

BIB204 NT2 Early Church

Unit 2 Study Resource

Commentary on Acts of the Apostles

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Acts IX

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IX: 1, 2. These is a sudden transition in our narrative at this point, and it assumes more the character of a biography. The writers of sacred history, in both Testaments, devote the greater part of their space to biographical sketches. The greater familiarity of the masses of the people with such portions of the Bible fully attests the wisdom of this course. This familiarity is the result of a deeper impression made upon the heart, and, consequently, upon the memory. We accept it, therefore, thankfully, that Luke, in his sketch of apostolic labors, was directed to record, somewhat connectedly, the labors of Paul, rather than detached sketches from the lives of all the apostles. What is lost to our curiosity in reference to the other apostles is far overbalanced by the more thrilling effect of a continuous personal narrative. This effect is all the more thrilling, from the selection of him, who, among all the apostles, was "in labors most abundant."

Saul has already been introduced to the reader in the account of Stephen's martyrdom. By the aid of his own subsequent statements concerning himself, we are able to trace his history to a still earlier period. The early education and ancestral remembrances of a man have much to do in forming his character and shaping his career. Those of Saul were calculated to thrust him into the very scenes in which he first figures in history. He was born in the city of Tarsus, in Cilicia, not far from the period at which Jesus was born in Bethlehem. He was of pure Jewish extraction, of the tribe of Benjamin, and descended from pious ancestry. This insured his careful instruction in Jewish history, and such portions of the law of Moses as he could understand in childhood. His parents were Pharisees, and, therefore, his understanding of the Scriptures was modified by the peculiar interpretations and traditions of that sect, while his prejudices were all enlisted in its favor.¹⁸³

Besides this religious instruction, he was taught the trade of tent-making. The goat's hair which was used in this manufacture was produced in Cilicia in such abundance, and of so fine a quality, that the manufactured article acquired the name *Cilicium*, from the name of the province. The wisdom of his parents in teaching him this trade as a means of providing against the unfortunate contingencies of life, will be fully exemplified in the course of this narrative.

The child was being educated, under the eye of an overruling Providence, for a future unthought of by either himself or his parents. His residence in a city where the Greek language prevailed was not the least important circumstance bearing upon his education. Like the children of foreigners in our own country, though the ancestral tongue was the language of the fireside, on the streets and in all places of public resort he was compelled to employ the language of the adopted country. In this way he acquired that familiarity with the Greek, which enabled him, in after-life, to employ it with facility both in writing and speaking.

It was only his earliest childhood that was thus devoted to parental instruction, and to the acquirement of the Greek language and a trade; for he was "brought up" in the city of Jerusalem, at the feet of Gamaliel.¹⁸⁴ Under the instruction of this learned Pharisee, whose prudence and whose calm indifference to the cause of Christ we have had occasion to notice, in commenting on the second trial of the apostles,¹⁸⁵ his Pharisaic prejudices must have been intensified, with his knowledge of the law was enlarged, and his zeal for it inflamed.

A youth of Paul's intellectual capacity would be expected to make rapid advances with the opportunities which he now enjoyed, and so, he tells us, he did. "I made progress in the Jew's religion above many my equals in age in

my own nation, being more exceedingly zealous for the traditions of my fathers.”¹⁸⁶ This pre-eminence among his school-fellows was accompanied by the strictest propriety of religious deportment; so that he could appeal, after the lapse of many years, to those who knew him in his youth, though now his enemies, to testify that, “according to the strictest sect of our religion, I lived a Pharisee.”¹⁸⁷ He could even declare that he was, “touching the righteousness that is in the law, blameless.”¹⁸⁸ Such was his character, and his reputation, when he finished his course of instruction in the school of Gamaliel.

If the usual supposition concerning Saul's age is correct, it is not probable that he was in Jerusalem at the time of the crucifixion, or for several years previous. If he had been, it would be unaccountable that in all his epistles he makes no allusion to a personal knowledge of Jesus. The supposition that he was at that time still confined in the school of Gamaliel is not only inconsistent with his supposed age, which could not have been less than thirty at the time he is introduced to us, but it is insufficient to account for his ignorance of events over which the every children of Jerusalem rejoiced.¹⁸⁹ The supposition that he left the school and returned to Tarsus previous to the immersion preached by John, and reappeared in Jerusalem after the ascension of Jesus, is most agreeable to all the known facts in the case. By an absence of a few years he had not forfeited his former reputation, but appears now as a leader in the movements against the Church. We have already, in commenting on [Acts vi. 9](#), ventured the assumption, that among the Cilicians there mentioned as opponents of Stephen, Saul bore a leading part as a disputant. Such a position of his superior learning and piety would naturally assign him, and his prominence at the stoning of Stephen affords evidence in favor of this assumption. The law required that the witnesses upon whose testimony an idolater was condemned to death should throw the first stones, in the execution of the sentence.¹⁹⁰ In accordance with this law, the witnesses against Stephen, preparatory to their cruel work, laid off their cumbrous outer-garments, at the feet of Saul, who “was consenting of his death.”¹⁹¹ After the death of Stephen, he still maintained the position of a leader, and continued to commit men and women to prison, until the Church was entirely dispersed. Many of those committed to prison met with the fate of Stephen. This fact is not stated by Luke, but is confessed by Paul in his speech before Agrippa.¹⁹² Many others were beaten in the synagogues, and compelled to blaspheme the name of Jesus as the condition of release from their tortures.¹⁹³

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After the congregation in Jerusalem had been dispersed, Saul doubtless thought that the sect was effectually crushed. But soon the news came floating back from every quarter, that the scattered disciples were building up congregations in every direction. One less determined than Saul might have despaired of final success in destroying a cause which had thus far been promoted by every attack made upon it, and which even sprung up with increasing strength from apparent destruction. But his was a nature which gathered new resolution as obstacles multiplied before him; and thus he appears in the present text, which, after so long delay, we must now have before us. (1) “*But Saul, yet breathing out threatening and slaughter against the disciples of the Lord, went to the high priest, (2) and requested from him letters to the synagogues in Damascus, that, if he found any of that way, whether men or women, he might bring them bound to Jerusalem.*”

