

International Sunday School Lesson
Study Notes
October 11, 2015

Lesson Text: Acts 9:18-31
Lesson Title: A Dynamic New Witness

Introduction

Persecution does not stop the truth, it spreads it. This has been the experience of the Christian church from Pentecost until today. In fact, left to itself, the church has a tendency to become complacent and apathetic. Persecuted and pressured, the church continues to preach the gospel and souls are birthed into God's kingdom.

The circumstances leading up to the arrest, trial, and martyrdom of Stephen are recorded in Acts 7. Between Stephen's death and the conversion of Saul of Tarsus, Luke records how Philip was used of the Holy Spirit to preach Jesus to the Samaritans and later to the Ethiopian eunuch. In the midst of all of this mighty work of God, Saul of Tarsus was *"yet breathing out threatenings and slaughter against the disciples of the Lord"* (Acts 9:1). The word *"yet"* is important. It means "in spite of" the defense of Stephen, his martyrdom, and the evidence of the working of the Holy Spirit, Saul continued to persecute the church.

While on his way to Damascus to arrest those who were *"...of this way"* (Acts 9:2), Saul of Tarsus was miraculously saved by grace. His conversion account is one of the most thrilling stories in God's Word (Acts 9:1-9). God converted Saul in a dramatic way. A blinding light sent from heaven by the Lord left Saul with a temporary blindness that lasted for three days (Acts 9:8-9). Saul was then led to Damascus by the men that journeyed with him and there waited instructions from the Lord. As Paul waited at the house of Judas, the Lord spoke to a man named Ananias and commanded him to go to the house of Judas to ask about this man named Saul (Acts 9:10-12). Although reluctant to obey the Lord because of Saul's reputation, Ananias obeyed and found Saul. At the command of the Lord, he put his hands upon Saul and Saul was *"filled with the Holy Ghost"* (Acts 9:17) and *"received his sight"* (Acts 9:17).

With the opening of Saul's eyes a new witness was born and a new day began for the church and the gospel. The persecutor became a preacher. The one who hated Christians now loved his brothers and sisters in Christ.

A Witness in Damascus (Acts 9:18-25)

Verse 18

“And immediately there fell from his eyes as it had been scales: and he received sight forthwith, and arose, and was baptized.”

“Immediately” or as soon as Ananias prayed for Saul “there fell from his eyes as it had been scales: and he received sight forthwith.” “Scales” were flakes of debris that prevented one from seeing. For Saul, these “scales” were the teachings of Judaism. He knew the Old Testament and prophecies about the coming Messiah. He had been blind to the reality of Jesus Christ. Now, the “scales” have fallen off and Saul can see.

In response to Ananias’ directions to rise and be baptized (Acts 22:16), Saul “arose, and was baptized.” Saul the Persecutor became Paul the Apostle, saved, baptized, filled with the Holy Spirit, and ready to be a faithful follower of Jesus Christ and one of history’s greatest Christian witnesses.

Verse 19-20

“And when he had received meat, he was strengthened. Then was Saul certain days with the disciples which were at Damascus. And straightway he preached Christ in the synagogues, that he is the Son of God.”

“Saul” (hereafter called Paul) had been three days without food or drink (Acts 9:9). After his conversion and baptism, he ate “meat” and “was strengthened.” The word “strengthened” means “to invigorate.” After eating he remained “certain days with the disciples which were at Damascus.” “Damascus” is north of Jerusalem. Since his conversion, Saul has a desire to be with “the disciples” of Christ. Prior to conversion, he killed them. One way you can have assurance of salvation is the desire to be with God’s people (1 John 3:14).

“Certain days” does not tell us a specific length of time. We do know from Galatians 1:16-19 that Paul did not travel to Jerusalem for three years. It is possible Paul stayed in Damascus for several months, then went into Arabia, later returned to Damascus, and then visited Jerusalem. We know Paul stayed in Damascus long enough to “preach Christ in the synagogues.”

