

Lesson 13: Acts 9:1-31 The Persecutor Transformed Into Ambassador

Introduction

Acts part I ended with the summary statement,

The word of God kept on spreading; and the number of the disciples continued to increase greatly in Jerusalem, and a great many of the priests were becoming obedient to the faith. (Acts 6:7).

Acts part II began with the death of Stephen, the event that ended the Jerusalem awakening and propelled persecuted believers out into the countryside. There are four reports in part two. The first, Stephen's trial and death, showed a Gospel clash with orthodox Judaism; the second gave us a glimpse at the Gospel's inroads into unorthodox Samaritanism; the third revealed the Gospel's inclusion of the Ethiopian Eunuch, highlighting Jesus as the servant of God; and this fourth story will depict the Gospel's transformation of the persecutor Saul, highlighting Jesus as the Son of God.

The introduction of the story comes in Acts 9:1-2.

¹ Now Saul, still breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord, went to the high priest, ² and asked for letters from him to the synagogues at Damascus, so that if he found any belonging to the Way, both men and women, he might bring them bound to Jerusalem.

Luke sets up the story of Paul's conversion by reminding us of the intensity of his zeal against the Christian movement. He breaths threats and murder. He cannot let it go. He has discovered his calling. You can imagine Paul reaching into the Old Testament for inspiration. He is Phineas of old, the priest who ran a spear through the Jewish man and Moabite woman who flaunted immorality and idolatry in the face of God at the very end of the forty years of wandering in the desert. Did not Phineas bring an end to the plague of God? Did he not turn the hearts of the Israelites back to God leading to victory over Moab and preparing the way for the conquest on Canaan? Paul is the righteous warrior, fighting for the soul of Israel. He will stamp out this blasphemous sect wherever the cancer spreads.

We cannot be sure how long Paul persecuted the Christian Church in Jerusalem and Judea before he took it upon himself to pursue them out of country, starting in Damascus. We have to work with various markers in the Biblical text to put together the chronological puzzle. Paul will make a reference in his second letter to the Corinthians stating that Aretas was in control of Damascus when he was lowered down in the basket to escape (2 Corinthians 11:32). The death of King Aretas is a known event that occurred in 40 AD. So, recognizing that the crucifixion and Pentecost occurred in 30 AD, that gives us 10 years for the Jerusalem Awakening, the persecution that followed, and the time Paul spent in Damascus. So, Paul's work to stamp out the Church in Judea could have easily lasted a couple of years before he goes and gets letters to address the situation in Damascus.

The population of Jews in Damascus is quite large. Josephus, writing about the Judean revolt, an event that took place 25 years after this, claimed the Romans killed 10,500 Jews of Damascus. Paul's concern is that the Christian cancer propelled out of Jerusalem has landed in a large Jewish community numbering in the thousands, may be tens of thousands.

Paul's request for letters from the high priest to specifically go to synagogues in Damascus suggest that he is not going after Gentile citizens who have become believers, and probably not going after Jews native to Damascus. He is targeting Jews who fled the persecution in Jerusalem, who are still legally under the authority of the high priest.

A couple centuries before this period, under the short-lived autonomy of the Hasmoneans, Rome agreed to extradite Jewish criminals back to Jerusalem. 1 Maccabees 15:21 records the Roman ambassador writing to Ptolemy VIII of Egypt, "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). Josephus affirms that the right of extradition was maintained when Rome

took control of Judea.¹ That is what's happening here. Though Damascus is not under Jewish governance, the high priest apparently had the legal right granted by Rome to extradite back to Jerusalem Jews in Damascus charged with a crime by the Jewish government. Later in the book of Acts, we will see that Paul himself is protected from automatic extradition to a court in Jerusalem because he is not only Jewish, he is also a Roman citizen. That right of citizenship with its protection is not granted to most of the non-Latins living in the Roman Empire. It is a valuable status that Paul has and he's going to use it later. Here, he is using the Roman law to his own benefit to go to Damascus, under the authority of the high priest, to bring back Jews who have fled.