Why he selected Damascus as the scene of his first enterprise, rather than some of the cities of Judea, is acknowledged by Olshausen as “difficult to determine.” But when we remember the sensitiveness of patriots, in reference to the reputation of their country and its institutions in foreign lands, the difficulty disappears. The ancestral religion of the Jew was his pride and boast in every land. It was bitter enough to the proud Pharisee that it

should be brought into disrepute among a portion of the population at home; but when the hated authors of this reproach began to spread it abroad in surrounding kingdoms, it was beyond endurance. When the news reached Jerusalem that this dishonoring heresy had begun to spread in the ancient and celebrated city of Damascus, where thousands of Jews then lived, and had obtained a religious influence over a large portion of the population, the exasperation of the Pharisees knew no bounds, and Saul, with characteristic ardor, started in pursuit of the fugitives. He had reason, of course, to believe, that, upon requisition of the high priest, the authorities of Damascus, which was then embraced within the dominions of the Arabian king Aretas, would deliver up the disciples as fugitives from justice. That he was correct in this is sufficiently demonstrated by the zeal with which the governor afterward lent the aid of his guards to the orthodox Jews, for the purpose of seizing Paul himself.¹⁹⁴

3. The storm of passion with which Saul started from Jerusalem would naturally subside, in some degree, in the course of the five or six days necessary to perform on foot the journey of one hundred and forty miles, leaving him in a calmer mood, and better prepared for the scenes which transpired near the close of the journey. (3) “*And as he journeyed, he came near to Damascus, and suddenly there flashed around him a light from heaven.*” This occurred at noon, when the sun was shining with full meridian strength upon the sandy plain which he was traversing,¹⁹⁵ yet the light from heaven was “above the brightness of the sun.”¹⁹⁶

We are now fairly introduced to the history of Saul's conversion, and must note carefully the entire process, both with reference to the specific changes effected, and the influences which produced them. In order that we may have the case fully before us, we will draw upon the parallel passages in the twenty-second and twenty-sixth chapters for such additional facts as they furnish.

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4. “*And he fell upon the earth, and heard a voice saying to him, Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?*” He not only heard this voice, but, gazing, while his eyes could endure it, into the midst of the glory, he saw distinctly the being who spoke to him.¹⁹⁷ The question he heard, by the simple force of the word *persecute*, carried his mind forward to his bloody purpose in Damascus, and back to his bloody deeds in Jerusalem. Nor was this the only involuntary motion of his mind upon the instant; for here we must locate the additional words, “It is hard for thee to kick against the goads.”¹⁹⁸ This language reveals to us that Saul's conscience had not been altogether at rest during his persecutions, but that, like an unruly ox, he had been kicking against a goad, which urged him to a different course. Although he had acted ignorantly, and in unbelief, yet it was with so many misgivings, that he ever afterward regarded himself as the *chief of sinners*, having been the chief of persecutors.¹⁹⁹ His conscience must have been instantaneously aroused by this reference to its past goadings.

5, 6. Though his conscience was now aroused, and he knew full well that the vision before him was from heaven, he can not comprehend it until he knows who it is that speaks to him and asserts himself the object of his persecutions. (5) “*And he said, Who art thou, Lord? And the Lord said, I am Jesus, whom you persecute.*” It is impossible for us, who have been familiar with the glory of our risen Savior from our infancy, to fully appreciate the feelings which must have flashed, like lightning, into the soul of Saul, upon hearing these words. Up to this moment he had supposed Jesus an impostor, cursed of God and man; and his followers blasphemers worthy of death; but now, this despised being is suddenly revealed to him in a blaze of divine glory. The evidence of his eyes and ears can not be doubted. There he stands, with the light of heaven and the glory of God around him, and he says, “I AM JESUS!” “Now is Jesus risen from the dead, and become the first fruits of them that slept.” Stephen was a blessed martyr, and

I have shed innocent blood. My soul is guilty. "O wretched man that I am, who shall deliver me from the body of this death?" I have gloried in my shame. All that I have gained is lost. It is filth and refuse. I will throw myself upon his mercy. (6) "*And he, trembling and astonished, said, Lord, what wilt thou have me to do?*" The die is cast. The proud spirit yields, and the whole mighty current of that soul is turned back in its channel, to flow forever, deeply and strongly, in the opposite direction.

The glorious power of the one great gospel proposition was never more forcibly illustrated than on this occasion. A moment ago, Saul was sternly, and with fearful calmness, pressing to the destruction of the cause of Jesus, but now he is a trembling suppliant at his feet. What has produced this change? It is not the fact that he has seen a light and heard a voice. For when he fell to the ground in alarm, his unbelief and ignorance still remained, and he still had to ask the question, "Who art thou?" Thus far, he is no more convinced that Jesus is the Christ than he was before; but he is convinced that the vision is divine, and this prepares him to believe what he may further hear. When that heavenly being, whose word he can not doubt, says, "I am Jesus," one new conviction, that must, from its very nature, reverse all the purposes of his life, takes possession of his soul. To stifle its effects he is not able; to resist its impulse is contrary to the honesty of his nature; and he has no time, if he would, to steel his heart against it. The change flashes over him in an instant, and he lies there a *penitent believer*. The word of the Lord, miraculously attested, gives him faith. The conviction that Jesus, whom he had persecuted in the person of his disciples, is really the Lord of glory, brings him to repentance. He mourns over his sins, and yields his will. These facts reveal the glorious simplicity of gospel salvation; and while we contemplate them, the sickly talk about "irresistible grace," which floats, like the green scum on a stagnant pool, over the pages of many commentaries, in reference to this conversion, is swept away, while the sights and sounds which haunt the memory of many a superstitious convert are driven back to dwell with the ghosts and hobgoblins of a night of ignorance now nearly gone.

