

THE ACTS OF THE APOSTLES

by

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CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

SAUL'S COMMISSION AND FIRST PREACHING

(Acts 9:10-31)

OUTLINE

Key verse – 20.

The account in this paragraph covers about three years' time. Many important events in the life of Saul occurred during this time, among them, Saul's first Christian prayer, the vision which he received, his baptism, infilling with the Holy Spirit, commission, first preaching, and first suffering of persecution.

1. A call and a ready response (10).
2. The Lord's commands are reasonable (13-16).
3. The Lord wants a sympathetic messenger (17).
4. The Lord chooses his ministers (15), also (Galatians 1:15).
5. The disciple must bear his cross (16).
6. With the commission the Lord gives power (17).
7. Spiritual training is of prime importance (Galatians 1:16-18).
8. Effective preaching arouses opposition (22, 29).
9. God cares for His own.
10. Our duty to the convert.
11. God blesses His church (31).

We have just been considering the conversion of the greatest of Christian missionaries. He was a chosen vessel to bear the name of Christ "**before the Gentiles, and kings, and the children of Israel**" (9:15). We left him alone in Damascus, in a state of blindness, fasting and praying. In our last study we found him a proud persecutor and left him an humble suppliant. We found him ignorant of Christ and left him with a person acquaintance with Christ.

This most important event in one of the greatest of God's servants is recorded in the brief space of nine verses.

In the passages before us, within the compass of twenty-one verses, we have the account of Saul's first Christian prayer, the answer to that prayer, the vision which he received, the ministrations of Ananias, and the miracle of the restoration of his sight.

We also have his baptism, his infilling with the Holy Spirit, the commission which he received, the extent of that commission, the instruction which he received, the warning of his future suffering, his sojourn with the disciples at Damascus, his preaching at Damascus, his growth as a defender of the faith, the plot against his life at Damascus, his narrow escape, his flight to Jerusalem, the plot of the Grecian Jews, his escape to Tarsus, and the great blessing and growth of the church. This account covers about three years' time. A large part of this time was apparently spent in Arabia, in communion with Christ, as he points out in the first chapter of Galatians.

When we take into account all of these facts, events took place very rapidly. Saul was changed from a persecutor to a strong preacher, stepped aside for a period of spiritual preparation, suffered two persecutions, and preached in three, possibly five or more, different centers. It is quite likely that he did some preaching in Arabia, Syria, and Tarsus, as well as in Damascus and Jerusalem, for he tells us that he was in all of these places during this time, and it was Saul's custom to preach and teach wherever he was, even if in a place for but a short time.

A CALL AND A READY RESPONSE

When the Lord called Ananias he replied at once: **"Behold, I am here, Lord"** (9:10). Ananias was ready to go as soon as the Lord called. It is true that he asked a question first, concerning this particular mission, but that is not strange considering the circumstances. Ananias was told where he should go and what he was to do. The place would not be difficult for him to find, Straight street in Damascus, for it was a broad thoroughfare, divided into three highways by columns of pillars. It was the best known street in the city. The house of Judas may have required a certain amount of searching to find, but we are led to suppose that this house was well known on that important street. He was told that Saul was engaged in prayer and that he had seen, in vision, a man named Ananias coming in and laying his hands on him that he might receive his sight.

Jonah refused, at first, to obey God because he did not want to be the means of preserving a nation which was a bitter enemy of his own nation. Ananias might have refused to go lest he should be the means of aiding and making active a man who was the most bitter enemy of the church of Christ. But so soon as Ananias was assured that Saul was a chosen vessel of God he went to carry out his commission. This is the kind of a response that the Lord always wants. Every child of God may rest assured that when God calls, the work to which he calls is important and urgent, and that he will sustain in the performance of that work. The safest place in the world for the child of God is the place where God calls him and while engaged in the work which God has assigned him.

THE LORD'S COMMANDS ARE REASONABLE

Ananias wanted to assure himself that the vision which he saw was from the Lord and the command which he received was actually in accordance with the will of God. He knew that Saul had been a bitter persecutor.