Paul's target in these introductory verses is described as the Way. Men and women belonging to the Way are to be brought back. They are not being called Christians, yet. Even after they begin to be called Christians by others, this name "the Way" continues to be used by Christians to describe themselves. It will be repeated in chapters 19, 22, and 24. And there are a couple other references that help us understand the name. What do they mean when they call themselves, the Way?

Crying out in Philippi, the demon possessed girl will say of Paul and Luke and the rest of their team, "they are servants of the Most High God who are proclaiming to you a way of salvation (Acts 16:17)." Where does the way lead you? It is a way of salvation. Then in Ephesus Priscilla and Aquila are going to recognize that Apollos has been "instructed in the way of the Lord," and they instruct him in "the way of God more accurately" (Acts 18:25-26). So, whose way is it? The way of the Lord, the way of God. There is a more subtle reference by Peter. It comes in his first Pentecost sermon when he quotes David in Psalm 16, saying,

YOU WILL NOT ABANDON MY SOUL TO HADES, NOR ALLOW YOUR HOLY ONE TO UNDERGO DECAY. 'YOU HAVE MADE KNOWN TO ME THE WAYS OF LIFE; YOU WILL MAKE ME FULL OF GLADNESS WITH YOUR PRESENCE.' (Acts 2:27-28).

The way of salvation, the way of the Lord, the way of life, I can't help but think of the most famous reference to the way, when Jesus said of himself on the night before his arrest, "I am the way and the truth and the life (John 14:6)." I have to think that is where the name came from. The way.

C. S. Lewis loved the idea of journey as a metaphor for the Christian life. You are on your way somewhere. And you have a destination that you are journeying to. A journey can depict obstacle, and adventure, and monotony, and peace. There is room for failure and success and just walking. You meet other people on your journey. You can gather together a band of people who walk together on the journey. You grow on your way.

Tolkien loved this idea, too. "It's a dangerous business, Frodo, going out your door. You step onto the road, and if you don't keep your feet, there's no knowing where you might be swept off to." That's not a bad description of the story we just looked at in Acts. Philip was serving happily in Samaria when God said, "Get up and go." And Philip got up and went. He got on the way at the command of his Lord. There was another man peacefully traveling along his way, coming out of Jerusalem.

You never know what is going to happen when you put your foot on the road. What happened this day to Philip the Jew and a royal eunuch from Ethiopia is that they met on the road, they spoke for some time about the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

[Then] they both went down into the water, Philip as well as the eunuch, and he baptized him. When they came up out of the water, the Spirit of the Lord snatched Philip away; and the eunuch no longer saw him, but went on his way rejoicing (Acts 8:38-39).

On his way, he met the Way and went on his way rejoicing.

¹ F. F. Bruce. *The Book of the Acts* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1988) 180.

Paul is on his way. And his vision is clear. His mission is firm. He steps onto the road. It is a dangerous business. Let's read what happens.

Paul's Conversion: Blinded by Light in Order to See (9:3-9)

³ As he was traveling, it happened that he was approaching Damascus, and suddenly a light from heaven flashed around him; ⁴ and he fell to the ground and heard a voice saying to him, "Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting Me?" ⁵ And he said, "Who are You, Lord?" And He said, "I am Jesus whom you are persecuting, ⁶ but get up and enter the city, and it will be told you what you must do." ⁷ The men who traveled with him stood speechless, hearing the voice but seeing no one. ⁸ Saul got up from the ground, and though his eyes were open, he could see nothing; and leading him by the hand, they brought him into Damascus. ⁹ And he was three days without sight, and neither ate nor drank.

Jesus does not ask Paul why he is persecuting the Church. He asked, "Why are you persecuting me?" Jesus sent the Holy Spirit to convict the world of the truth regarding Himself. And he commissioned His disciples to join in the work of witness. When those disciples, participating in the witnessing ministry of the Holy Spirit in the name of Jesus, are persecuted, Jesus takes it personally. "Why are you persecuting me?", he says. He stands behind those who believe in His name and give witness to Him. They will be vindicated.

What kind of a shock must Paul have experienced? "Who are you Lord?... I am Jesus whom you are persecuting." "Everything the Apostles had been saying is true. That guy Stephen we killed. Everything he was saying... Jesus is the Messiah, rejected, murdered, buried, risen, exalted." What do you imagine Paul felt? Joy? I'm not sure about that at the beginning. More likely, fear. Humiliation. Guilt. Remorse. Shock.