“Straightway” means “immediately after his conversion.” The words “preached Christ” means Paul publicly declared that Jesus Christ was the Son of God. Before his conversion, Paul hated and persecuted those who preached Jesus. Now, he is preaching the same message his predecessors Peter, John, Stephen, and the rest of the apostles preached. Preaching “Christ” always gives credibility to your witness and testimony.

Paul “preached Christ in the synagogues.” The “synagogue” was the meeting place for the leaders of Judaism. Before his conversion Paul was a strict Jew and dedicated to Judaism. It did not take Paul days, weeks, or months to

witness the new life he now possessed. The change was instant. From this point on Paul had but one theme: “*Jesus Christ, and him crucified*” (1 Corinthians 2:2).

Verse 21

“But all that heard him were amazed, and said; Is not this he that destroyed them which called on this name in Jerusalem, and came hither for that intent, that he might bring them bound unto the chief priests?”

It is possible that the religious leaders in Jerusalem were eager to assemble and hear Saul (as they knew him) deliver a blistering message against these Christians who were preaching Jesus. Instead, “all that heard him were amazed.” Their question, “Is not this he that destroyed them which called on this name in Jerusalem, and came hither for that intent, that he might bring them bound unto the chief priests” reveals their amazement and shock that Saul is now preaching Christ. They were expecting Saul to come to Damascus and “bring” Christians “bound unto the chief priests” for punishment and judgment.

In light of what happened on the Damascus Road, Saul of Tarsus was now Paul the Apostle. He was a new man in Christ Jesus (2 Corinthians 5:17). Saul was the same man in physical appearance but he was a new man in heart and action.

Verse 22

“But Saul increased the more in strength, and confounded the Jews which dwelt at Damascus, proving that this is very Christ.”

The more Saul preached Jesus the more he “increased in strength.” The word “strength” means “to make strong, to empower.” It is the same Greek word used in Romans 4:20 to describe the astonishing faith of Abraham, “*He staggered not at the promise of God through unbelief; but was strong in faith, giving glory to God.*” This “strength” is a power that is irresistible. That is why the Jewish community was “confounded.” “Confounded” means “stirred up, in an uproar, perplexed in mind.”

Verse 23-24

“And after that many days were fulfilled, the Jews took counsel to kill him: But their laying await was known of Saul. And they watched the gates day and night to kill him.”

“After many days were fulfilled, the Jews took counsel to kill” Saul. We do not know the length of time exactly. Luke simply says, “Many days.” Evidently the

confrontation considered for some considerable amount of time. After hearing Saul preach Jesus, the “Jews took counsel to kill him.” When religion fails to win its argument, it always results to deadly tactics. The only solution religion had here was to kill the messenger. They “watched the gates” of the city of Damascus and were ready to arrest Saul should he try to escape the city.

Who were these “Jews” who plotted to kill Saul? It could have been any of a number of religious leaders. Perhaps it was the chief ruler of the synagogue in Damascus. Maybe orders came down from the Sanhedrin in Jerusalem. Who knows? The point is, Saul’s capture was sanctioned by those who loved Judaism and hated Jesus.

“But their laying await was known of Saul” is no coincidence. We are not told how God communicated this to Saul, but God saw to it that he knew about the plot on his life. What comfort and assurance for those of us today who preach and teach Jesus Christ. The prophet Isaiah said, *“No weapon that is formed against thee shall prosper; and every tongue that shall rise against thee in judgment thou shalt condemn. This is the heritage of the servants of the LORD, and their righteousness is of me, saith the LORD”* (Isaiah 54:17). God is promising that all who hate Him are sealing their own destruction and He will defend and protect His own. This is the *“heritage”* of God’s children. Until the Lord was finished with Paul, he would continue to preach the gospel. The same is true of every true follower of Jesus Christ.

Verse 25

“Then the disciples took him by night, and let him down by the wall in a basket.”

