VCBC SLG 2022 Fall Term
The Book of Acts
Session #6: The Conversion of Paul, the Apostle to the Gentiles—Chapters 9

I. Introduction

To say that Paul is the central figure of the Book of Acts is not necessarily an exaggeration, because from chapter 9 onwards, apart from a few chapters that narrate the continued ministry of Peter the purpose of which seems to surround the gradual affirmation that the Gospel is for all mankind, Jews and Gentiles alike by the Jerusalem disciples through Peter's own experience and witness to the conversion of the Gentiles, the rest of the book focuses on the ministry of Paul as "the Apostle to the Gentiles" (Galatians 2:8). Even that few chapters about Peter (chapter 10 and part of chapters 11 & 12) serve to validate the legitimacy of Paul's ministry to the Gentiles.

In this lesson, we shall look at the conversion of Paul not only in chapter 9 as narrated by Luke, but also Paul's own retelling of the same dramatic event in chapter 22 as he defended himself before the mob on the steps of the Roman barrack in Jerusalem, and also in chapter 26 before King Agrippa. The latter two speeches add some interesting information to the conversion story with which we all are familiar in chapter 9.

Before that, we shall also look at who Paul was before his conversion, gleaning from both the information provided by Luke in this book, but also from some of Paul's own writings.

II. The Pre-conversion Paul or Saul

We are first introduced to Paul as Saul at the martyrdom of Stephen in 7: 58
"**Meanwhile, the witnesses laid their clothes at the feet of a young man named Saul."**

Bruce points out that those who (falsely) testified against Stephen would have taken part in his execution, "**a duty prescribed in the written Torah…'The hand of the witnesses shall be first against him to put him to death, and afterward the hand of all the people' (Det. 17:7; cf. Lev. 24:14; Deut. 13: 9-10). In order to throw the first stones the witnesses would naturally divest themselves of their outer garments, as they are here said to have done**." (NICNT, *Acts*, 158)

At that time, Saul was a young man. As expected, scholars have varying opinion as to how old he was, some would even venture to suggest that he could be thirty years old (Lenski) which does not seem likely or Jesus would have been called a young man when He began His ministry at thirty (Luke 3:23).

Barret, quoting from Philo's use of the word "*neanias*" points out that it "is most often a young man not yet married." (ICC, *Acts*, 386) If we use the Jewish custom of Bar mitzvah as a guide which is to celebrate the coming of age of a Jewish boy at age 13 at which point they are to be held accountable for their own actions, theoretically they could be old enough for marriage as this age coincides with their puberty. Since most scholars appear to opine that Joseph and Mary likely got married around 16, it is perhaps safe to assume that Saul would be around that age,

except that by his own admission, referring to his own training in Mosaic Law which he likely began to do so diligently after 13 (after becoming the "son of the law") he says in Galatians 1:14 "**I was advancing in Judaism beyond many Jews of my own age and was extremely zealous for the traditions of my fathers**."

Personally, I presume that Saul would be between 18-20 at the death of Stephen.

In any case, this is what we learn about his pre-conversion life starting with Luke's accounts in the Book of Acts.

Chapters 21-22—Defending before the mob in Jerusalem

"**Paul answered (the Roman commander), I am a Jew, from Tarsus in Cilicia, a citizen of no ordinary city. Please let me speak to the people**.'" (Acts 21:39)
"**Then Paul said: 'I am a Jew, born in Tarsus of Cilicia, but brought up in this city. I studied under Gamaliel and was thoroughly trained in the law of our ancestors. I was just as zealous for God as any of you are today**.'" (Acts 22: 3)

Chapter 26—Defending before King Agrippa
"**The Jewish people all know the way I have lived ever since I was a child, from the beginning of my life in my own country, and also in Jerusalem. They have known me for a long time and can testify, if they are willing, that I conformed to the strictest sect of our religion, living as a Pharisee**." (Acts 26: 4-5)

Romans 11
"I am an Israelite myself, a descendant of Abraham, from the tribe of Benjamin" (11:1).