The others hear the voice, but they do not see. Paul sees spiritual reality when he sees Jesus, but he is immediately reminded of his unseeing. When he opens his eyes, he does not see. And that has been his life up to this moment. Fervently convinced that he saw, he in truth was blind as a dead man.

In the last words of Acts, speaking to Jewish leaders while under house arrest, Paul is going to quote what God said to Isaiah after Isaiah saw the glory of God. It's going to come from Isaiah chapter 6. That's where Isaiah told his story of his own calling. And he begins chapter 6, "In the year of King Uzziah's death, I saw the Lord sitting on a throne..." As a human being, the experience of seeing Yahweh revealed in His glory, overwhelmed Isaiah, not with joy, but with fear and dismay. He cried out,

Woe is me, for I am ruined!
Because I am a man of unclean lips, And I live among a people of unclean lips;
For my eyes have seen the King, the LORD of hosts." (Isaiah 6:5)

Seeing, Isaiah cries out, "I am undone!" Seeing God truly pierces into a human being. All our sin, and pride, and indifference, our self-centered love is laid bare. Everything is peeled back, our false security, our hidden self, our utter dependence on factors that we can't control, our weakness, our helplessness, our mortality, our guilt, our presumption, our secrets, the ugliness of our soul. All is laid out on the dissection table under bright light and intense magnification, held up in comparison to the purity, and goodness, and power of God. When you see God, God sees you and you know you are seen. And how do we look in the light of His glory? If we can bear to look at ourselves at that moment, we will not like at all what we see. We will desperately reach out for fig leaves to cover the nakedness of our soul.

The searing pain of being revealed by the piercing light of God's glory would leave us undone - woe is me! - but for the grace of God. He sees truly. And even in the corruption, he sees His image, and He sees how to redeem that image. He knows the price it's going to cost, and He is willing to pay it. He did not leave Isaiah on the dissection table.

Then one of the seraphim flew to me with a burning coal in his hand, which he had taken from the altar with tongs. He touched my mouth *with it* and said, "Behold, this has touched your lips; and your iniquity is taken away and your sin is forgiven." (Isaiah 6:6-7)

Isaiah's redemption was granted on credit, paid 700 years later when the God of glory suffered Himself to be executed on a rough, Roman cross.

Isaiah saw. Sadly, he would be one among a small remnant. The majority of his fellow Israelites would remain in darkness. Paul understood his situation, working among his people, as parallel. Just as the Jews of Isaiah's day refused to see, leading to the exile of the Northern Kingdom under the strong arm of the Assyrians, also in his day the majority of Jews would refuse to see and so enter into an exile of spiritual darkness, while Gentiles flooded in. At the end of this book, Paul quotes Isaiah 6:10 to the Jewish leaders in Rome. This is what God tells Isaiah about his calling. This is what you look forward to in ministry.

²⁷ FOR THE HEART OF THIS PEOPLE HAS BECOME DULL,
AND WITH THEIR EARS THEY SCARCELY HEAR,
AND THEY HAVE CLOSED THEIR EYES;
OTHERWISE THEY MIGHT SEE WITH THEIR EYES,
AND HEAR WITH THEIR EARS,
AND UNDERSTAND WITH THEIR HEART AND RETURN,
AND I WOULD HEAL THEM." ' (Isaiah 6:10; Acts 28:27)

The Jewish nation had shut their eyes to Jesus. Paul had shut his eyes to Jesus, the great Light foretold by Isaiah. They did not embrace the Light when he came to Earth. They hated the Light. They sought to shut out the Light. They preferred darkness. God appears in the light of His glory to Paul. He cannot shut out the light. It shines all around, piercing through his eyes, into his soul and, becoming blind, Paul sees. The proud Pharisee is humbled. He does not eat. He does not drink. In darkness for three days, he will remain just as his Lord remained for three days in the darkness of the grave.