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To the question, What wilt thou have me to do? the Lord gave an answer which naturally divides itself into two parts. One part is given by Luke, in the verse before us, and by Paul, in his speech to the Jerusalem mob; the other, in the speech before Agrippa. The latter contains his commission as an apostle, and is expressed in these words: "I have *appeared* to thee for this *purpose*, to appoint thee a minister and a witness of the things which thou hast seen, and of those in which I will appear to thee, delivering thee from the people and the Gentiles, to whom I now send thee, to open their eyes, that they may turn from darkness to light, and from the authority of Satan to God, that they may receive remission of sins, and inheritance among the sanctified, by faith in me."²⁰⁰ In this sentence, which we will notice more at length in its proper connection, Jesus states the object of his *personal appearance* to Saul, and gives him his commission as an apostle. The former was necessary to the latter; for an apostle must be a witness of the resurrection,²⁰¹ and this he could not be without having seen him alive since his crucifixion.²⁰² Having now seen him, not only alive, but glorified, his evidence was afterward classed with that of the original apostles and witnesses.²⁰³ If he had been converted without having seen the Lord, he would not have been an apostle, unless the Lord had afterward appeared to him to make him one. Instead of this, the Lord chose to appear to him in connection with his conversion. While this appearance was necessary to his apostleship, we may not assume that it was necessary to his conversion, unless we take the strange position that it was impossible for him to be convinced in any other way.

Before Saul could enter upon the office of an apostle, it was necessary that he should become a citizen of the kingdom of which he was to be a chief officer. The other portion of the Savior's reply has reference to his duty in this particular. It is stated by Luke in these words, constituting the last clause of [verse 6](#), of which we have already quoted a part: "*Arise, and go into the city, and it shall be told thee what thou must do.*" Saul's own statement of it is more minute: "Arise and go into Damascus, and there it shall be told thee concerning all the things which are appointed for thee to do." The things which he was to do as an apostle had just been told him, and concerning these there had been no previous *appointment*. The things which had been *appointed* for him to do concerned him in common with all other penitent sinners. These having been already appointed by the Lord himself, and their execution committed to the hands of faithful men, the Lord shows respect to his own transfer of authority, by sending the suppliant to Damascus to learn them.

During his personal ministry, Jesus sometimes spoke pardon, at once, to penitent sinners.^{[204](#)} But, since his resurrection from the dead, and the appointment, by formal enactment, of the terms of pardon, there is no instance of this kind. Moreover, his refusal to tell Saul his appointed duty, or to pardon him on the spot, establishes the presumption that he will not do so in any case. If there ever was an occasion on which we would expect the glorified Savior to speak pardon, in person, to a sinner, it is here, when he is in actual conversation with the penitent, and the request is formally preferred. But he refuses to do so. Those, therefore, who imagine themselves to have received a direct communication of pardon from Christ, either orally, or by an abstract spiritual agency, are deluded. They claim for themselves what was not accorded to Saul, and what is inconsistent with the order established in the kingdom of Christ. The reply to all inquirers, if Christ should now speak, would be, as it was then, Go to Damascus, and it shall be told you; Go to the apostles and evangelists of the New Covenant, and the answer will now be given you by Peter, Philip, Ananias, in the same words, and by the same authority, that it was then.

7. While the conversation was passing between Saul and Jesus, the conduct of his companions is thus described by Luke. (7) "*Now, the men who were journeying with him stood speechless, hearing the voice, but seeing no man.*" Paul gives a different account of their demeanor, by saying that they *all fell to the ground*,^{[205](#)} but the two accounts harmonize very naturally. The first effect of such an apparition would naturally be to prostrate them all; but his companions, not being held in this position by any direct address to them, would naturally arise after the first shock was over, and fleeing to a safe distance, there stand gazing, in mute terror, upon the glory which enveloped their leader. This supposition is confirmed by the fact that Paul represents the falling to the earth as occurring *before* the voice was heard, while their standing speechless is connected by Luke with the *close* of the conversation.

This supposition helps to account for a well-known verbal discrepancy between these two accounts. Luke says they *heard* the voice; Paul says "they *heard not* the voice of him that spoke to me." The discrepancy arises from the ambiguous use of the verb *hear*: There is nothing more common, among all nations, than for one who is listening to a speaker, but, either from his own confusion or the indistinctness of the speaker's articulation, can only catch an occasional word, to exclaim "I don't *hear* you;" although the sound of the voice reaches him continually. It is in this sense of the word *hear*, that the companions of Saul, in the confusion of their effort to escape from the scene, failed to *hear* the voice. They heard the sound, but did not understand the words.

8, 9. When the vision disappeared, Saul promptly obeyed the commandment given him. (8) "*And Saul was raised from the earth, but when his eyes were opened he saw no one, and they led him by the hand, and brought him into Damascus.*" (9) "*And he was there three days without seeing, and did neither eat nor drink.*" The physical effect of

the intense light into which he had gazed upon his eyesight was not more painful than the moral effect of the whole scene upon his conscience. The former made him blind; the latter filled him with remorse. To this feeling alone can we attribute his total abstinence from food and drink. The awful crime of fighting murderously against God and Christ was pressing upon his soul, and as yet he knew not what to do that he might obtain pardon. His Jewish education, if not his natural instinct, prompted him to *pray*; and this he was doing with all fervor;²⁰⁶ but the hands he lifted up were stained with blood—the blood of martyrs; and how could he hope to be heard? No penitent ever had greater cause for sorrow, or wept more bitterly than he.

10–12. While this scene of anguish was transpiring in the presence of the astonished Jews who surrounded Saul, the Lord was not unmindful of the promise he had made him. As he had sent him to Damascus to learn what to do, he provides him with a teacher. (10) “*Now there was a certain disciple in Damascus, named Ananias. And the Lord said to him in a vision, Ananias! And he said, Behold, I am here, Lord.*” (11) *And the Lord said to him, Arise, and go upon the street called Straight, and inquire in the house of Judas, for one named Saul of Tarsus. For behold, he is praying,* (12) *and has seen in a vision a named named Ananias coming in and putting his hand upon him that he might receive his sight.*” It will be observed, that, in these directions, the Lord does not tell Ananias what to tell Saul to *do*. This omission only proves that Ananias already knew perfectly what such a person *should* be told to do, and corresponds with the fact that the things in which he was to be instructed were “the things *appointed* for him to do.”