Would he be helping to release him to work further havoc in the church? His question was reasonable and the Lord gave him a clear and satisfactory reply. The Lord showed Ananias that Saul had been a bitter persecutor. Would he be helping to release him to work further havoc in the church? His question was reasonable and the Lord gave him a clear and satisfactory reply. The Lord showed Ananias that Saul was now a changed man; that he was “a chosen vessel” of God and that he was to be as active a missionary as he had been a persecutor. He showed him that Saul was no longer going to cause the Christians to suffer, but that he would suffer many things for the name of Christ.

The Lord is ever reasonable in His call and His commission which He gives to men. He assured Gideon, He assured Moses, He assured David and others of his saints that they were acting in according with His will when they were in perplexity. God desires obedience; He desires prompt obedience, but He also desires that His servants shall be intelligent in their work. While God calls upon His disciples to bear His Gospel into all the world, He wants them to take reasonable precautions to protect their lives.

THE LORD WANTS A SYMPATHETIC MESSENGER

When Ananias entered into the house of Judas, **“putting his hands on him said, Brother Saul, the Lord, even Jesus, that appeared unto thee in the way as thou camest, hath sent me”** (9:17). There must have been a temptation in the heart of Ananias, as he came into the presence of Saul, to knock him about a bit and to speak to him harshly, as he knew the brutal treatment which he had given to others and had planned to give to them. Ananias did not yield to such a temptation. He dealt with Saul in a kindly and brotherly manner. He placed his hands gently upon him and called him brother. That must have been a wonderfully soft touch and a remarkably sweet sound to Saul. Saul must have been thinking of his former cruelty and wondering whether he could persuade any of the disciples to receive him as a friend. He would long remember the touch and voice of Ananias and the relief that it gave him from the moment he heard the words, “Brother Saul.”

How often have the gentle voice, the sympathetic touch and the kind act been used of God to win men to Him since that day! M. T. Lamb gives the following illustration from workers of the Salvation Army. “Two slum sisters crept up a rickety and dirty stairway five or six stories high to an attic, and there, in a desolate room fit for a pigsty, they found an old man crippled by rheumatism and asthma until entirely helpless. He was sitting in an old chair, the only article of furniture in the room. He could not stand up; he could not lie down; he could not even bend down and reach his feet. There he sat night and day alone, save that twice a day a miserable drunken daughter, who lived in the story below, brought him something to eat.

“His person and clothes were filthy beyond description. His naked feet had in some way become covered with sores; and some charitable person, weeks before, had come in and kindly bound them with lint saturated with ointment, but had forgotten to return and replace the bandages; and the lint had imbedded itself into the flesh until both feet were a mass of corruption, covered by dirt and vermin more terrible than I can describe to you.

“What did those two slum sisters, God’s noble women, do? First of all they secured a pail of warm water and got down on their hands and knees and scrubbed that filthy floor until they had made it clean. Then with another pail of water they got down in front of that old man, put his feet into it, and tenderly bathed and soaked them until the old bandages and the corruption were removed. Then they dressed them over again with clean lint and ointment, and did not forget to return the next day, and next, and so every day for weeks they washed those feet and dressed them until they healed.

“Meanwhile those sisters began to tell him the story of the cross. His mind was dark as a heathen’s. He swore at them when they first intruded into his den. But such unheard-of-love and tenderness conquered him. It could not have been otherwise. He was sweetly forced to listen to the truth; they compelled him. And so, by the time his feet were healed, his soul had been healed. And now it was their turn to be blessed; for he became so happy in Christ that every time they visited him they received an inspiration and uplift.” (*Won by One*, p. 84).

It requires a heart that is filled with the grace of God to speak and act in a kind manner toward the cruel, the filthy, and the vile representatives of the human race. Yet that is the kind of messenger whom God loves and it is the kind that will win men to Him.

THE LORD CHOOSES HIS MINISTERS

The Lord makes a definite choice of those who are to serve him: **“But the Lord said unto him, Go thy way: for he is a chosen vessel unto me, to bear my name before the Gentiles, and kings, and the children of Israel”** (9:15). We are told in this passage that Saul was “a chosen vessel.” Later he tells us concerning himself: **“But when it pleased God, who separated me from my mothers womb, and called me by his grace”** (Galatians 1:15).