Galatians 1 (above-mentioned)
"**I was advancing in Judaism beyond many Jews of my own age and was extremely zealous for the traditions of my fathers**." (1:14)

Philippians 3
"**circumcised on the eighth day, of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews; in regard to the law, a Pharisee; 6 as for zeal, persecuting the church; as for righteousness based on the law, faultless**." (3: 5-6)

Summing up the above, the following might be a more-or-less accurate picture of Saul

- He was likely born into the family of a very zealous Pharisee's father who have him "**the name of the most illustrious member of the tribe (of Benjamin) in the nation's history—the name of Israel's first king, Saul…(which was) his family name as an Israelite; he is better know in history by his Roman cognomen Paullus**." (NICNT, *Acts*, 158-9)
- He must have inherited the zeal of his father which earned him the very special privilege to be a student under Gamaliel
    - A word about this Gamaliel might be appropriate here: "**This Gamaliel was the grandson of Hillel who was famous in Jewish tradition. Hillel flourished about**

37-4 B.C. We know nothing about his son Simon; but Simon's son Gamaliel, whom Luke introduces here, was one of the seven men who were accorded the title 'Rabban'. He developed his grandfather's teaching and found the dynasty of famous men which continued about four centuries. (His love of Greek set him apart from many of his more zealous rabbinical colleagues—Arch. Study Bible, p. 1819) This Gamaliel, called 'the old," to distinguish him from his grandson of the same name (*who was said to take the Hillel traditions to even greater height,* italics mine.)" (Lenski, 231)

- According to Luke, this Gamaliel I was highly honored by all at the time (Acts 5:34) and Bruce quoting from Mishnah, *Sitah* 9.15 adds that, "**When Rabban Gamaliel the Elder died…it was said…the glory of the Torah ceased and purity and separateness died**" (NICNT, *Acts*, 115).
- This perhaps explains why Saul, as the pilpul of this famous teacher of the law, could rise to such prominence at such a young age, and could claim that "**The Jewish people all know the way I have lived ever since I was a child, from the beginning of my life in my own country, and also in Jerusalem. They have known me for a long time and can testify, if they are willing, that I conformed to the strictest sect of our religion, living as a Pharisee**." (Acts 26: 4-5) and that, "**I was advancing in Judaism beyond many Jews of my own age." (Galatians 1:14)**

III. Paul's Conversion

Combining the three accounts of Luke in Acts, we can see a fuller picture of this dramatic event of Paul's conversion:

Chapter 9: 1-18	Chapter 22:4-16	Chapter 26: 9-18
Persecutor of the Church Meanwhile, Saul was still breathing out murderous threats against the Lord's disciples. He went to the high priest [2] and asked him for letters to the synagogues in Damascus, so that if he found any there who belonged to the Way, whether men or women, he might take them as prisoners to Jerusalem.	Persecutor of the Church I persecuted the followers of this Way to their death, arresting both men and women and throwing them into prison, [5] as the high priest and all the Council can themselves testify. I even obtained letters from them to their associates in Damascus, and went there to bring these people as prisoners to Jerusalem to be punished.	Persecutor of the Church I too was convinced that I ought to do all that was possible to oppose the name of Jesus of Nazareth. [10] And that is just what I did in Jerusalem. On the authority of the chief priests I put many of the Lord's people in prison, and when they were put to death, I cast my vote against them. 11 Many a time I went from one synagogue to another to have them punished, and I tried to force them to blaspheme. I was so obsessed with persecuting them that I even hunted them down in foreign cities.

Conversion	Conversion	Conversion
3 As he neared Damascus on his journey, suddenly a light from heaven flashed around him. 4 He fell to the ground and heard a voice say to him, "Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?"	6 "About noon as I came near Damascus, suddenly a bright light from heaven flashed around me. 7 I fell to the ground and heard a voice say to me, 'Saul! Saul! Why do you persecute me?'	12 "On one of these journeys I was going to Damascus with the authority and commission of the chief priests. 13 About noon, King Agrippa, as I was on the road, I saw a light from heaven, brighter than the sun, blazing around me and my companions. 14 We all fell to the ground, and I heard a voice saying to me in Aramaic,[Hebrew] 'Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me? It is hard for you to kick against the goads.'
5 "Who are you, Lord?" Saul asked.	8 "'Who are you, Lord?' I asked.	15 "Then I asked, 'Who are you, Lord?'
"I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting," he replied.	" 'I am Jesus of Nazareth, whom you are persecuting,' he replied. 9 My companions saw the light, but they did not understand the voice of him who was speaking to me.	" 'I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting,' the Lord replied.
6 "Now get up and go into the city, and you will be told what you must do." 7 The men traveling with Saul stood there speechless; they heard the sound but did not see anyone.	10 "'What shall I do, Lord?' I asked." 'Get up,' the Lord said, 'and go into Damascus. There you will be told all that you have been assigned to do.'	16 'Now get up and stand on your feet…
8 Saul got up from the ground, but when he opened his eyes he could see nothing. So they led him by the hand into Damascus. 9 For three days he was blind, and did not eat or drink anything.	11 My companions led me by the hand into Damascus, because the brilliance of the light had blinded me.	