It is well to pause for a moment here, and inquire what progress has been made toward the conversion of Saul, and by what means the progress made has been effected. That he is now a believer, it is impossible for any man who has followed the narrative intelligibly to doubt. That he is also a penitent is equally certain. But the Holy Spirit—by whose direct agency alone, it is taught by man, a man can be brought to faith and repentance—has not yet been imparted to him, nor does he receive it till after the appearance of Ananias.²⁰⁷ Such an agency of the Spirit, then, is not necessary to faith and repentance. Moreover, as we have already observed, the only influence yet brought to bear upon him was that of the words of Jesus, proved to be of divine authority by the miraculous vision. He was 120 convinced, then, by the same means that the eunuch and the three thousand on Pentecost had been, by the word of the Lord miraculously attested. His case differs from both of those, in that the Lord himself was his preacher, instead of an inspired man; and from that of the eunuch, in that the miraculous attestation was a physical display in his case, and the fulfillment of prophecy in the eunuch's. The *nature* of the influences was the same in them all.

Saul is now a believer, and a penitent believer; but he is not yet justified. The theory, therefore, drawn from his own words in the epistle to the Romans, that a man is justified by faith only, the moment he believes, is proved false by Paul's own experience. He says, “*Being justified by faith, we have peace with God.*”²⁰⁸ But he had faith for three days before he was justified, or obtained peace with God. Interpreting his words, then, by his experience, we conclude that men are justified, not by faith only, nor the moment they believe, but when they are led by faith, as he was, to *do* what is *appointed* for penitent believers to do.

There is another fact in the case worthy of notice just here. There is some such necessity for the co-operation of a fellow man, in order to one's conversion, that, although the Lord himself has appeared to Saul, and conversed with him, he can not find peace of mind, though he weeps and groans and prays for three days and nights, until *Ananias* comes to him. In this particular, also his case is like that of the eunuch, whose conversion could not be effected, though an angel had been sent from heaven, and the Spirit had operated miraculously, until the *man Philip* took his

seat in the chariot. The necessity, in his case, differs from that of the eunuch, in that he needed not the man to preach Jesus to him; for this had already been done by Jesus himself. But there was *something* to be done before he obtained pardon, which a *man* must do; and the sequel will show what that something is. In the mean time, let it be observed, that all these pretended conversions of the present day, which are completely effected while the subject is in his bed at night, or alone in the grove, or praying in some solitary place, lack this something of being scriptural conversions. No man was so converted in the days of the apostles.

13–16. Ananias had already heard of Saul, doubtless through fugitive brethren from Jerusalem, and such was the horror which his name inspired, that he was reluctant to approach him, even when commanded by the Lord to do so. (13) “*Then Ananias answered, Lord, I have heard from many concerning this man, how much evil he has done to thy saints who are in Jerusalem,* (14) *and here he has authority from the high priests to bind all who call on thy name.* (15) *But the Lord said to him, Go; for he is to me a chosen vessel, to bear my name before the Gentiles, and kings, and the children of Israel.* (16) *For I will show to him how great things he must suffer on account of my name.*” Here we have a statement that the Lord had made a special choice of Saul for a certain work, and a prediction that he would suffer in the execution of it. The latter demonstrates the foreknowledge of God concerning human conduct, and the former shows that he makes choice beforehand of suitable individuals to execute his purposes. 121

17–19. The assurance given by the Lord was sufficient to remove his fears. (17) “*And Ananias went away and entered into the house, and laid hands upon him, and said, Brother Saul, the Lord, even Jesus who appeared to you in the road in which you came, has sent me that you may receive sight, and be filled with the Holy Spirit.* (18) *And immediately there fell from his eyes something like scales, and he received sight forthwith, and arose and was immersed;* (19) *and taking food, he was strengthened.*” In laying hands on Saul to restore his eyesight, Ananias imitated the example of Jesus, who wrought similar miracles, at one time by touching the eyes of the blind,²⁰⁹ and at another by putting clay on them and directing that it be washed away.²¹⁰

It is quite common to assume that Ananias also conferred the Holy Spirit upon him, by imposition of hands. But this is neither stated nor implied in the text; nor is there any evidence that any besides the apostles ever exercised the power of imparting the Spirit. The fact that this power is not known to have been exercised by any other than the apostles, establishes a strong presumption that it was not exercised by Ananias. This presumption, in the entire absence of proof to the contrary, would alone be conclusive. We do not forget that Ananias says, “Jesus has sent me that you may be filled with the Holy Spirit.” This shows that his reception of the Spirit in some way depended upon the presence of Ananias, but does not imply that he received it by imposition of hands. All the other apostles received it direct from heaven, without human agency.²¹¹ They also received it after they had been immersed; for the fact that Jesus preached the immersion of John, and caused the twelve to administer it under his eye, is proof that they themselves had submitted to it. Moreover, in every other case in the New Testament, with the single exception of Cornelius, the gift of miraculous power followed immersion. These facts furnish a firm basis for the conclusion that Saul's inspiration was awaiting his immersion; and that it depended upon the visit of Ananias, because he was sent to immerse him that he might receive pardon and be filled with the Holy Spirit. To conclude otherwise would be to make his case an exception to that of all the other apostles in reference to *manner* of receiving the Spirit, and to nearly all other disciples, including the apostles, in reference to the *time* of receiving it.