The Lord has a right to choose, and does choose, from among men whom He will. He chose Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. He said, **“Jacob have I loved, but Esau have I hated”** (9:13). All are sinners. God owes no man anything, but if He chooses to make salvation, He has a right to do so. If He wishes to call us to any service He has the right so to do. In another place Paul tells us that God does not usually choose the wise, the mighty and the noble: but he chooses the foolish things of the world that He may put to shame them that are wise. We are among the blessed of God if we are among those whom He has called to His service. No more important call comes in this world than the call of God. We ought to respond at once. It would seem, from what Jesus said to Saul about kicking against the goads, that he had been resisting the call of God for some time. We can make no greater mistake than to resist that call.

The Lord gave Saul evidence that he had been chosen. His sight was restored instantly. The scales fell from his eyes and his vision was completely renewed. He was filled with the Holy Spirit. It is absurd for anyone to reason, from Saul’s temporary blindness, that weak eyes constituted his thorn in the flesh. It is to suppose that God had not the power to restore the sight completely which He had taken away. God is not thus limited in the power of His miracles. The Lord proved to all the apostles, in a miraculous manner, that the Gospel was true; that Jesus was the Son of God.

The vivid remembrance of Jesus appearing to Saul, of the loss and restoration of sight, of the assurance that he was chosen of God to bear His message, was told again and again by Saul in his efforts to convince others that Jesus was the Son of God. The story is undoubtedly true. Among all the records of conversions there is none more convincing. Men who read it and men who hear it told are left without excuse. They should believe and accept Christ.

THE DISCIPLE MUST BEAR HIS CROSS

The Lord makes clear to His disciples at the outset that they must suffer for Him: **“For I will show him how great things he must suffer for my names sake”** (9:16). He said He would show Saul these things, which means that He wanted Paul to fully count the cost first. Jesus never calls His disciples to serve under false pretences. He warned His disciples, particularly in the days of His popularity, that there would be hardships, privations and sufferings. When one would follow Him without full consideration of the cost He told him that the foxes have holes and the birds of the air have their nests but He did not have a place that He could call His own, even to lay down His head. It would be folly for us to start out in the service of Christ with the idea that we can follow Him in any capacity, whether as layman, minister or missionary, without suffering. If we do we are mistaken. Saul knew what it was to see disciples suffer. Jesus reminded him at the moment He was giving him His commission that he would also suffer just as he had seen others suffer. Saul joyed so much in Christ that his afflictions seemed light and but for a moment in comparison with the great glory of eternity which awaited him when his afflictions were over. Many are the disciples, since the days of Saul, who have testified that they would not if they had their lives before them again, change their course though they might avoid the dangers and sufferings through which they have passed. They, like the early disciples, **“rejoicing that they were counted worthy to suffer shame for his name”** (Acts 5:41).

When Namuri, a native Christian teacher of the New Hebrides, was threatened with death by the heathen of Tanna, Mr. Paton urged him to remain at the mission house until the threatened danger was past. But Namuri replied: “Missi, when I see them thirsting for my blood, I just see myself when the Missionary first came to my island. I desired to murder him, as they now desire to kill me. Had he stayed away from such danger, I would have remained Heathen; but he came, and continued coming to teach us, till, by the grace of God I was changed to what I am. Now the same God that changed me to this, can change these poor Tannese to love and serve Him. I cannot stay away from them; but I will sleep at the mission House, and do all I can by day to bring them to Jesus” (John G. Paton’s *Autobiography*, p. 195). How many with much better opportunities than Namuri are as willing as he to suffer for the honor of Jesus and the enlightenment of their fellowmen?

WITH THE COMMISSION THE LORD GIVES POWER

The Lord gives understanding to, and confers spiritual power upon, those whom He calls into His service: **“And Ananias went his way, and entered into the house; and putting his hands on him said, Brother Saul, the Lord, even Jesus, that appeared unto thee in the way as thou camest, hath sent me, that thou mightest receive thy sight, and be filled with the Holy Ghost”** (9:17).