Jesus does not leave Paul alone in the dark. He sends someone to him. Acts 9:10-19,

Paul's Conversion: Made Able to See Now that He Sees (9:10-19a)

¹⁰ Now there was a disciple at Damascus named Ananias; and the Lord said to him in a vision, "Ananias." And he said, "Here I am, Lord." ¹¹ And the Lord *said* to him, "Get up and go to the street called Straight, and inquire at the house of Judas for a man from Tarsus named Saul, for he is praying, ¹² and he has seen in a vision a man named Ananias come in and lay his hands on him, so that he might regain his sight." ¹³ But Ananias answered, "Lord, I have heard from many about this man, how much harm he did to Your saints at Jerusalem; ¹⁴ and here he has authority from the chief priests to bind all who call on Your name." ¹⁵ But the Lord said to him, "Go, for he is a chosen instrument of Mine, to bear My name before the Gentiles and kings and the sons of Israel; ¹⁶ for I will show him how much he must suffer for My name's sake." ¹⁷ So Ananias departed and entered the house, and after laying his hands on him said, "Brother Saul, the Lord Jesus, who appeared to you on the road by which you were coming, has sent me so that you may regain your sight and be filled with the Holy Spirit." ¹⁸ And immediately there fell from his eyes something like scales, and he regained his sight, and he got up and was baptized; ¹⁹ and he took food and was strengthened.

Ananias is a disciple of Christ. We hear a little more about him when Paul later tells his testimony to the Jerusalem mob in chapter 22. We are told there that he is "devout by the standard of the Law, *and* well-spoken of by all the Jews who lived there." So, he seems to be a Jew from Damascus, which suggests Paul's initial fears were true, the Word of the Lord had spread from Jerusalem, had taken root, and begun to grow, and people like Ananias had believed.

Ananias has a vision of the Lord and he is told to go find Paul. He responds,

“Lord, I have heard from many about this man, how much harm he did to Your saints at Jerusalem; and here he has authority from the chief priests to bind all who call on Your name.”

We could take that statement as resistance to the command of the Lord, like Moses in Exodus 4: “Not me! Not me, Lord! Send somebody else!”, but since God does not respond negatively and He doesn’t have to convince Ananias, I assume we are not to suppose refusal here. This may indicate fear. That would be reasonable. And in light of that fear, Ananias may be clarifying what he must do. But when God gives that clarification, saying, “Go,” Ananias goes. This is obedience.

Paul’s journey has taken a sharp 180-degree turn, from persecutor of Jesus Christ to ambassador of Jesus Christ. Paul tells us later in Acts what Jesus said to him. In this story we hear it from God speaking to Ananias. And this is the calling,

“Go, for he is a chosen instrument of Mine, to bear My name before the Gentiles and kings and the sons of Israel; for I will show him how much he must suffer for My name’s sake.”

We’re going to see the story become true. What God proclaims will happen. God is sovereign here. Paul will bear His name before Gentiles. Paul will take His name and witness to sons of Israel. Paul will speak before kings. It is hard to imagine Paul not becoming the Apostle to the Gentiles. God’s sovereign hand is very active in his conversion and in his commission. Luke does not even bother to tell us that Paul has believed in Jesus. Paul is overwhelmed by the glory of God. He did not choose God. God chose him. We do recognize Paul’s faith in the immediate transformation of his life. He believes in Jesus. We’ll see that as he begins to witness immediately.

Like the Apostles, the filling of the Holy Spirit does not come at the moment of Paul’s belief, which I assume happened three days before Ananias came. I believe Paul believed immediately when he saw Jesus. He doesn’t receive the Holy Spirit at that time. Instead, Paul meets Jesus and believes, God keeps him blind for three days, he is commissioned, he regains sight, and then he is filled with the Spirit, either just before, or during, or after baptism. It is somehow connected with baptism. And then we see the transformation of his life in the next verses. This is Acts 9:19-22.

Paul’s Conversion: Seeing Paul Points Others to the Light (9:19b-22)

Now for several days he was with the disciples who were at Damascus,²⁰ and immediately he *began* to proclaim Jesus in the synagogues, saying, “He is the Son of God.”²¹ All those hearing him continued to be amazed, and were saying, “Is this not he who in Jerusalem destroyed those who called on this name, and *who* had come here for the purpose of bringing them bound before the chief priests?”²² But Saul kept increasing in strength and confounding the Jews who lived at Damascus by proving that this *Jesus* is the Christ.