“Then” is a reference to “after the previous events.” After the plots and plans of the enemies of the cross, “the disciples took” Saul “by night” and “let him down by the wall in a basket.” It is interesting that the word “basket” used here is the same Greek word for “basket” used in Matthew 15:37 and Mark 8:8 in reference to the *“seven baskets left full”* after Jesus fed the multitudes. That would indicate that Paul was “let down” over “the wall” in the same size “basket” Jesus used in the miraculous feeding!

Was Paul afraid to stand for Jesus in this situation? No. This man had a great message of salvation to preach to the world and he knew if he stayed in Damascus where the Jews hated him it would mean certain death. Paul may not have known it, but when he fled Damascus, he was actually obeying the words of Jesus. Our Lord told His disciples, *“But when they persecute you in this city, flee ye into another: for verily I say unto you, Ye shall not have gone over the cities of Israel, till the Son of man be come”* (Matthew 10:23). There are times when Christians must die for the witness and testimony of Jesus Christ.

But this was not the time for Paul to die. Paul did not deny the faith by leaving Damascus as he did.

Note: Here is the beginning story of Paul's ministry. He gets saved, baptized, filled with the Holy Spirit, preaches Jesus in the synagogue at Damascus, makes the Jews angry, and leaves town in the night in a basket. What a way to start a ministry!

A Witness in Jerusalem (Acts 9:26-30)

Verse 26

“And when Saul was come to Jerusalem, he assayed to join himself to the disciples: but they were all afraid of him, and believed not that he was a disciple.”

Paul made several visits to the city of Jerusalem during his life and ministry. His first visit is recorded here in Acts 9:26-30. This seems to be the visit Paul discusses in Galatians 1:18-19. Upon his arrival in “Jerusalem,” Paul attempted to “join himself” to the Christian “disciples.” Can you blame these “disciples” for being a little fearful? The name “Saul of Tarsus” must have struck fear in the hearts of everyone who knew what he had done to Christians. They “were all afraid of him” and questioned the reality of his salvation.

Commenting on why these disciples were afraid of Paul, Doctor Warren W. Wiersbe writes, “Their attitude seems strange to us, for surely the Damascus saints had gotten word to the church in Jerusalem that Saul had been converted and was now preaching the Word. Perhaps Saul's "disappearance" for almost three years gave an air of suspicion to his testimony. Where had he been? What was he doing? Why had he waited so long to contact the Jerusalem elders? Furthermore, what right did he have to call himself an apostle when he had not been selected by Jesus Christ? There were many unanswered questions that helped create an atmosphere of suspicion and fear.” (*Bible Exposition Commentary, BE Series - New Testament - The Bible Exposition Commentary – New Testament, Volume 1.*)

Verse 27

“But Barnabas took him, and brought him to the apostles, and declared unto them how he had seen the Lord in the way, and that he had spoken to him, and how he had preached boldly at Damascus in the name of Jesus.”

“But Barnabas” is precious words indeed. Good ole “Barnabas.” We met him back in Acts 4:36-37, and we will see him again in the history of the early church. Since Barnabas was from Cyprus (Acts 4:36), not too far from Tarsus,

it is possible he had met Saul of Tarsus. “Barnabas brought” Saul “to the apostles” (Peter, John, and others) and “declared unto them how he had seen the Lord in the way.”

What a glorious meeting this must have been! Imagine “Barnabas,” the great encourager, introducing “Saul” (now Paul) to Peter, James, John, and the other apostles. You can almost see the fear melt as Barnabas told them how God saved Saul. Doctor John Phillips suggests that Peter may have given Saul a big fisherman’s bear hug! Can you imagine the conversation taking place between these men? It must have been glorious. May this occasion stir our hearts to be a Barnabas to new believers and the church.

Verse 28-29

“And he was with them coming in and going out at Jerusalem. And he spake boldly in the name of the Lord Jesus, and disputed against the Grecians: but they went about to slay him.”