The Call to be the Apostle to the Gentiles	The Call to be the Apostle to the Gentiles	The Call to be the Apostle to the Gentiles
10 In Damascus there was a disciple named Ananias. The Lord called to him in a vision, "Ananias!"	12 "A man named Ananias came to see me. He was a devout observer of the law and highly respected by all the Jews living there.	
"Yes, Lord," he answered.		
11 The Lord told him, "Go to the house of Judas on Straight Street and ask for a man from Tarsus named Saul, for he is praying. 12 In a vision he has seen a man named Ananias come and place his hands on him to restore his sight."		
13 "Lord," Ananias answered, "I have heard many reports about this man and all the harm he has done to your holy people in Jerusalem. 14 And he has come here with authority from the chief priests to arrest all who call on your name."		
15 But the Lord said to Ananias, "Go! This man is my chosen instrument to proclaim my name to the Gentiles and their kings and to the people of Israel. 16 I will show him how much he must suffer for my name."		
17 Then Ananias went to the house and entered it. Placing his hands on Saul, he said, "Brother Saul, the Lord—Jesus, who appeared to you on the road as you were	13 He stood beside me and said, 'Brother Saul, receive your sight!' And at that very moment I was able to see him.	I have appeared to you to appoint you as a servant and as a witness of what you have seen and will see of me. 17 I will rescue you from your own people and from the Gentiles. I am sending you to them 18 to

coming here—has sent me so that you may see again and be filled with the Holy Spirit." [18] Immediately, something like scales fell from Saul's eyes, and he could see again. He got up and was baptized,	[14] "Then he said: 'The God of our ancestors has chosen you to know his will and to see the Righteous One and to hear words from his mouth. [15] You will be his witness to all people of what you have seen and heard. 16 And now what are you waiting for? Get up, be baptized and wash your sins away, calling on his name.'	open their eyes and turn them from darkness to light, and from the power of Satan to God, so that they may receive forgiveness of sins and a place among those who are sanctified by faith in me.'

Apart from the supplementary information gleaned from Paul's own defenses, the following questions are often raised:

(1) Did Saul really have the legal right to extradite Christians from other places, like Damascus back to Jerusalem to be punished or even killed?

First, irrespective of his age, Saul appeared to be the leader in the persecution of Christians, as 9:1 mentions that "**Meanwhile, Saul are still breathing out murderous threats against the Lord's disciples**."

F.F. Bruce explains that "**When the Jewish state won its independence under the Hasmonaean dynasty of ruling priests (142 B.C.), the Romans, who patronized the new state for reasons of their own, required neighboring states to grant it the privilege of a sovereign state, including the right of extradition. A letter delivered at that time by a Roman ambassador to Ptolemy VIII of Egypt concludes with the demand: 'If any pestilent men have fled to you from their own country [Judea], hand them over to Simon the high priest, so that he may punish them according to their law.' (1 Macc. 15:21). In 47 B.C. Julius Caesar confirmed those rights and privileges anew to the Jewish nation (although Judea was no longer a sovereign state), and more particularly to the high-priesthood. Luke's narrative implies that the right of extradition continued to be enjoyed by the high priest (*Caiaphas, italics* mine) under the provincial administration set up in A.D. 6. The followers of The Way whom Saul was authorized to bring back from Damascus were refugees from Jerusalem, not native Damascene disciples (*of which Ananias was one, italics* mine). The charge against them may have been complicity in Stephen's offense against the temple**" (NICNT, *Acts*, 180-1).

However, Barret asks for caution in assuming such arrangement might still be the case in Paul's time and "it would be quite possible for Jews known to be Christians to 'disappear'…and subsequently to find themselves in unwelcome circumstances in Jerusalem" (ICC, *Acts*, 446-7).

(2) Did Paul actually see Jesus or only heard His voice?

All three narratives in Acts make it clear that as "**Paul fell to the ground and (he) heard a voice say to him"**. If he actually saw Jesus, it would not be described as only hearing a voice. It is safe to say that he did not, at that point, see Jesus.

(3) Then why did Ananias in commissioning Paul says, "The God of our ancestors has chosen you to know his will and to see the Righteous One and to hear words from his mouth. [15] You will be his witness to all people of what you *have seen and heard* (22: 14-15).

Also, in his defense before King Agrippa, Paul mentions that "I (Jesus) have appeared to you to appoint you as a servant and as a witness of what you *have seen and will see* of me" (29:16)?