Jesus has not been called the Son of God, yet, in the book of Acts. This clear reference to His divine nature is shocking coming so soon after belief from the lips of a devout Pharisee who did not walk with Jesus prior to his conversion. This is one of the huge stumbling blocks. We hear that Paul has proven that Jesus is the Messiah. Well, that’s a challenge to prove. But that He is the Son of God? A belief in the Trinity, that the Son and the Father are both God; this is a huge struggle for the Jewish mind to wrap around. Paul’s witness to Jesus as the Son of God is testimony to the power of his experience with Jesus and the degree to which the Holy Spirit has opened his eyes to understand the Scripture to which he had dedicated himself, though until now, has not correctly understood. But now he sees it.

Paul still has room to grow. The text tells us that he “kept increasing in strength.” The power of his proclamation was strong from the start. He had a testimony of a changed life. He had all the knowledge as the Pharisee. And he saw Jesus to be true and was proclaiming him as Son of God and as Christ, and he is speaking what he knows to be true. That proclamation still has room to grow, and he increases in strength over time.

How long Paul stayed in Damascus, growing in his knowledge of the Gospel, is an interesting question, not at all apparent here in Acts. Consider the last verse of this paragraph and the first verse of the next paragraph. And how much time does it sound elapses? This is verse 22-23.

²² But Saul kept increasing in strength and confounding the Jews who lived at Damascus by proving that this *Jesus* is the Christ. ²³ When many days had elapsed, the Jews plotted together to do away with him...

And it goes on.

The next paragraph is going to conclude the story of Paul's conversion with the account of him escaping Damascus by a basket and going back to Jerusalem. So, we are at the end of his time in Damascus, end of that last paragraph. But how much time really passes in verses 22-23 between the report that Paul kept increasing in strength in his proclamation and the plot to do away with him? Luke writes, "When many days had elapsed..." But many days is a relative concept. Many days could be 5 days or 5 years. It feels shorter here as Luke is moving the story along. But reading the letter to the Galatians, we found out that it is a big gap. A lot of time exists here in these "many days." Paul writes the Galatians to explain when he first discussed with the Apostles the Gospel of Jesus. So he's talking about this story. "I came to believe in Damascus and then there was some time before I went to Jerusalem." So this is what he says in Galatians 1:17-18.

¹⁷ nor did I go up to Jerusalem to those who were apostles before me; but I went away to Arabia, and returned once more to Damascus. ¹⁸ Then three years later I went up to Jerusalem to become acquainted with Cephas...

You went to Arabia? Luke didn't say anything about going to Arabia. And three years? Apparently, Luke's "many days" is three years. And it's a good reminder of a truth we have already pointed out. In a book that covers 30 years in only 28 chapters, the author must be selective about what he chooses to report. Acts covers a whole generation. We become aware that not only is the Acts of the Apostles not about the missionary work of all the Apostles, but even with the two Apostles Luke does focus on, Peter and Paul, we are getting only a selection of what they said and did.

It's the same with the Gospels which are not nearly long enough to cover everything Jesus said and did. If John did not decide to write his Gospel late in life, we would never have heard about the story of Lazarus being raised from the dead. Not until we got to Heaven. And there we would be shocked. Luke, how could you leave that out? So, wouldn't it be nice, like with the Gospels, to have another book like Acts that fills in more of the history Luke was not able to get to? But we don't have that. We've got Acts and the letters. Then we get some additional information a little bit that can help fill out more of the story.

So, we find out by Paul's own pen in Galatians that he was three years in Damascus but not the whole time in Damascus. He comes to Christ in Damascus and immediately shares his witness of Jesus in the synagogues. (Notice that reference is to synagogues rather than synagogue, plural, not singular. This is a large community of Jews.) So, he's witnessing in the synagogues. But after he began his witness among the Jews of Damascus, he then goes to Arabia after which he returns to Damascus. And the whole period is three years. We are not sure how much was Damascus and how much was Arabia.

