

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

---

### Acts 9:1-6

By this point in Luke's historical account he has shown how two Hellenistic brothers, Stephen and Philip led the way for the Church's world missions efforts.

Having detailed these contributions, he is now ready – if not eager – to move the narrative forward to telling of two very important conversions.

One, of course is the remarkable salvation of Cornelius the Centurion – the first Gentile convert. The other is the salvation of Saul of Tarsus – who will become the primary apostle to the Gentile world.

Chapter nine describes Saul's conversion while the next chapter is devoted to Peter's visit to Cornelius.

Let's read verses 1-2:

“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, so that if he found any there who belonged to the Way, whether men or women, he might take them as prisoners to Jerusalem.”

After telling about Philip's evangelism efforts in Samaria Luke now returns to the story of Saul of Tarsus and his vicious campaign against the Christians in Jerusalem.

In Acts 8:3 he told Theophilus, “But Saul began to destroy the church. Going from house to house, he dragged off men and women and put them in prison.” Now he adds, “Meanwhile, Saul was still breathing out murderous threats against the Lord’s disciples.”

As we can see, it was not enough for Saul to drive these primarily Hellenistic Christians out of Jerusalem: He’s pursuing them and rounding them up anywhere they have been dispersed both within and without the boundaries of Israel.

In Saul’s own words to Agrippa, “In the excess of my fury against them, I pursued them even to foreign cities” – Acts 26:11. Are we to find this as an exceptional situation? Probably not. As John Stott points out,

“The great paragons of religious zeal in Israel’s history Phinehas, Elijah, and Mattathias (the father of the Maccabees) were prepared to go to extremes of violence against the enemies of God, and they were the exemplars on whom Saul modeled himself in his zeal against the church.” – John Stott

One of the historical questions we should probably consider is, “What was the basis of Luke’s statement in verses 1- 2 that, “Saul went to the high priest and 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.”

In 142 B.C., the Jewish state won its independence under the Hasmonaean dynasty of ruling priests. The Romans had political reasons for allowing Palestine to operate as a semi-independent state, so they required Palestine’s

neighboring states to grant it certain rights, including extradition.

Archeologists found a letter that was delivered by a Roman ambassador to Ptolemy VIII of Egypt, It includes this demand: “If any pestilent men have fled to you from ... [Judaea], hand them over to Simon the high priest, so that he may punish them according to their law” (1 Macc. 15:21).

In 47 B.C. Julius Caesar re-confirmed those rights and privileges, although Judaea was no longer a sovereign state. He made specific allowances for extraditions to take place under the auspices of Israel’s high priest. Luke is making it clear that the Sanhedrin and high priest’s authority for extraditions continued under the regional administration established in 6 A.D.

Saul was widening his circle of arrests. This is notable since Damascus was some 150 miles from Jerusalem. Saul was granted extradition papers to bring refugees who had fled to Damascus back to Jerusalem to stand trial – presumably before the Sanhedrin.

These were not native Damascene disciples, but Hellenistic and Hebrew Christians who had been caught up in the diaspora. It’s assumed that they would be charged with complicity in Stephen’s offense against the Temple.

Another question is, “Why did Saul decide to go all the way to Damascus?” There are several reasons. First, it was a very prominent city – with roots all the way back to Abraham’s day. During Israel’s original monarchy, Damascus was the capital of the most important

Aramaean kingdom. In later times, it also served as the administrative seat for an Assyrian province.

In Hellenistic times Damascus underwent a complete city planning redesign. If you are interested in city planning, you might find this fascinating.

Hippodamus (He-ped-a-mus) was a pioneer of urban planning. He designed what he called the “ideal city” – based on 10,000 male citizens, with an overall potential of 50,000 persons, including women, children, and slaves.

He studied the functional problems of cities and linked them to the state administration system. To do this, he divided citizens into three classes: soldiers, artisans, and farmers. Additionally he divided land into sacred, public, and private sectors.

Hippodamus is credited with the creation of the municipal street-grid system. Damascus was one of his projects – adding to the ancient city’s prominence well into the first century.

From 64 B.C. Damascus belonged to the Roman province of Syria but enjoyed some municipal autonomy as a part of the Syrian Decapolis.

So, why did Saul go some 150 miles on foot or on horseback, pursuing these diaspora Messianic Jews? A clue is in Luke’s wording of verses 1-2. He writes, “Saul went to the high priest and asked him for letters to the synagogues in Damascus ...”