The manner in which Ananias proceeded when he reached the house of Judas presents a most remarkable contrast with the course of most Protestant preachers of the present day. Leaving out of view the miraculous restoration of Saul's eyesight, Ananias was simply sent to a man in a certain house, who had been a persecutor, but now was praying. He had no special directions as to the instruction he shall give the man, but is left to his own previous knowledge of what is proper in such cases. He comes into the house, and finds him prostrate upon the floor, almost exhausted from want of food and drink, which his wretchedness makes him refuse; and he is still praying in great agony. No man of this generation can hesitate as to the course one of our modern preachers would pursue [122] in such a case. He would at once urge him to pray on, and quote to him many passages of Scripture in reference to the answer of prayer. He would tell him to believe in the Lord Jesus, and that the moment he would cast his soul entirely upon him he would be relieved. He would pray with him. Long and fervently would he call upon God to have mercy on the waiting sinner, and send down the Holy Ghost to speak peace to his troubled soul. If these efforts did not bring relief, other brethren and sisters would be called in, and their prayers united with those of the preacher. Pathetic hymns would alternate with zealous prayers and warm exhortations, until both the mourner and his comforters were exhausted, the latter every moment expecting to hear from their wretched victim a shout of joy, as the touch of God would roll away the burden from his soul. If all the efforts failed, the man would go mourning over his still unpardonable sins, perhaps for the remainder of his life. Fortunate would it be for him, if the terrible conclusion that all religion is but hypocrisy, or that he himself is an inevitable reprobate, did not take possession of his soul. This picture is not overdrawn; for my readers can testify that far deeper colors could be spread over it, by copying accurately from many thousands of cases which have occurred in popular "revivals."

Such is the baleful influence of this gross departure from the word of God, that men who are under its influence are constantly denouncing as *heretics* those who venture to follow the example of Ananias. He finds the man to whom he is sent, praying to the Lord Jesus; but, instead of commanding him to pray on, and praying with him, he says to him, "Why do you tarry? Arise, and be immersed, and wash away your sins, calling on the name of the Lord."²¹² There are many Churches at present day, professing to derive their creeds from the Bible, whose clergy dare not follow this example, upon pain of excommunications. Engaged in a public debate, a few years since, with a Doctor of Divinity of a numerous and powerful party, I determined to apply to him a test which had been employed before by some of my brethren, and charged that he dare not, as he valued his ministerial position, and even his membership in the Church, give to mourners seeking salvation the answers given by inspired men, in the very words, which they employed. He interrupted me, by asking if I intended to insinuate that he would not preach what he believed to be the truth. I replied, that I had no disposition to question his honesty, but that I was stating a startling fact, which ought to be made to ring in the ears of the people. I then told the audience I would put my statement to a test at once, and turning to the Doctor, I said: "Sir, if you had a number of mourners before you, as Peter had on Pentecost, pierced to the heart with a sense of guilt, and exclaiming, What shall we do? would you *dare* to say to them, '*Repent* and be *baptized*, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ, *for the remission of sins*, and you shall receive the gift of the Holy Spirit?' Or, if you were called into a private house, like Ananias, to see man fasting and weeping and praying, would you *dare* to say to him, 'Why do you tarry? Arise, and be *baptized*, and wash away your sins, calling on the name of the Lord?' I pause for a reply." I stood waiting, and the immense audience held [123] their breath, until the silence became painful; but the Doctor hung his head and answered *not one word*.

It is high time that the people were won back from such delusions, and made to feel the necessity of following the word of God. Ananias was guided by the apostolic commission. Seeing there were three conditions of pardon, faith, repentance, and immersion, and that Saul had already complied with the first two, he does not tantalize him by telling him to believe or urging him to repent, but commands him to do the one thing which he had not yet done, "Arise, and be immersed." He instantly obeyed; and then, for the first time since he saw the vision by the way, he was sufficiently composed to take food and drink. "Taking food, he was strengthened." Like the eunuch, it was *after* he came up out of the water that he rejoiced.

His composure and peace of mind, after being immersed, was the proper result of intelligent obedience in that institution. If he had not already learned its design, by what he knew of apostolic preaching, the words of Ananias conveyed it without ambiguity. To a sinner mourning over his guilt, seeking pardon, and knowing that the Lord alone could forgive sins, the command to be immersed and wash away his sins could convey but one idea, that, upon the washing of water over the body in immersion, the Lord would remove his sins by forgiving them. That such was the idea intended in the metaphorical expression, "wash away," would need no argument, if it had not suited the theories of modern sectaries to call it in question. It is a common assumption that Saul's sins had been *really* forgiven before his immersion, and Ananias required him only to *formally* wash them away. But this is a mere combination of words to hide the absence of an idea. How can a man *formally* do a thing which has already been *really* done, unless it be by going through a *form* which is empty and deceptive? If Saul's sins were already washed away, then he *did not* wash them away in immersion, and the language of Ananias was deceptive. But it is an indisputable fact, that at the time Ananias gave him this command he was still unhappy, and, therefore, unforgiven. Immediately after he was immersed, he was happy; and the change took place in the mean time, which connects it with his immersion. In precise accordance, therefore, with the commission, with Peter's answer on Pentecost, and with the eunuch's experience, his sins were forgiven when he was immersed.

These individual cases of conversion are of great value to one studying the plan of salvation, because they present more in detail the entire process that can be done in describing the conversion of a multitude. We now have before us two such, and will have a third in the tenth chapter, when we will find it profitable to institute a close comparison between them.²¹³

19–22. No sooner had Saul obeyed the gospel and obtained pardon, then he began to devote all his energies to building up what he had sought to destroy. (19) "*Then Saul was some days with the disciples in Damascus, (20) and immediately he preached Christ in the synagogues, that this is the Son of God. (21) And all who heard him were astonished, and said, Is not this he who destroyed those in Jerusalem who called upon this name, and came hither for this purpose, that he might take them bound to the high priests? (22) But Saul increased the more in strength, and confounded the Jews who dwelt in Damascus, proving that this is the Christ.*" The one great gospel proposition, that Jesus is the Christ and the Son of God, the belief of which had wrought in him all the wondrous change on the road to Damascus is now his constant theme. The synagogues being for a time open to him, and the curiosity of the people intensely excited, in reference to his change of conduct, it is probable that he had more ready access to the unbelieving Jews in Damascus than had been enjoyed by those who preceded him. Whatever opponents he encountered, were "confounded" by the proofs he presented.

