

Title: Acts 9

Author: Dr. Craig Keener

Session 12

Sponsored by Biblicalelearning.org by Ted Hildebrandt

Keywords

Saul's conversion, Damascus, Ananias, Straight Street, Tarsus, Lydda, Joppa, Tabitha, Simon the Tanner, Cornelius

Abstract

This lecture covers Acts chapter nine, analyzing the dramatic conversion and calling of Saul of Tarsus on the Damascus road and the subsequent miracles performed by the apostle Peter in Lydda and Joppa. Dr. Craig Keener explores how Saul, a zealous persecutor of early Christianity, is sovereignly intercepted by Jesus to become a chosen vessel for the Gentile mission, receiving healing and confirmation through the obedience of Ananias. The lecture then details Peter's healing of the paralyzed man Aeneas and his raising of the beloved benefactress Tabitha from the dead, demonstrating how signs and wonders continue to draw entire communities to the faith. Finally, Keener introduces the Roman military context of Caesarea Maritima, establishing the strategic setup for the upcoming conversion of Cornelius.

Outline

I. Introduction to Acts 9: The Intervention of Saul of Tarsus

A. The Sovereign Power of God

1. Saul, the persecutor, gets intercepted and "arrested" by the Lord on the road to Damascus.
2. The conversion demonstrates that if God can use Saul, He can use any person (echoed in 1 Timothy 1).
3. Theological context: In Maccabean literature, God intercepts a persecutor to destroy him; here, God makes him a vessel for grace and His own purposes.

B. The Scope and Initiation of Persecution

1. Saul is the key figure initiating this high level of persecution, which is why the church experiences peace after his departure.
2. Saul obtains letters of recommendation from the High Priest (Caiaphas) to Damascus synagogues.
3. Letters of recommendation as a very common epistolary form in antiquity:
 - a. Cicero was a master of this (Book 13 of his letters is compiled of recommendations).

- b. New Testament letters like Philemon or Romans 16 (recommending Phoebe) utilize these social conventions.
- c. Reciprocity and social obligations were crucial (e.g., calling up debts or requesting favors).
- 4. Access to the High Priest: A young man like Saul would typically have trouble accessing Caiaphas, but Saul's status as a top student of Gamaliel and family wealth made him influential.
- 5. Greek culture appreciation: High priestly families valued Greek culture (tomb inscriptions are often in Greek), so Saul's Hellenist background was an asset.
- 6. Authority: Diaspora synagogues cooperated out of high respect for the Jerusalem High Priest, even without formal extradition rights.

II. The Damascus Road Encounter: Theophanic Call (Acts 9:3-9)

A. The "Way" (He Hodos)

- 1. Saul is literally and figuratively traveling on a path.
- 2. "The Way" was a chosen self-designation for the early Christian movement.
- 3. Grounded in Jewish wisdom literature (the way of truth and righteousness vs. the way of folly) and Essene thought (divine path, preparing the way).

B. The Journey to Damascus

- 1. A long journey of 135 miles (220 kilometers) north of Jerusalem.
- 2. Typically required about six days on foot, though quicker if on horseback.
- 3. Presence of a large Jewish community: Josephus records over 20,000 Jews lived there, requiring multiple synagogues (archaeology confirms multiple meeting places).

C. The Heavenly Theophany

- 1. A brilliant light from heaven, understood by Jewish listeners as the Shekinah (God's glorious presence).
- 2. Parallels Old Testament divine callings and theophanies (Moses at the burning bush, Isaiah's temple vision, Ezekiel's wheel).
- 3. Saul falls to the ground in reverence, a common response to angelic/divine revelation in Jewish literature.

D. The Double Name Call and Christological Reversal

- 1. "Saul, Saul" doubled name echoes callings of Abraham, Jacob, Moses, and Samuel.
- 2. Reversal of expectations: Jesus asks, "Why are you persecuting me?" rather than offering a blessing.
- 3. Theology of representation: Persecuting Jesus' followers is equivalent to persecuting Jesus Himself (echoing Luke 10:16).
- 4. Saul's confusion: Addresses the voice as "Lord" (Kurios), which can mean "sir" or "divine Lord" in this context.

E. Blindness and Fasting

- 1. Saul is blinded: A motif where God temporarily blinds to prevent evil or initiate inner transformation (parallels Sodom, Elisha's army, and Zechariah's muteness).

2. Fasts for three days without food or water, signifying deep mourning, repentance, and a total rethinking of his belief system.