At that time, there was a very large Jewish population in Damascus, including several synagogues. Now here's why that is important to know:

In the Jewish culture, the local synagogue was the hub of the religious, social, and judicial life of its people. The local rabbis had a very high level of authority – including the discipline of its members.

Saul was, therefore, utilizing the Jewish system of authority to grant him permission to take letters from Israel's high priest to his subordinates requiring them to hand over any Messianic Christians for extradition to Jerusalem. No rabbi was going to resist the high priest's extradition demands.

In verse 2 we find a new designation for the Church in Acts. We read about those "who belonged to the Way". "The Way" became a well-known appellation for the new Christian movement. It is used many times in Acts, including Acts 19:9, 23; 22:4; 24:14; 24:22). I've given you the references but let's look at them:

- Acts 19:9 "But some of them became obstinate; they refused to believe and publicly maligned the Way."
- Acts 19:23 – "About that time there arose a great disturbance about the Way."
- Acts 22:4 – "I persecuted the followers of this Way to their death, arresting both men and women and throwing them into prison..."
- Acts 24:14 – "However, I admit that I worship the God of our fathers as a follower of the Way, which they call a sect."

- Acts 24:22 – “Then Felix, who was well acquainted with the Way, adjourned the proceedings.”

From what we gather, “The Way” became a term used by Jesus’ early followers to signify their movement as the way of life or the way of salvation. They were not, however, the first to use this designation. Earlier Jewish documents also reference this.

In the late 1800’s some fragments were discovered belonging to a group of Essenes. They became known as the Zadokite Work. In the Old Testament, Zadok was a priest. In Jewish history, the Zadokites were his descendants and the highest rank of priests.

During the second century B.C., the Zadokites separated from Orthodox Judaism, choosing an ultra-rigorous lifestyle, and settling in Damascus.

Okay, now we have a good idea of why Saul was taking such extreme measures to extradite and put on trial those Messianic Jews who had previously been expelled from Jerusalem. Let’s look at verses 3-9:

“As he neared Damascus on his journey, suddenly a light from heaven flashed around him. He fell to the ground and heard a voice say to him, ‘Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?’” “Who are you, Lord?” Saul asked. “I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting,” he replied. “Now get up and go into the city, and you will be told what you must do.”

7 The men traveling with Saul stood there speechless; they heard the sound but did not see anyone. 8 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.

To get a full picture of what happened on that day outside of Damascus, we need to use three passages from Acts. We will draw from Luke's narrative in Acts 9, as well as Paul's defenses in Acts 22 and Acts 26.

Saul was no doubt travelling with an escort of Temple police. This would be natural since he was carrying letters from Israel's high priest, demanding the extradition of those Saul identified as Christian fugitives from Jerusalem.

It appears that Saul's first plan was to contain Jesus' followers in Jerusalem and eradicate them. However, some must have, as one commentator put it, "escaped his net and fled to Damascus". Considering the number of synagogues there – and the likelihood of distant relatives – they must have hoped for protection in Damascus.

Saul, however, was determined to pursue these fugitive disciples beyond Israel's boundaries. His argument must have been persuasive since the high priest sanctioned his plans and gave him the necessary extradition warrants.

Saul and his contingent had nearly completed their 150-mile trek from Jerusalem to Damascus. Neither Luke nor Saul/Paul give us two pieces of information: 1. Did they walk, or did they ride horses? 2. What route did they take?

If they walked, the 150-mile trip would have taken between a week to two weeks, give or take a couple of days. On horseback, it would have taken less than a week.

Some of the great artists, such as Caravaggio have depicted Saul as falling from a horse during his conversion. Did he? The fact is, we don't know. However, a piece of information from Luke's account does make us wonder if he wasn't on foot when he saw the blinding light.

Here's why: Some Jewish scholars point out that noon was an established time of prayer – especially for the Pharisees. They routinely prayed three times a day, supposedly following David's custom in Psalm 55: "But I call upon God, and the Lord will save me. Evening and morning and at noon." - Psalm 55

The Pharisees would normally recite the prayers while standing and facing Jerusalem. Given these facts, did Saul, a zealous Pharisee, stop to observe midday prayer while on the road to Damascus?

If so, he would have been standing and facing south towards Jerusalem when he was blinded by that heavenly light and fell to the ground.