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In addition to proofs employed by the other apostles and teachers, Saul stood up in the synagogues as a new and independent witness of the resurrection, and glorification of Jesus. He had seen him alive, and arrayed in divine

glory. He had conversed with him face to face. If any man doubted the truth of his statements in reference to the vision, his traveling companions, who saw the same light, and heard the same voice, could testify with him. If any man, still incredulous, ventured the supposition that all of them were deceived by an optical illusion, or by some human trickster, the actual blindness which remained after the vision had passed away, and was witnessed by both believers and unbelievers, proved, indisputably, that it was a reality. No illusion or deception could have produced this effect. If it were suspected that Saul and his companions had made up the story, in order to deceive, the suspicion was silenced by the fact that the blindness was real, and could not be feigned. Whether, therefore, they regarded him as honest and dishonest, such was the combination of facts that they could not find an excuse for doubting his testimony. No wonder that he "*confounded the Jews who dwelt in Damascus.*"

Such was the force of Saul's testimony, as it was addressed to his contemporaries in Damascus. To others, not eye-witnesses of his career, and to men of subsequent generations, it stands thus: If the vision which he claimed to have witnessed was a reality, then Jesus is the Christ, and his religion is divine. But if it was not a reality, then Saul was deceived, or was himself a deceiver. His blindness precludes the supposition that he could have been deceived. Was he, then, a deceiver? His whole subsequent career declares that he was not. All the motives, in reference to both time and eternity, which can prompt men to deception, were arrayed against the course he was pursuing. His reputation among men, his hopes of wealth and power, his love of friendship, and his personal safety, all demanded that he should adhere to his former religious position. In making the change, he sacrificed them all, and, if he was practicing deception, he exposed himself, also, to whatever punishment he might suppose the wicked to incur in eternity. It is possible to believe that a man might, through miscalculation as to the immediate results, *begin* to practice a deception which would involve such consequences; but it is entirely incredible that he should continue to do after his mistake was discovered, and persist in it through a long life of unparalleled sufferings. It is 125 incredible, therefore, that Saul was a deceiver. And, as he was neither deceived himself, nor a deceiver of others, his vision must have been a reality, and Jesus *is* the Christ.

There is no way to evade the force of this argument, except by denying Luke's account of Saul's career, after his supposed conversion. But this would be to deny to Luke even the ordinary credibility attached to ancient history; for the argument depends not upon miracles, but upon the ordinary events of Saul's life, which are in themselves most credible. Supposing this much to be granted, as a basis for the argument (and it is granted by all who are acquainted with history,) the proof of the Messiahship of Jesus from the conversion of Saul is perfectly conclusive.

23–25. Saul now begins to see enacted in Damascus scenes similar to those in which he had played a part in Jerusalem; but his own position is reversed. He begins to experience, in his turn, the ill-treatment which he had heaped upon others. (23) "*Now when many days were fulfilled, the Jews determined to kill him;* (24) *but their plot was known to Saul; and they watched the gates, day and night, that they might kill him.* (25) *Then the disciples took him by night, and let him down through the wall in a basket.*" The Jews were not alone in this plot. Dwelling as strangers in a foreign city, they would hardly have ventured upon so murderous an undertaking without the connivance of the authorities. Paul himself informs us that the governor of the city lent them his active co-operation. He says: "In Damascus, the governor under Aretas, the king, kept watch over the city with a garrison, desiring to apprehend me."²¹⁴ From the same passage in Second Corinthians, we learn that it was through a *window* in the wall that he was let down. Even to the present day there are houses in Damascus built against the wall, with the upper stories projecting beyond the top of the wall, and containing windows which would answer admirably for such a

mode of escape. The observations of modern travelers are constantly bringing to light topographical facts which accord most happily with the inspired narrative. Another such is the fact that there is yet a street in Damascus running in a straight line from the eastern gate for about a mile, to the palace of the Pasha, which can be no other than “the street called Straight,” on which Judas lived, and where Ananias found Saul.²¹⁵

It was three years from the time of his conversion that Saul made this escape from Damascus. The whole of this period had not been spent in that city, but he had made a preaching tour into Arabia, and returned to Damascus. This we learn from his own pen: “I conferred not with flesh and blood, neither went I up to Jerusalem to them who were apostles before me; but I went into Arabia, and returned again into Damascus. Then, after three years, I went up to Jerusalem to see Peter.”²¹⁶ It is quite probable that some excitement attendant upon his preaching in other parts of the dominions of King Aretas had some influence in securing the ready co-operation of the Arabian governor with the Jews, in trying to take his life.

26, 27. The mortification of Saul as being compelled to thus escape from Damascus was remembered for many years, to be mentioned when he would “glory in the things which concerned his infirmities.”²¹⁷ He had not yet 126 seen any of those who were apostles before him since he left them in Jerusalem to go on his murderous mission to Damascus. He turns his steps in that direction, resolved to go up and see Peter.²¹⁸ We will not attempt to depict the probable emotions of the now devout apostle, as the walls of Jerusalem and the towering height of the temple came once more into view. As he approached the gate of the city, he passed by the spot where Stephen was stoned, and where he himself had stood, “consenting to his death.” He was about to meet again, on the streets, and in the synagogues, his old allies whom he had deserted, and the disciples whom he had persecuted. The tumult of emotions which the scenes about him must have excited, we leave to the imagination of the reader, and pages of more voluminous writers.²¹⁹ We know the reception which awaited him both from friends and foes. (26) *“And when he arrived in Jerusalem, he attempted to join himself to the disciples, but they were all afraid of him, not believing that he was a disciple.* (27) *But Barnabas took him and brought him to the apostles, and related to them how he had seen the Lord in the way, and that he had spoken to him, and how he had spoken boldly in Damascus in the name of Jesus.”* This ignorance of the brethren in reference to the events of the past three years in Damascus is somewhat surprising; but it only proves that they had no rapid means of communication with the brethren in that city. It is not probable that Barnabas had any means of information not enjoyed by the other brethren. Doubtless he obtained this information from Saul's own lips, either because he was prompted to do so by the generous impulses of his own heart, or because Saul, having some knowledge of his generosity, sought him out as the one most likely to give him a candid hearing. In either case, it would not be difficult for him to credit the unvarnished story, told, as it must have been, with an earnestness and pathos which no impostor could assume. When Barnabas was once convinced, it was easy for him to convince the apostles; and the warm sympathy which he manifested for Saul was the beginning of a friendship between them which was fruitful in blessing to the Church and to the world.

