

Why Are We Here?

Lesson 2

To Help All People Experience a New Life in Jesus Christ

Paul's Testimony

Acts 9:1-9; Galatians 1:11-24

One hundred and thirty-three miles north of Jerusalem is the city of Damascus. The Bible mentions the city in the days of Abraham. Abraham was born in 2163 BC and died in 1986 BC. It is an ancient city noted in public government documents from as far back as 1500 BC. Damascus was mentioned among the conquests of the Egyptian King Thothmes III (1500 B.C.), and in the Amarna tablets (1400 B.C.). In 64 BC, the Romans captured the city, making it the chief government seat east of Rome. Because Damascus was in Syria, not Israel, Saul of Tarsus needed a legal document to allow him to expand his persecution past the borders of the Sanhedrin's control. The Sanhedrin high priest was appointed by the Roman government. In this case, the position was an appointment by Valerius Gratus the Prefect of Judea. Gratus appointed Caiaphas as the high priest in AD 18. Tiberius Caesar replaced Gratus as Prefect of Judea with Pontius Pilate in AD 26. At the same time, Herod Archelaus was the king of Judea, and Herod Antipas was the tetrarch of Syria, but Pontius Pilate was ruler over both of them. Herod Archelaus allowed the Sanhedrin to do as they pleased in his area, but Herod Antipas did not allow the same freedom in his domain. Since Caiaphas answered directly to Pilate, a letter from him gave Saul the authority he needed to continue his zealous persecution in Syria.

"Now Saul, still breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord, went to the high priest, ² and asked for letters from him to the synagogues at Damascus, so that if he found any belonging to the Way, both men and women, he might bring them bound to Jerusalem. ³ As he was traveling, it happened that he was approaching Damascus, and suddenly a light from heaven flashed around him; ⁴ and he fell to the ground and heard a voice saying to him, 'Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting Me?'" ⁵ And he said, 'Who are You, Lord?' And He said, 'I am Jesus whom you are persecuting, ⁶ but get up and enter the city, and it will be told you what you must do.'" ⁷ The men who traveled with him stood speechless, hearing the voice but seeing no one. ⁸ Saul got up from the ground, and though his eyes were open, he could see nothing; and leading him by the hand, they brought him into Damascus. ⁹ And he was three days without sight, and neither ate nor drank." (Acts 9:1-9)

In this passage, Luke used the name "Saul." In Acts 13:9, Luke told us, *"But Saul, who was also known as Paul..."* At that point, Luke will call him "Paul" through the rest of the book. Therefore, from now on we will call him "Paul", but the Scripture will continue to call him "Saul" until Acts 13. It is interesting that Luke uses the word *"breathing"* in this passage. The English word does not hold the same connotation as found in the original language. This word, *"breathing"* is like *a snorting warhorse which loves to engage in a bloody battle*. Paul had already sniffed the air of death with Stephen's stoning. Now he exhaled the desire to press on to the distant lands to continue his war against the Church.

Paul was a descendant of Benjamin, the son of Jacob. In Genesis 49, Jacob on his deathbed, gave a prophecy to each of his sons. In his prophecy to Benjamin he said, *"Benjamin is a ravenous wolf; in the morning he devours the prey, and in the evening he divides the spoil."* (Genesis 49:27). Without a doubt, Paul was the greatest descendent in the history of the Benjamin line and he alone fulfilled the prophecy.

Luke was specific about Paul's need for a letter to the synagogues in Damascus, but evidently, the letter also gave Paul authority in other cities. Luke spoke about it when he quoted Paul saying,

"And as I punished them often in all the synagogues, I tried to force them to blaspheme; and being furiously enraged at them, I kept pursuing them even to foreign cities." (Acts 26:11).

Needless to say, Luke's purpose in this passage was to convey the final attempts of Paul to persecute the Church. Luke tells us that Paul fell to the ground when the Lord spoke to him on the road just outside Damascus, but later Luke recorded the testimony of Paul saying, *"And when we had all fallen to the ground, I heard a voice saying to me in the Hebrew dialect, 'Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting Me? It is hard for you to kick against the goads.'"* (Acts 26:14).

The most important point in this passage is the fact that Paul instantly surrendered to the Lord and did as He commanded. Here is what Paul said about that in his letter to the Galatians.

"For I would have you know, brethren, that the gospel which was preached by me is not according to man. ¹² For I neither received it from man, nor was I taught it, but I received it through a revelation of Jesus Christ. ¹³ For you have heard of my former manner of life in Judaism, how I used to persecute the church of God beyond measure and tried to destroy it; ¹⁴ and I was advancing in Judaism beyond many of my contemporaries among my countrymen, being more extremely zealous for my ancestral traditions. ¹⁵ But when God, who had set me apart even from my mother's womb and called me through His grace, was pleased ¹⁶ to reveal His Son in me so that I might preach Him among the Gentiles, I did not immediately consult with flesh and blood, ¹⁷ nor did I go up to Jerusalem to those who were apostles before me; but I went away to Arabia, and returned once more to Damascus. ¹⁸ Then three years later I went up to Jerusalem to become acquainted with Cephas [Peter], and stayed with him fifteen days. ¹⁹ But I did not see any other of the apostles except James, the Lord's brother. ²¹ Then I went into the regions of Syria and Cilicia. ²² I was still unknown by sight to the churches of Judea which were in Christ; ²³ but only, they kept hearing, 'He who once persecuted us is now preaching the faith which he once tried to destroy.' ²⁴ And they were glorifying God because of me." (Galatians 1:11-24)