Through Ananias Saul received instruction. It was the answer to his question, “**Lord, what wilt thou have me to do?**” (9:6) He was also the instrument through whom the Lord conferred on Saul the Holy Spirit. Moreover, it was by him that Saul was baptized. It is remarkable that the Lord used Ananias, a mere disciple to do all this. It is an evidence that the Holy Spirit is not limited to place or time or men or office for the execution of His will. If some men were attending to this today they would have Peter brought from Jerusalem to perform these duties. It is well for us to observe the will of God concerning His church, so far as it is revealed to us, but it is also well for us to remember that there are many rules of men which are guarded in some circles as closely as though they were the commands of God.

The Lord could fill men with the Holy Spirit, in those days without the laying on of hands as is manifest in the case of Cornelius. But in this instance He chose to fill Saul with the Spirit while the hands of Ananias were placed upon him. Of this we may be sure, that if the Lord calls us into His service there is no fear that He will lack power to confer upon us. He will not likely perform a miracle to give us evidence of the fact that Jesus is the Son of God and that the Gospel is true. Abundant evidence already exists to prove these facts. Miracles of this type are no longer needed.

Nor does the Lord need to send a messenger who has received his message in a vision in order to instruct us concerning the will of God today. The Lord has given His complete revelation to us in the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments and we can turn to them for instruction. He has directed His servants who wrote with earnestness as to what they should write and has warned us not to add to or take from the inspired record.

SPIRITUAL TRAINING IS OF PRIME IMPORTANCE

The Lord makes clear, from the early history of Saul, that spiritual preparation is of prime importance in His work: “**To reveal his Son in me, that I might preach him among the heathen; immediately I conferred not with flesh and blood: Neither went I up to Jerusalem to them which were apostles before me; but I went into Arabia, and returned again unto Damascus. Then after three years I went up to Jerusalem to see Peter, and abode with him fifteen days**” (Galatians 1:16-18). We are told in this passage that Saul spent some days with the disciples at Damascus. Before he left Damascus to flee to Jerusalem we are told that “**many days were fulfilled**” (9:23). Sometime during these “many days” Saul went to Arabia receiving instruction from the Lord, and after that returned to Damascus preaching with more strength and confounding the Jews, “**proving that this is very Christ**” (9:22). Saul says that it pleased God who had called him to reveal His Son in him for the purpose of preaching among the Gentiles.

Saul had had exceptionally thorough intellectual and Biblical training. His Biblical training, of course, was confined to the Old Testament. In order to be an apostle he needed to know Jesus personally and to be taught directly by Him. In order to be fitted spiritually he needed a period of retirement and meditation. There are places in Saul’s writings where he tells us that he received his instruction directly from the Lord, as when he gives directions concerning the observance of the Lord’s Supper (I Corinthians 11:23), and when he tells of the resurrection (I Corinthians 15:3).

Moses was the leading scribe of the Old Testament and Saul of the New. Moses experienced a period of retirement in the wilderness for forty years, seemingly in preparation for his great work as leader and lawgiver of Israel. He was trained, intellectually, long before that in the schools of Egypt. Saul, in like manner, needed more than the schools of Tarsus and Jerusalem could give him. Even the great Gamaliel could not fit him for the work of an apostle and missionary. He needed communion with, and instruction from, a Greater than Gamaliel.

Before the ascension of Jesus we are told that He “**opened . . . their understanding, that they might understand the scriptures**” (Luke 24:45). After the conversion of Saul Jesus opened his mind that he might also understand the Scripture. The New Testament, however, was not then written and it was necessary that Saul should receive much of the doctrine which it contains directly from the Lord. Every teacher and minister of the Gospel today needs a period of preparation. There should be preparation of the mind and heart. The training of the intellect alone is not enough today any more than it was then. There is much attempted work which is accomplished much less effectively than it might otherwise be because of lack of preparation. If it was no loss on the part of Jesus to spend thirty years in preparation for three years of active ministry, it surely is not a loss of time on our part to undergo a period of careful training before we endeavor to take up the ministry of the Gospel or the teaching of the profound truths of the Word of God. We need to know our Bibles and we need to know how to interpret the Word so as to reveal Christ to men.