From these two accounts and Paul's subsequent writings, we know that

- While Jesus likely did not appear as a figure to Paul on the road to Damascus, the bright light that blinded him and the voice he heard were enough to convince Paul of this divine encounter and knew who was speaking to him.
- During the three days of blindness, we know that Paul spent time praying, and during his prayer he saw a vision about being healed and commissioned by Ananias. During these three days of prayers, the Lord (through the Holy Spirit) would have guided Paul into the truth of the meaning of many of the OT passages and prophecies that enabled him to commit himself to Christ through baptism and immediately launched into proclaiming the gospel boldly in Damascus.
- 29:16 clearly points out that this seeing and hearing would be an ongoing process ("*have seen and will see*"), and it would be more than likely that as he spent the next three years immediately upon escaping from Damascus in the desert of Arabia (Galatians 1:17), the Lord would reveal Himself to him and personally taught him many things: this is why
    - He could claim to the Corinthians that Jesus also appeared to him, the same way He appeared to the other Apostles and the 500 brothers (I Cor. 15: 8);
    - He could say that the instructions about the Lord's Supper that he passed to them was what he "**received from the Lord**" I Cor. 11:23) and that
    - He emphasizes that right after his conversion, "**I did not consult any man nor did I go up to Jerusalem to see those who were apostles before I was**" (Galatians 1:16).

(4) When was the commissioning of being an "Apostle to the Gentiles" made plain to Paul?

- The words related by Ananias are quite clear, "**This man is my chosen instrument to carry my name before the Gentiles…**" (Acts 9:15) Although this is followed by "kings" and "people of Israel", to place Gentiles in front is very significant in that up till then the idea of a Jews-only gospel was the norm.
- In his defense of his apostleship to the Galatians, as quoted earlier, Paul understood clearly his call was to "**preach Him (God's Son) among the Gentiles**" (Galatians 1:16) and added that "**For God who was at work in the ministry of Peter as an apostle to the Jews was also at work in my ministry, an apostle to the Gentiles. James, Peter and John, those reputed to be pillars…agreed that we should go to the Gentiles and they to the Jews**" (Galatians 2:8-9)

IV. Immediately after Conversion

"[20] At once he began to preach in the synagogues that Jesus is the Son of God. [21] All those who heard him were astonished and asked, 'Isn't he the man who raised havoc in Jerusalem among those who call on this name? And hasn't he come here to take them as prisoners to the chief priests?' [22] Yet Saul grew more and more powerful and baffled the Jews living in Damascus by proving that Jesus is the Messiah.

- Indeed, Paul had no one to teach him, but the Holy Spirit through his time of prayers and further study of the Law and Prophets. On the other hand, while in Jerusalem, he would have participated in the debates with disciples like Stephen who argued with those Greek speaking Jews from Cyrene, Alexandria, Cilicia and Asia (Acts 6:9), and certainly he was present during Stephen's lengthy discourse which led to his martyrdom. All these arguments proving that Jesus is the Messiah which he strongly rejected now had come to life—everything makes perfect sense to him.
- Though nothing was said about his companions who came all the way from Jerusalem to Damascus, since they also saw the bright light and the miraculous healing of blindness of Paul, they would have to take Paul's message seriously.
- But it also reveals not only the boldness of Paul and his total commitment to his gospel call.

[23] After many days had gone by, there was a conspiracy among the Jews to kill him, [24] but Saul learned of their plan. Day and night they kept close watch on the city gates in order to kill him. [25] But his followers took him by night and lowered him in a basket through an opening in the wall.

- "**The history of Damascus goes back to remote antiquity. It was a city in the days of Abraham, and at the time of the Israelite monarchy, it was the capital of the most important Aramaean kingdom. Later, it was the seat of administration of an Assyrian province…From 64 B.C. on it belonged to the Roman province of Syria…There was a large Jewish population in the city…the Judean revolt in A.D. 66 was marked by the massacre of 10,500 Damascene Jews**" (NICNT, Acts, 181). "**The distance from Jerusalem to Damascus was bout 150 miles (241 km)…Today. This still-thriving city, the capital of Syria is home to 1.7 million**" (Archaeological Study Bible, p.1782)—that was obviously a figure before the last decade as a good part of Damascus is in ruin due to continued warfare and the place is going through great economic turmoil.
- That was the first episode of persecution that Paul would face for the rest of his apostolic life as "promised" by the Lord at his conversion: "[16] I will show him how much he must suffer for my name."