Paul recalled how he was a Jew of the Jews. He was a brilliant man and student in Judaism. He was a student of Gamaliel, either in Jerusalem or Tarsus. He personally persecuted the Church. He was on his way up the ladder of success in Judaism, yet that all came to an end on the Damascus Road.

But God had a plan for Paul, even from the very beginning of his life. Once he met the Lord on the road to Damascus, he did not immediately go to the Apostles who were headquartered in Jerusalem. The text in Acts 9 is a far better commentary than I could ever write. Let's look at that text.

Now there was a disciple at Damascus named Ananias; and the Lord said to him in a vision, "Ananias." And he said, "Here I am, Lord." ¹¹ And the Lord said to him, "Get up and go to the street called Straight, and inquire at the house of Judas for a man from Tarsus named Saul, for he is praying, ¹² and he has seen in a vision a man named Ananias come in and lay his hands on him, so that he might regain his sight." ¹³ But Ananias answered, "Lord, I have heard from many about this man, how much harm he did to Your saints at Jerusalem; ¹⁴ and here he has authority from the chief priests to bind all who call on Your name." ¹⁵ But the Lord said to him, "Go, for he is a chosen instrument of Mine, to bear My name before the Gentiles and kings and the sons of Israel; ¹⁶ for I will show him how much he must suffer for My name's sake." (Acts 9:10-16)

For three days Paul remained blind while he stayed in the home of Judas in Damascus. We know nothing about Judas. We can only assume that he was a Jew because his home had been previously secured for Paul's stay while in Damascus. Ananias was a Christian, yet he was well-respected in the Damascus Jewish community. His encounter with the Lord frightened him because he had heard about the reputation of Paul and the terror he was inflicting on the Church. The Lord announced to Ananias His plans for Paul. He was to be a witness for the Lord to the *"Gentiles and kings and the sons of Israel."* Perhaps the Lord knew that He would have to convince Ananias of the future greatness of Paul in order to get him to make the visit to Judas' home. But the Lord added the pressure on Ananias by telling him, *"He has seen in a vision a man named Ananias come in and lay his hands on him, so that he might regain his sight."* Paul was expecting Ananias to show up and help him.

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.”¹⁸ And immediately there fell from his eyes something like scales, and he regained his sight, and he got up and was baptized;¹⁹ and he took food and was strengthened. (Acts 9:17–19a).

When Ananias finally saw Paul just as the Lord announced in the vision, all of Ananias’ suspicions about him vanished. Seeing Paul as a true brother in Christ, he called him “Brother Saul.” It was a gracious greeting spoken to a person who would be under suspicion from both the Jews and the Church. The respect for Ananias would help soothe the fears of the believers in Damascus. On the third day, after hearing the words of the Lord just outside Damascus, Paul regained his eyesight and was baptized, more than likely by Ananias in a pool in Damascus as a symbol of his new life in Christ that had begun three days before.

Now for several days he was with the disciples who were at Damascus,²⁰ and immediately he began to proclaim Jesus in the synagogues, saying, “He is the Son of God.”²¹ All those hearing him continued to be amazed, and were saying, “Is this not he who in Jerusalem destroyed those who called on this name, and who had come here for the purpose of bringing them bound before the chief priests?”²² But Saul kept increasing in strength and confounding the Jews who lived at Damascus by proving that this Jesus is the Christ. (Acts 9:19b-22).

With the same vigor and vitality that he had persecuted the Church, Paul now defended its Leader - Jesus. In no time, he went to the synagogues to proclaim that Jesus was the “Son of God.” This phrase becomes Paul’s theme for the rest of his ministry. Amazingly, Paul began his ministry in the very synagogues where he had intended to arrest those who profess the same Jesus that he now called Lord.

When many days had elapsed, the Jews plotted together to do away with him,²⁴ but their plot became known to Saul. They were also watching the gates day and night so that they might put him to death;²⁵ but his disciples took him by night and let him down through an opening in the wall, lowering him in a large basket. (Acts 9:23-25).