But you really have to wonder, what is he doing in Arabia? We get so little talk of Arabia in the Bible it seems like it's a reference out of nowhere. Until we understand that, at this period of time, that Damascus is actually under the control of King of Arabia. I mentioned in our introduction Paul's reference to King Aretus in 2 Corinthians, which helps us to have some boundaries of dating. Because we know Aretus died in 40 AD. If Paul was in Damascus and Arabia 3 years and Aretus was still alive when Paul fled, then the absolute latest Paul could have arrived in Damascus was 37 A.D., so three years before 40 A.D. But when I look at a Bible map, I assume that Damascus is controlled by the Roman province of Syria. That's not true, not at this point in time. It is controlled by the King of Arabia, more commonly referred to in historical studies as the King of Nabatea. Nabatea or Nabatia, I'm sure I pronounced it wrong. I'm going to go with Nabatea.

Nabatea, formerly independent, but now a client kingdom of Rome, was ruling the territory between Egypt and Judea. That is the whole Midian wilderness where Mt. Sinai is located and where that first

Jewish generation out of Egypt spent 40 years in exile. That whole wilderness is Nabatea. Nabatea also controls the territory around the eastern side of the Jordan river, so where the Moabites and the Amorites lived, going all the way up to Damascus. If you are familiar with the word, Transjordan, you know, to cross the Jordan to the territory on the other side of the Jordan, at this point in time that's controlled by Nabatea, or Arabia.

Aretus had not always been in control of Damascus. But he had married his daughter to Herod Antipas, and that Herod was the one who controlled Galilee at the time of Jesus and beheaded John the Baptist. Well, he divorced the daughter of Aretus, so that he could marry his own niece, who was also his sister-in-law, which is the act that John the Baptist heavily criticized and eventually lead to his execution. Well, Aretus did not take well Herod Antipas divorcing his daughter. In response, he attacked the forces of Herod, won a surprising victory and, as a result, took control of Damascus. There's this whole soap-opera behind the events that lead to Paul being in Damascus when Damascus is under control of the Nabateans. When Paul says he is going to Arabia, he is already in a sense in Arabia, in Damascus, and he's just moving out east. Rome will eventually send their own troops to sort that out, but during the time Paul is in Damascus, it is under control of the Nabataeans.

The Nabateans are ethnically Bedouins. They do consist of tribes and some are nomadic, but they also have significant cities. And it is into their territory Paul goes, so presumably goes to the cities. That's what we, at least, see later in his life as his ministry strategy. So, Luke does not tell us about this in Acts. We're going off the little bit we get in Galatians. I am spending a little on it because it helps us to think about Paul's timeline and his own growth and his own growth before he returns to Jerusalem. So, things are happening here.

Another tempting question to ask, is "Why?" Why did Paul go into Arabia? The three-year period is interestingly close to the three years the Apostles spent with Jesus, receiving training from Jesus before they began their work of witness in Jerusalem. Could have Arabia been an extended period of reflection and development for Paul? Was it like a spiritual retreat? Mount Sinai is in Arabia. Did he journey to Mount Sinai?

I think Paul's time would include spiritual formation. Though it is a bit hard to imagine Paul not going somewhere to proclaim the Gospel of Jesus Christ. He began a ministry of proclamation immediately in Damascus after he saw Jesus. He did not wait. And Jesus had told him, "Go to Gentiles!" And he is currently in a Gentile city controlled by the Gentile kingdom of Nabatea. He is there when Jesus says, "Go to Gentiles!" So, what Gentiles does Paul naturally think of? Arabia would be quite natural. So, it's hard to imagine evangelistic ministry not being a primary reason for Paul venturing out from Damascus. You know, Damascus is a base and then he ventures out into Arabia. And of course, God also used it as a time for Paul to continue to reflect on the Scriptures, and the Gospel, and the New Covenant, to develop and grow in this new way of walking with God in Jesus Christ. Yes, maybe he made a trip to Mt. Sinai in the Nabatean territory, following the footsteps of Elijah. That's interesting to think about. It would have been a long trek south. I don't really think it's likely. I think it's more likely that he stayed closer to Damascus, witnessing in the nearby cities, interacting with some of these Jews who had been persecuted, who were potentially followers of Christ in His lifetime. There is a community of believers here that he is interacting with, and if he stays close to Damascus, it explains why he ends up back in Damascus to conclude our story.

