age of miracles beginning to fade – forcing believers to contrive their own means of deliverance?

Over the next decades, Peter and Paul would both see a number of miracles. Peter's ministry would include 9 recorded miracles; Paul's ministry would include 9 as well.

- **Paul's miracles:**

1. Elymas the sorcerer, is struck with blindness - Acts 13:6-12
2. Signs and wonders are done by Paul and Barnabas - Acts 14:3
3. Paul's & Silas' prison doors open - Acts 16:19-34
4. Paul heals a cripple - Acts 14:8-10
5. Paul delivers a woman from a spirit of fortune telling - Acts 16:16-18
6. God works unusual miracles through Paul - Acts 19:11-12
7. Paul resurrects Eutychus - Acts 20:9-12
8. Paul shakes off a poisonous viper - Acts 28:3-6
9. Paul heals the father of Publius as well as others - Acts 28:7-10

From the Book of Acts, it appears that miracles were not fading, they were going full bore!

- **Next Time: Saul goes to Jerusalem.**