The words “coming in and going out at Jerusalem” means Paul had free course to come and go as he pleased in Jerusalem. He has been received by the Christians “at Jerusalem” as a Christian and an apostle. In the very city where he had previously persecuted Christians he now “boldly” proclaims “the name of the Lord Jesus.”

Paul also “disputed against the Grecians.” The “Grecians” were as much opposed to the gospel as the Jews in Jerusalem. They were Israelites with a Greek background. They were also the same group that had engineered the trial and death of Stephen (Acts 6:9-15). Paul was one of them, having been born in Tarsus. No doubt he now feels the obligation to pick up where Stephen left off (Acts 22:20).

These “Grecians,” or unbelieving Jews were not about to let Saul give this kind of witness to Jesus Christ, so “they went about to slay him.” But Saul will not leave Jerusalem just because of their threats and plots to kill him. At this point we must read Acts 22:17-21. Paul recounts how God reminded him of his call to take the gospel to the Gentile world. As Paul was praying, the Lord spoke to him and said, *“Make haste, and get thee quickly out of Jerusalem: for they will not receive thy testimony concerning me.”* It may look like Paul leaves Jerusalem as he left Damascus, but God is working behind the scenes to bring the gospel to the Gentiles.

Verse 30

“Which when the brethren knew, they brought him down to Caesarea, and sent him forth to Tarsus.”

When the believers at Jerusalem learned about the Jewish plot to kill Paul, “they brought him down to Caesarea, and sent him forth to Tarsus.” The fact that “the brethren” believed Paul is proof that he had been fully accepted by the church. Paul is now safe in his home town, “Tarsus.”

Verse 31

“Then had the churches rest throughout all Judaea and Galilee and Samaria, and were edified; and walking in the fear of the Lord, and in the comfort of the Holy Ghost, were multiplied.”

Once again Luke gives us one of his statements that may seem unimportant or nothing more than geographical locations. Luke tells us “the churches had rest” which seems to indicate that persecution was reduced for a season after the conversion of Saul. This “rest” was experienced “throughout all Judaea and Galilee and Samaria.” Notice these locations parallel those given in Acts 1:8. Luke is telling us the gospel is going out to the places the Lord had commanded.

In spite of all the persecutions and growing pains of the early church, the churches “were edified: and walking in the fear of the Lord, and in the comfort of the Holy Ghost.” “Edified” means “build-up, embolden.” Since persecution had subsided for a season the believers had time to be together and build each other up in the faith. They also continued to “walk in the fear of the Lord.” Their conduct and manner of life was lived not in fear of man, but of the Lord (Colossians 1:10). Finally, they experienced the “comfort of the Holy Ghost and were multiplied.” Through the power of the Holy Spirit they were exhorted and encouraged to press on in Christ. Souls were continually being saved and added to the church.

Conclusion

What a great day it was when Saul of Tarsus was converted. His salvation was not only a new beginning for him personally, it was also a new beginning for the church. The Gentiles were about to receive the good news of Jesus Christ. What started in Samaria through the preaching of Philip would now go around the world, much of it through the ministry of the Apostle Paul.

If you have been saved by God’s amazing grace, you, like Paul, are a member of the family of God. Paul accepted Christ by faith and identified himself with the church, the body of believers who shared the same faith. He then faithfully began to tell everyone what Christ had done for him and what He could do for them.

Your salvation and calling is the same as Paul’s. Maybe your salvation experience is not as dramatic as Paul’s, but in terms of distance from God

there is no difference between sinners. We were all dead in trespasses and sins (Ephesians 2:1; Colossians 2:13) and alienation from God (Ephesians 4:8; Colossians 1:21). Now we are saved and called to be witnesses to Jesus Christ and His great salvation. Let us bear witness today to Jesus Christ, the majesty of His person and work for the salvation of sinners.

May our witness, like Paul's, be a Christ-centered witness!

Amen.