[26] When he came to Jerusalem, he tried to join the disciples, but they were all afraid of him, not believing that he really was a disciple. [27] But Barnabas took him and brought him to the apostles. He told them how Saul on his journey had seen the Lord and that the Lord had spoken to him, and how in Damascus he had preached fearlessly in the name of Jesus. [28] So Saul stayed with them and moved about freely in Jerusalem, speaking boldly in the name of

the Lord. [29] He talked and debated with the Hellenistic Jews, but they tried to kill him. [30] When the believers learned of this, they took him down to Caesarea and sent him off to Tarsus."

- Luke did not say that after Paul escaped from Damascus that he immediately left for Jerusalem, while Paul in Galatians 1 says that "**But when God, who set me apart by His grace, was pleased to reveal His Son in me so that I might preach Him among the Gentiles…I went immediately into Arabia and later returned to Damascus**." (1: 15-17).
- If we take Paul's own words at face value (and there is no reason not to), then when he was converted likely in A.D. 34, then he would have stayed in Arabia and later in Damascus up to A.D. 37 before he went to Jerusalem.
- Whether it was in A.D. 34 or 37, it is sad to learn that the Jerusalem disciples (and also the Apostles obviously) were reluctant to receive him out of fear. However, since Paul was once the champion of attack against Christians, and he personally had arrested Christians leading to not only imprisonment but death, who can blame these believers whose loved ones had suffered or died in Paul's hand.
- Here, we have come to know Barnabas—who was true to his nick-name, Son of Encouragement—with his prominent position among the believers in Jerusalem, and also a Hellenistic Jew, took the risk of receiving Paul, and because of his position, the Apostles were willing to receive Paul. But according to Paul's own account, such an apostolic reception was confined to Peter (with whom Paul stayed for 15 days) and James, the brother of the Lord (Galatians 1: 18-19).
- I cannot help but sense a "cold-shoulder" reception by the Apostles in Jerusalem, but in any case, Paul did not seem to be much affected by this less-than supportive reception and went on to focus on his calling, the preaching of the gospel. And being a Hellenistic Jew fluent in Greek, it was natural for Paul to debate with Grecian Jews as well.
- Paul or Saul was previously well-known in the Jewish circle in Jerusalem, and quickly he faced grave danger, but the Lord provided a way out for him and he was able to leave Jerusalem and headed to Caesarea and then to his home town, Tarsus in Syria which gibes with Paul's account in Galatians.

V. Summary Thoughts

- It was rare to have Roman citizenship at Paul's time, and yet he was "born" with it (Acts 22:28). It implies that his father would have been a well-connected person, affluent and of social status in Tarsus, Syria.
- Being a pilpul of Gamaliel also meant that his family had the financial means to send him back to Jerusalem to learn after this perhaps most famous rabbi of the time, likely after he turned 13, becoming a "son of the law/Bar Mitzvah".
- Then it would only be reasonable to assume that he was in Jerusalem during the three years of ministry of our Lord and being an ardent Pharisaic adherent, he would have joined in the opposition of our Lord, except that he might be a bit too young to make any difference at the time.
- But after Pentecost, at the sudden rise of Christianity (The Way), Paul was more than zealous to help stamp out this "heresy", and at the martyrdom of Stephen,

he might have "come of age" (literally) and soon became a champion of the persecution of Christians.

- His Hellenistic root made him a natural to spread (or spearhead) the persecution to the neighboring cities with a large Jewish population to which Jesus' disciples naturally fled (and immigrated).
- While we have no answer as to why, of all people, the Lord would choose Paul as His Apostle, but logically speaking, his wealth of knowledge of the Law and Prophets, his fluency in Greek (and Grecian culture), his status in the Roman world (as a rare Jewish Roman Citizen), and with the blood of Christians on his hands made him a perfect candidate to bring the gospel beyond the Jews to the Gentiles
- The interesting thing is, even at the outset of his conversion, his heart was obviously deeply concerned with his own people, whether traditional or Grecian Jews, but as we can observe, he was led to the path of saving the Gentiles in the main—a lesson that we might be prudent to learn and that is, as much as we have a strong desire to serve the Lord in a certain direction, it is far more important to not only hear His voice, but also to listen and obey!
- But God-given personality is also an asset in that given a more gentle spirit, Paul would be so discouraged by the initial cold reception of the Apostles in Jerusalem, but he persevered.
- Not only that, as we have previously considered, as he was not privileged to be around Jesus at the beginning of His ministry, nor witnessed the resurrected Lord the way the Apostles did, the only one who could validate his God-directly-given apostleship was Barnabas, and he basically had to "fight" for the authenticity of his apostleship from the very first day—perhaps, that's part of the "thorn" if not the "thorn" itself that he had to put up with as God's way of humbling him (II Cor. 12)