Okay, that covers the first issue. The second one is, "What route would Saul have taken?" There were two options:

The first would have Saul going east out of Jerusalem and descend to the Jordan Rift Valley. This, incidentally, is the road Jesus cited in his parable of the Good Samaritan.

Once Saul arrived near Jericho, he would have turned north and headed toward Scythopolis and from there crossed the Jordan River and proceeded north along the mountain ridge east of the Sea of Galilee. (Golan Heights). From here, Saul would have traveled north to Caesarea Philippi and taken the Via Maris on their way to Damascus.

The second – and most likely option – is the northern route. From Jerusalem, Saul would have traveled north through the mountains of Samaria and arrived on the southern edge of the Jezreel Valley.

Crossing the Jezreel, he would have joined the Via Maris which led toward the western shore of the Sea of Galilee in the Plain of Gennesaret. Saul would have passed Capernaum before heading north toward Caesarea Philippi and then on to Damascus.

When Saul approached Damascus, he would be in a beautiful oasis surrounded by desert. According to Acts 22:6 it was about noon when, suddenly, a light from heaven flashed around him, In Acts 26:13 Paul describes it as “brighter than the midday sun”.

According to Luke, it was such an overwhelming experience that it both blinded Saul and knocked him over. Acts 26:14 says that, as Saul lay on the ground a voice addressed him personally in Aramaic. The voice said, “Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?”.

I want us to notice the repetition of Saul’s name. There are only eight times in the Bible when God specifically calls someone’s name twice. There are some important reasons for these double salutations.

Depending on the context, a double salutation could emphasize getting the person's immediate attention. It could be an indication that they needed to know something important or to prevent them from doing something. Additionally, at times repeating a person's name was a Hebrew expression of intimacy.

You may notice that, at times, there is an exclamation point after the person's name. This can indicate several things, including immediacy or even danger.

Okay, let's briefly look at eight examples of double salutations:

- **Abraham! Abraham!**

In Genesis 22, God interrupts Abraham before he can complete the sacrifice of Isaac.

- **Jacob, Jacob**

In Genesis 46, Jacob learns that his son Joseph isn't dead. While Jacob is preparing to go to Egypt, God gives him an assuring vision – calling his name twice.

- **Moses, Moses!**

In Exodus 3 God calls to Moses out of the flames of the bush that does not burn up. He uses the double salutation to capture Moses' attention.

- **Samuel! Samuel!**

In 1 Samuel 3, at a time when people rarely hear from God, a boy asleep in the tabernacle hears a voice

calling him by name, twice. Young Samuel thinks it's the high priest is calling him, but soon learns a much greater voice is calling him.

### • **Martha, Martha**

In Luke 10, as Jesus visits his friends Martha and Mary, Martha is perturbed that Mary is not helping prepare the meal. When Jesus affirms Mary's choice of sitting at his feet and listening to his teaching, he says, "Martha, Martha".

It's not a moment of rebuke, per-se; it's Jesus lovingly addressing Martha's pattern of worrying about everything being perfect.

### • **Simon, Simon**

In Luke 22, Jesus has his last supper with the 12 apostles. As the apostles debate which one of them is the greatest, Jesus singles out Simon Peter, saying, "Simon, Simon." He goes on to warn Simon of the test of faith he will experience that very night.

Let's read verses 5-9:

"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." 7 The men traveling with Saul stood there speechless; they heard the sound but did not see anyone. 8 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.

Verse 5 reveals something interesting. When Saul asks the speaker who he is he says, “I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting”. Had Saul persecuted Jesus? Not in any personal way. We don’t even have any evidence that Saul had ever met Jesus. Yet, Jesus’ statement is really a question. He’s saying, “Why are you persecuting me?”

We should take note that Jesus is making something known to Saul. Jesus is so intimately identified with his followers that to pursue and persecute them was the same as doing it to Him.

In verse 6 we read, “Now get up and go into the city, and you will be told what you must do.” Again, we have an insight from the wording of the text. When Jesus says, “now get up” he implies that Saul has been on the ground during this entire conversation. Jesus is standing, talking to Saul, but the latter is lying on the ground listening.

Jesus tells Saul to go on into the city and he will learn what he is to do next. That’s all the instruction Jesus gives, so Saul must take this one step and see what will unfold. As we will see later, he truly is “walking by faith and not by sight”.

We will see what happens next time.