28, 29. Though the brethren, even at the solicitation of Barnabas, may have received him with some misgivings, the course he pursued soon won their confidence. (28) *“And he was with them coming in and going out in Jerusalem,* (29) *and spoke boldly in the name of the Lord Jesus, and disputed against the Hellenists; but they undertook to kill him.”* During his three years' absence from Jerusalem, the persecution of which Saul had been the leader had so far

abated that the Hellenists were once more willing to debate the points at issue. But they found in their new opponent one equally invincible with Stephen, and, in the madness of defeat, resolved that Stephen's fate should be his.

30. In this emergency, the brethren found opportunity to make amends for the suspicion with which they had at first regarded him. (30) "*And when the brethren knew this, they took him down to Cæsarea, and sent him forth to Tarsus.*" We learn, from Paul's own account of this movement, that it was not controlled by his own judgment, nor entirely by that of the brethren. While praying in the temple, he fell into a trance, in which the Lord appeared to 127 him, and said, "Make haste, and get quickly out of Jerusalem; for they will not receive your testimony concerning me." Saul had, himself, come to a very different conclusion. Notwithstanding the murderous disposition of his opponents, he still believed that his labors among them would prove successful. He argued upon the supposition that his former position as a persecutor, like them, would now give peculiar weight, with them, to his testimony and arguments; and he ventured to urge this consideration upon the attention of the Lord: "Lord, they know that I am imprisoned and beat in every synagogue those who believe on thee; and when the blood of Stephen thy witness was shed, I was myself standing by and consenting to his death, and keeping the raiment of those who slew him." But he had erred in overlooking the peculiar odium attached to the character of one who could be styled a *deserter*, inclining men to listen more favorably to an habitual opponent than to him. The Lord did not argue the case with him, but peremptorily commanded him, "Depart; for I will send you far hence to the Gentiles."²²⁰ The fears of the brethren were confirmed by this decision of the Lord, and they promptly sent him to a place of safety.

After reaching Cæsarea, a short voyage on the Mediterranean and up the Cyndus brought him to Tarsus, the home of his childhood, and perhaps of his earlier manhood. He returns to his aged parents and the friends of his childhood, a fugitive from two great cities, and a deserter from the strictest sect in which he had been educated; but he comes to bring them glad tidings of great joy. He disappears, at this point from the pages of Luke; but he does not retire into inactivity. His own pen fills up the blank that is left there by the historian. He says that he went "into the regions of *Syria* and *Cilicia*, and was unknown by face to the Churches in Judea who were in Christ; but they heard only that he who once persecuted us is now preaching the faith which he once destroyed. And they glorified God in me."²²¹ Not long after this we find mention of *brethren* in Syria and Cilicia, which renders it probable that his labors that were attended with his usual success. We have reason also to believe that he encountered, during this interval, a portion of the sufferings enumerated in the [eleventh chapter of Second Corinthians](#); such as the five times that he received from the Jews forty stripes save one, the three shipwrecks, and the night and the day that he spent in the deep. We can not refer them to a later period; for, from this interval to the time of writing that epistle, we have a continuous history of his life, in which they do not occur.

We now part company with Saul for a time, and while he is performing labors, and enduring afflictions, the full detail of which we will never learn till we meet him in eternity, we turn with our inspired guide, to contemplate some instructive scenes in the labors of the Apostle Peter.

31. Preparatory to this transition in the narrative, the historian glances rapidly over the territory to which we are about to be introduced, stating the condition of things immediately after Saul's departure for Tarsus. (31) "*Then the Churches had peace throughout all Judea and Galilee, and Samaria; and being edified, and walking in the fear of the Lord, and the consolation of the Holy Spirit, they were multiplied.*" Thus times of peace and quiet were seen to be propitious to a cause which had sprung up amid strife and opposition, showing that it was not the obstinacy of

human passion, but the legitimate working of unchangeable truth, which had brought it into being. According to the philosophy which Gamaliel had urged in the Sanhedrim,²²² its claim to a divine origin was now vindicated.

32–35. We have just seen Saul sent “far hence to the Gentiles;” but as yet we have no account of the admission of uncircumcised Gentiles into the Church; it is time that this account should be before us, and Luke proceeds to give it. He approaches the subject by relating the circumstances which led Peter, who was the chosen instrument for opening the gates of the kingdom to the Gentiles, into the city of Joppa, where the messengers of Cornelius found him. We parted company with this apostle on his return with John from the visit to Samaria. We meet him again, engaged in active labor through the rural districts of his native country. (32) “Now it came to pass that Peter, passing through all quarters, came down also to the saints who dwelt at Lydda. (33) And he found there a certain man named Æneas, who had kept his bed eight years, and was paralyzed. (34) And Peter said to him, Æneas, Jesus the Christ heals you. Arise, and make your bed. And he arose immediately. (35) And all who dwelt at Lydda and Saron saw him and turned to the Lord.” The long continuance of painful disease makes the afflicted individual well known to a large circle of neighbors, and fixes their attention upon the disease itself as one difficult to cure. Hence, the effect upon this community of the cure of Æneas, like that of the lame man at the Beautiful gate of the temple, was decisive and almost universal. It was a demonstration of divine power in Jesus the Christ, whom Peter had declared the agent of the cure, which the honest people of Lydda and Saron could not gainsay, and therefore they had no honest alternative but to yield to his claims.