Paul’s constant preaching irritated the Jews. After weeks of irritation, they plotted to kill him, but the faithful helped him escape by lowering him down the wall of the city in a basket. Paul recalled this story and gave a clue to the timing of the event in his letter to the Corinthians when he said, “In Damascus the ethnarch under Aretas the king was guarding the city of the Damascenes in order to seize me, and I was let down in a basket through a window in the wall, and so escaped his hands.” (2 Corinthians 11:33). Aretas was the king of Arabia and the father-in-law of Herod Antipas. His daughter was Antipas’ first wife whom he divorced in order to marry Herodias, the wife of his brother Herod Philip. Herod Antipas’ adulterous relationship with Herodias was condemned by John the Baptist. If you remember, years before, Herodias convinced her daughter to dance lewdly at Antipas’ birthday party and ask for the head of John the Baptist as a gift. Aretas, furious with Antipas, invaded the territory and totally destroyed the armies of Antipas in AD 36. He also took advantage of the death of Caesar Tiberius in AD 37, taking possession of all the area including the eastern Roman capital of Damascus. With the mention of Aretas, we know that the dating of this event is after AD 36. More than likely, Paul had been preaching Jesus in the synagogues for more than two years since his conversion, but he did not spend all his time in the city. Paul filled in a little more information about these first few years in his letter to the Galatians when he said,

But when God, who had set me apart even from my mother’s womb and called me through His grace, was pleased¹⁶ to reveal His Son in me so that I might preach Him among the Gentiles, I did not immediately consult with flesh and blood,¹⁷ nor did I go up to Jerusalem to those who were apostles before me; but I went away to Arabia, and returned once more to Damascus.¹⁸ Then three years later I went up to Jerusalem to become acquainted with Cephas [Peter], and stayed with him fifteen days.¹⁹ But I did not see any other of the apostles except James, the Lord’s brother. (Galatians 1:15-19).

Therefore, from the time of Paul's conversion until his first visit back in Jerusalem was three years. When we add the fact that Aretas was the king when Paul escaped from Damascus, we can assume at this point it was approximately AD 37 and that will place Paul's conversion date in AD 34. Paul was in Damascus for three years. Finally, he went to Jerusalem for 15 days, trying to introduce himself, but with little success. He did make contact with Peter and James. Continuing to read in Acts 9, we find Barnabas connected with Paul and they began their long association together.

When he came to Jerusalem, he was trying to associate with the disciples; but they were all afraid of him, not believing that he was a disciple.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.²⁸ And he was with them, moving about freely in Jerusalem, speaking out boldly in the name of the Lord.²⁹ And he was talking and arguing with the Hellenistic [Greek] Jews; but they were attempting to put him to death.³⁰ But when the brethren learned of it, they brought him down to Caesarea and sent him away to Tarsus. (Acts 9:26–30).

The people were fearful of Paul when he returned to Jerusalem after a three-year absence. They had not forgotten his terror and persecution. Barnabas, who came to the aid of Paul, was not new in the historical stories of the Acts of the Apostles; Luke introduced Barnabas earlier in the letter. He was also known as Joseph, a Levite of Cyprian, who sold his property to give to the needs of the Church. Note here, Joseph Barnabas was a Levite who owned land. This was strictly forbidden in the nation of Israel while they controlled the Promised Land. But, when Cyrus returned Israel to their land from exile in 536 BC, Persia controlled the land and the Levites no longer had the privilege of living on land donated to them by the other tribes. At that time, they began to purchase and own their own land. Moving on, because Luke introduced Barnabas so early in the story, we can assume that he had been a believer for many years and was a trustworthy and faithful man in the cause of Christ. His testimony about Paul's conversion calmed the fears of some of the Church and Paul was able to join the communion with believers in Jerusalem. Peter believed the testimony about Paul and treated him as his guest for two weeks. But Paul was not in Jerusalem to be Peter's guest; he had come to receive a commission from the Apostles to spread the Gospel. Paul's nature would not let him stay quiet while he was Peter's guest. During his two-week stay, he began to proclaim his message about Jesus everywhere in the city, stirring up strife among the Jews who did not believe in the Savior. It was not hard to imagine the scene in Jerusalem when the brilliant young Pharisee, the prize student of Gamaliel, returned to Jerusalem, preaching the same message that he had so vehemently persecuted a mere three years before. The "*brethren*" had to intervene to save Paul's life, moving him first to Caesarea, a city on the shore of the Mediterranean Sea about seventy miles northwest of Jerusalem. From there they most likely place him on a boat, shipping him off to his home in Tarsus, about three hundred miles away by sea and then another twelve miles north of the Mediterranean coastline in modern day Turkey. For the fourteenth time we see the use of the word "*brethren*" in Luke's letter. Its meaning is the same throughout the New Testament, but its use in this passage shows its intent clearly. "*Brethren*" always refers to a Jew or a Christian of Jewish heritage or bloodline, never a person of Gentile heritage. Therefore, the Christian Jews are the ones who came to the aid of Paul and protected him by getting him out of the country and back to his boyhood home where the Sanhedrin had absolutely no authority whatsoever. It seemed that no other Pharisee stepped forward with the same zeal to persecute the Church, so the Church was able to meet peacefully and recruit new members with little obstruction from the Jewish community.

It took fourteen years for Paul to return to Jerusalem after spending time in Arabia. Barnabas was still with Paul but Titus had joined the ticket. It was Paul's past that prepared him to serve the LORD. What in your past has prepared you to serve the LORD? What is your testimony? Who needs to hear your testimony? Who do you know who needs the LORD as Savior?