III. Ananias's Commission and Saul's Restoration (Acts 9:10-19)

A. The Call of Ananias

1. Ananias responds with absolute obedience ("Here I am" / Hineni), echoing Samuel and Isaiah.
2. Objections to the command: Ananias expresses hesitation based on Saul's notorious reputation as a persecutor.
3. God's response: Saul is a "chosen vessel" to carry the Name before Gentiles, kings, and Israel, which is repeated three times in Acts.

B. The Logistics on Straight Street

1. Saul stays in the house of Judas on Straight Street (the major East-West grid street running through Damascus).
2. High cultural value of hospitality: A visiting Jew with High Priestly recommendation letters would easily find lodging.
3. Tarsus background: Capital of Cilicia, prosperous trading city, university center for philosophy, large Jewish community.

C. Coordinated Visions and Healing

1. Paired visions (Saul and Ananias) confirm divine coordination, eliminating claims of hallucination.
2. Ananias greets him as "Brother Saul," demonstrating radical grace, love, and acceptance.
3. Scales fall from Saul's eyes (evoking Tobit's healing) and he is filled with the Spirit and baptized in the Barada River.

IV. Saul's Preaching and Escape from Damascus (Acts 9:19-25)

A. Outspoken Preaching in Damascus

1. Preaches Jesus immediately in synagogues, causing astonishment and anger.
2. Parallel response to Jesus' initial sermon in Luke 4.
3. Chronological timeline: Spent "many days" (which in Galatians 1 is described as part of three years) including time spent in Nabatean Arabia.

B. The Conspiracy and Wall Escape

1. Plot hatched against Saul leaks out, which was common in antiquity.
2. Gates are watched day and night by opponents, including agents of the Nabatean Ethnarch (2 Cor 11:32-33).
3. Escapes by being lowered in a basket through a window in the city wall (often homes were built directly into walls).
4. Biblical precedents: Joshua's spies (Rahab) and David (Michal) escaping through walls.

V. Saul in Jerusalem and Sending to Tarsus (Acts 9:26-31)

A. Barnabas the Encourager

1. Jerusalem disciples are terrified of Saul.
2. Barnabas (Son of Encouragement) bridges the gap, introducing Saul to Peter and James.

B. Hellenist Opposition and Departure

1. Saul debates Hellenistic Jews, who try to kill him, mirroring Stephen's martyrdom.
2. Apostles send him away to Tarsus, where he remains for a long preparatory period.
3. Reflection on calling and preparation: The call gives direction, but fulfillment often requires a season of patient preparation, school, or training.

VI. Peter's Coastal Ministry and Miracles (Acts 9:32-43)

A. Healing Aeneas in Lydda

1. Lydda is a Jewish coastal town 25 miles northwest of Jerusalem.
2. Peter heals Aeneas, a paralyzed, bedridden man, in the name of Jesus.
3. Sharon plain and Lydda residents turn to the Lord, establishing a strong Christian presence.

B. Raising Tabitha (Dorcas) in Joppa

1. Joppa: Sizable Jewish port city (modern Tel Aviv) 30 miles south of Caesarea.
2. Tabitha (Aramaic) / Dorcas (Greek) meaning "gazelle."
3. Her status: A patroness and benefactress who cared for marginalized widows.
4. Urgent summons: Peter must travel 11 miles (a 4-hour walk) quickly because Jewish custom required burial before sunset.
5. Raising scene: Peter sends everyone out of the upper room, prays, and says, "Tabitha, arise," presenting her alive to the widows.
6. Parallels Old Testament raisings by Elijah and Elisha, and Jesus raising Jairus's daughter.

C. Lodging with Simon the Tanner

1. Peter stays with Simon the Tanner in Joppa.
2. Tanners were considered ceremonially unclean or low-status due to handling dead animals, forced to live outside city limits.
3. Staying with a tanner shows Peter's relaxing of strict prejudices, preparation for the upcoming Cornelius event.

VII. Introduction to Acts 10: Roman Military Context in Caesarea

A. Caesarea Maritima

1. Largest Judean city and the official residence of the Roman governor.
2. Renamed by Herod the Great, featuring a major harbor, and populated by a high percentage of Gentiles.
3. Sizable Roman military presence: Five auxiliary cohorts (mostly local Syrian recruits) plus cavalry.

B. Cornelius the Centurion

1. Commanded a "century" (nominally 100, practically 80 troops).
2. Member of the Italian cohort, which is archaeologically attested in Judea around 69 AD.

3. Auxiliaries received Roman citizenship upon their discharge after 20-25 years of service.

C. Luke's Valuation of Soldiers

1. Luke frequently portrays Roman military personnel positively (soldiers in Luke 3, centurion in Luke 7, centurion at the cross, Julius in Acts 27).
2. Contrasts the Pax Romana of Augustus with the true peace brought by Jesus, the Prince of Peace, who welcomes even Roman officers.