EFFECTIVE PREACHING AROUSES OPPOSITION

When Saul returned from Arabia to Damascus, enlightened and instructed and enthused by communion with the Lord, he preached with exceptional persuasiveness and power. He “**confounded the Jews which dwelt at Damascus, proving that this is very Christ**” (9:22). Imagine a man filled with the Holy Spirit, with the keen intellect of a brilliant Greek, with the acute debating ability of a trained Rabbi from the school of Gamaliel, with the ability to reason concerning the Scriptures of the writer of the Romans, with the warm fervor of the writer of the Epistle to the Philippians, with an exceptional knowledge of the law of Moses, with a profound understanding of the Psalms and the prophets, and with a personal and intimate acquaintance with the risen Lord, preaching to the Jews and answering every question which they could propound to him. Of course the Jews at Damascus would be confounded; of course the Grecian Jews at Jerusalem could not dispute successfully with him. Unable to meet him in the forum of Biblical disputation they determined to kill him.

The plot of the Jews at Damascus became known to Saul. Though they had the assistance of the governor and watched the gates day and night to kill him, he escaped safely. The disciples took him by night and let him down through a window in the wall in a basket. He hastened away to Jerusalem. When he wished to join the company of the disciples at Jerusalem they were at first afraid of him. He was introduced to them by Barnabas, who was a devout and tender-hearted man, and they were told that he had already spoken boldly in the name of Christ and had risked his life for the sake of Jesus. He went especially to see Peter, as he tells us afterward, and was with him for fifteen days.

Saul preached boldly at Jerusalem. There he directed his message especially to the Grecian Jews, who had been associated with him in the persecution of Stephen. He no doubt wished to show them where both he and they had been mistaken when they had opposed Stephen. Not because of Saul's lack of ability to expound the Scriptures and testify of Christ, but because of the hardness of their hearts they would not be persuaded but sought to kill him. His brethren among the disciples learned of the plot and escorted him out of Jerusalem as far as Caesarea and sent him to Tarsus. We are not told of his experience in Tarsus. It is quite likely that his own father would cast him out of his old home and that he would meet with bitter opposition there. He was apparently not driven out of the city for he seems to have remained there for about ten years until Barnabas came to invite him back to Antioch to assist with the work there.

There is still opposition to the effective preaching of the Gospel on the part of evil men. In some places the disciples of Christ are still persecuted for proclaiming the saving love of the Lord Jesus. The more vigorously the Gospel is preached and the more effect it has, even in our own land, the more opposition there is aroused. The practical application of the Gospel means opposition to profanity, breaking of the Lord's Day and sinful amusements and indulgences. This stirs the enmity of wicked men and they join in opposition to the Gospel.

GOD CARES FOR HIS OWN

The care which God exercises over His own people is always beyond our comprehension. He directed Ananias to the exact spot where Saul was. He warned Saul of the plots which were laid against him at Damascus and Jerusalem and through the disciples enabled him to escape. His whole life is a wonderful testimony to the care and protection of God.

God still watches every hair that falls from our heads and sustains us and protects us in a thousand ways of which we do not know. Dr. Thomas Guthrie gives an example from his own experience when he was led to visit an old widow in his country parish who was suffering from paralysis. He was moved to cut short his conversation with another and hasten to her dwelling. He arrived just in time to save her from being burned. If he had been one or two minutes later the flames would have caught her clothes and burned her. He believed that it was the care of God for her that moved him that day to turn toward her cottage and hasten there he knew not why. The king of Israel was warned of God through Elisha again and again so that the king of Syria declared that one of his servants was a spy. He asked his servants to discover the one who might be a spy. But one of the servants replied, there is no spy: **“And one of his servants said, None, my Lord, O king: but Elisha, the prophet that is in Israel, telleth the king of Israel the words that thou speakest in thy bedchamber”** (II Kings 6:12). Almost any missionary biography exemplifies the fact that God, in a remarkable manner, cares for His own.

OUR DUTY TO THE CONVERT

Ananias received Saul as a brother and the disciples at Damascus evidently received him warmly. When he came to Jerusalem, and wished to join himself to the disciples they were afraid of him and would not receive him at first. Barnabas seems to have been ever forward to take in a wayward brother and he first became acquainted with Saul and brought him to the apostles.