36–42. From the midst of these happy and peaceful triumphs of the truth, Peter was suddenly called away to Joppa. The circumstances which led to this event are this related to Luke: (36) “Now, in Joppa, there was a certain disciple named Tabitha, which, translated, is Dorcas.²²³ This woman was full of good works and alms which she did. (37) And it came to pass, in those days, that she took sick and died. They washed her, and laid her in an upper room. (38) And Lydda being near to Joppa, the disciples, hearing that Peter was in that place, sent two men to him, entreating him not to delay to come to them. (39) Then Peter arose and went with them. When he arrived, they led him up into the upper room, and all the widows stood by him, weeping, and showing the tunics and mantles which Dorcas made while she was with them. (40) But Peter put them all out, and kneeled down and prayed: and, turning to the body, he said, Tabitha, arise. She opened her eyes; and, seeing Peter, she sat up. (41) Giving her his hand, he caused her to stand up; and, having called the saints and widows, he presented her alive. (42) It became known [129] throughout all Joppa, and many believed in the Lord.”

Nothing could be more graphic and simple than this narration, or more touching than the incident itself. Amid the array of solemn and stately events which are moving before us, it is dropped in, like a flower in the forest. It opens a vista through the larger events of history, and lets in light upon the social sorrows of the early saints, awakening a closer sympathy between our hearts and theirs. We see here enacted among them scenes with which we are familiar, when one who has been noted for good works sickens and dies: the same anxiety felt by all; the same desire for the presence of him who had been their religious counselor; the same company of weeping sisters, and brethren standing by in mournful silence. As each good deed of the departed is recounted by some sobbing voice, and the garments “which she made while she was with us,” to clothe the poor, are held up to view, how the eyes gush! how the heart swells! These are sacred hours. The labors of a whole life of piety are pouring their rich influence, unresisted, into softened hearts. How blessed are the dead who die in the Lord! They rest from their labors, but their works do follow them, still working while they are at rest. When Peter came into the company of

weeping disciples, he seems to stand once more beside his master, as once he and all who were with him wept with Mary and Martha over the tomb of Lazarus. But he remembers that his compassionate master is now in heaven. With deep solemnity, he motions the mourners all aside. He is left alone with the dead, and the company without have hushed their sobs into silent suspense. He kneels down and prays. How the heart turns to God beside the bed of death! How fervent our prayers are then! The prayer of faith is heard. The eyes of the dead are opened, and the faith and hope which glowed in them ere they were closed are in them now. She sees the loved apostle, and rises to a sitting posture. He takes her by the hand, raises her to the feet, and calls in her friends. Who can describe the scene, when brothers and sisters in the flesh and in the Lord, wild with conflicting emotions, rushed in to greet the loved one recovered from the dead! And if that is indescribable, what shall we say or think of that scene when all the sainted dead shall rise in glory, and greet each there on the shores of life? May Christ our Savior help us to that day! We have no Peter now, to wake up our sleeping sisters, and give them back to us; but we do not regret it, for we remember that Dorcas had to die again, and we would not wish to weep again, as we have wept over the dying bed, and the fresh sods of the silent grave. We would rather let them sleep on in the arms of Jesus, till both we and they shall rise to die no more.

43. Peter was engaged, at this time, in general evangelizing among the Jews, adapting his stay at a given point, and his change of place, to the exigencies of the cause. The restoration of Dorcas, doubtless, opened a wide field for usefulness in the surrounding community, (43) "*and he tarried many days in Joppa, with one Simon, a tanner.*" Here the historian leaves him for awhile, and introduces us to the circumstances which removed him from this to another field of labor.

¹⁸³ See Phil. iii. 4, 5; 2 Tim. i. 3.

¹⁸⁴ Acts xxii. 3.

¹⁸⁵ Acts v. 34–39.

¹⁸⁶ Gal. i. 14.

¹⁸⁷ Acts xxvi. 5.

¹⁸⁸ Phil. iii. 6.

¹⁸⁹ Matt. xxi. 15.

¹⁹⁰ Deut. xvii. 7.

¹⁹¹ Acts vii. 58; xxii. 20.

¹⁹² xxvi. 10.

¹⁹³ xxii. 19; xxvi. 11.

¹⁹⁴ Comp. ix. 23–24 with 2 Cor. xi. 32.

¹⁹⁵ For a description of the natural scenery, see Life and Epistles of Paul, vol. i, page 86. Throughout the remainder of this volume I will draw freely from the rich resources of this valuable and exhaustive work.

¹⁹⁶ Acts xxvi. 13.

[197](#)1 Cor. xv. 8.

[198](#)Acts xxvi. 14.

[199](#)1 Tim. i. 13–15.

[200](#)Acts xxvi. 16–18.

[201](#)See Com. i. 22.

[202](#)1 Cor. ix. 1.

[203](#)1 Cor. xv. 8.

[204](#)Matt. ix. 1–6; Luke vii. 37–50.

[205](#)Acts xxvi. 14.

[206](#)Verse xi.

[207](#)Verse xvii.

[208](#)Rom. v. 1.

[209](#)Matt. ix. 29.

[210](#)John ix. 6.

[211](#)Acts ii. 1–4.

[212](#)Acts xxii. 16.

[213](#)See Com. x. 47, 48.

[214](#)2 Cor. xi. 32, 33.

[215](#)Kitto's Encyclopedia, Art. Damascus.

[216](#)Gal. i. 16–18.

[217](#)2 Cor. xi. 30–33.

[218](#)Gal. i. 18.

[219](#)See Life and Ep., vol. 1, p. 101.

[220](#)Acts xxii. 17–21.

[221](#)Gal. i. 21–24.

[222](#)Acts v. 34–39.

[223](#)Which, again translated into English, is gazel.