It was true that in those days of persecution they needed to guard carefully against intruders who might be persecutors. They knew what a bitter persecutor Saul had been. They were right in wanting assurance that he was a changed man before receiving him into their circle. But suppose there had been no Barnabas what would have been the fate of Saul?

In those days when we are not persecuted there are many in the church who are slow to give a warm reception to one who has been a man of the world. There are many who take no pains to welcome new members into the fellowship of the church. Far too often members of the Christian church hold somewhat aloof from converts whom they ought to welcome with special warmth. We need a committee with the spirit of Barnabas in our churches today.

I have read of a godly woman who made a practice of going to her pastor to secure the names of new members in order that she might call upon them and welcome them into the fellowship of her congregation. A cold reception at Jerusalem did not dampen the ardor of Saul, but there are few who, from the beginning of their Christian life, have such a firm conviction and such ardent zeal as did Saul. Let us as Christians beware, lest by our coldness toward new members, or by our cynical treatment of them, we do not dampen their early ardor or turn them away from their first love. There are members in the church who are like the elder brother, in the parable of the Prodigal Son, who are selfish and envious. Members like that in the church are a great hindrance to its growth and work.

GOD BLESSES HIS CHURCH

After the conversion of Saul and his escape to Tarsus the persecution ceased for a time and: **“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”** (9:31). Thus again, we are reminded of the rapid growth of the early church. All the combined forces on earth could not destroy it nor could they prevent its growth. It grew in the midst of persecution; it grew in the days when peace prevailed. This is always true where both the members and the leaders of the church are filled with the Spirit. When the church is filled with the Spirit there is power, and no earthly power can offset the power of the Holy Spirit.

There are five things which are said of the early church at this time which it would be well if they could be said of the church in any age. The members enjoyed peace; they were edified; they walked in the fear of the Lord; they enjoyed the comfort of the Holy Spirit, and they were multiplied. If the members are not living at peace with one another; if they are not edified constantly by the Gospel; if they do not walk in the fear of the Lord; if they do not enjoy the comfort of the Holy Spirit, they may not expect to be multiplied. The church has outward peace today. She does not always enjoy inward peace, in fact it is seldom so, it is not so today. Perhaps if there were persecution it would be good for the church in purifying her and ridding her of those who do not walk in the fear of the Lord and are not filled with the Holy Spirit.

Some of our missionaries in China tell us that the persecution through which the church has been passing has been good for her, that they look for a purer and more powerful church in China when the persecution has subsided. May God grant that it shall be so!

May God bless His church throughout the whole world! May He purify her! May He strengthen her! May He enlarge her! May He cause her to come

**“Forth as the morning,
Fair as the moon,
Clear as the sun,
And terrible as an army with banners?”**

(Song of Solomon 6:10).

QUESTIONS

(Acts 9:10-31

1. Name some of the important events in Saul's life which are recorded in this paragraph.
2. About how much time is covered in this passage?
3. What was the response of Ananias when called? What lessons for us?
4. What is apparent concerning the knowledge and wisdom of God in this passage?
5. What is apparent concerning God's patience and willingness to reason with men?
6. How did Ananias show his sympathy with Saul and what lesson is there for us in that regard?
7. How do we know that Saul was chosen of God?
8. Did Saul know before he began his ministry that he must suffer for Christ? How?
9. When the Lord commissioned Saul did he give him an infilling of His Spirit? How do we know?
10. Is the laying on of hands necessary to the reception of the Spirit?
11. Is there any evidence that men receive new light today when the Spirit comes into their lives?
12. What use did Saul make of the remembrance of his conversion in after years?
13. In this period of the life of Saul how is the need of spiritual preparation emphasized?
14. Was it long before Saul began to preach that Christ is God?
15. What lesson is there in this for all Christians?
16. Could those who opposed Saul answer his reasoning concerning Christ? Can the today?
17. Does effective preaching usually arouse opposition? What of it?
18. Why did Saul leave Damascus for Jerusalem?
19. Who befriended Saul at Jerusalem? What lesson?
20. What was the general effect of Saul's conversion on the churches?

~ end of chapter 17 ~

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