So, one more question I have. Why didn't Luke mention Paul's ministry in Arabia? He is selective in the stories he reports. But it only took Paul one sentence in Galatians. Luke could have introduced that.

And I don't think this is a question I can fully answer. You know, I'm guessing. It is not really possible to get behind the text into the mind of the author. We know what he has written. We don't know what he hasn't written. We don't know what he's been thinking. He doesn't tell us. So, we can guess but I'll suggest a possible reason.

Luke is here still introducing Paul. We got the early mention of Paul at the end of Stephen's story. Now we get a full story of Paul where he is the main character, this is about his conversion, but we

are not ready shift the whole book onto a focus to Paul's ministry. That is going to be the second half of Acts. We still have one more part in the first half of Acts where Peter is the main Apostle under focus. To give an account of Paul's early ministry here would take us off track of the story Luke is telling. The primary work God has for Paul occurs in the Eastern half of the Roman Empire. He's not going to go east. Jerusalem is at the Eastern edge. Paul is going to go west, towards Rome. And that's the story we're going to get. So, while the witness in Arabia is very interesting, it is not the focus here in chapter 9, and it is not going to be the focus when we get to Paul's ministry.

And one more thing. If one of the reasons Luke writes Acts is to provide a defense of Paul before a Roman court, if it was written to Theophilus who is a high member of society and this was, hopefully, to get on record, then Paul's activity outside of the Roman empire does not fit with Luke's intended scope. Whether Luke intends this work to aid in Paul's defense, he has intentionally limited his scope. He is not trying to give us a full history of the spread of the Gospel in the first century. He is not telling us the stories of the other Apostles. He has chosen to focus on Peter and Paul. And in focusing on Peter and Paul, he is concentrating on the growth of the Christian movement in the Roman Empire, beginning in Jerusalem. Commenting on Paul's immediate ministry in Damascus and on the fact that Paul grew in strength, that covers the details Luke needs to convey at this point in the story.

Now, we have a little more to go in this story. The conclusion tells us about Paul's reception in Jerusalem and explains why he is not in Jerusalem, but in Tarsus, when Barnabas later recruits him to come teach in Antioch. The report ends in 9:23-31.

The Persecutor Returns to Jerusalem as an Ambassador (9:23-31)

²³ When many days had elapsed, the Jews plotted together to do away with him, ²⁴ but their plot became known to Saul. They were also watching the gates day and night so that they might put him to death; ²⁵ but his disciples took him by night and let him down through *an opening in the wall*, lowering him in a large basket. ²⁶ When he came to Jerusalem, he was trying to associate with the disciples; but they were all afraid of him, not believing that he was a disciple. ²⁷ But Barnabas took hold of him and brought him to the apostles and described to them how he had seen the Lord on the road, and that He had talked to him, and how at Damascus he had spoken out boldly in the name of Jesus. ²⁸ And he was with them, moving about freely in Jerusalem, speaking out boldly in the name of the Lord. ²⁹ And he was talking and arguing with the Hellenistic *Jews*; but they were attempting to put him to death. ³⁰ But when the brethren learned *of it*, they brought him down to Caesarea and sent him away to Tarsus. ³¹ So the church throughout all Judea and Galilee and Samaria enjoyed peace, being built up; and going on in the fear of the Lord and in the comfort of the Holy Spirit, it continued to increase.

Paul is on a dangerous journey. He was persecutor. He will be persecuted. Jesus said up front, "He must learn how much he will suffer for my name." Not only did Paul become an immediate target of the Jewish establishment, he also has to get past the barriers caused by his previous zeal. He scares people. Christians do not trust him. And rightly so. But one person does. Or is, at least, willing to give him a chance. Barnabas, the son of encouragement, risks believing that God has transformed Paul.

We don't know how Barnabas knew the whole story. Had he heard from friends who had been to Damascus or did he simply go for coffee with Paul and ask first-hand? You know, "Tell me your story." However, he heard the story, the story makes an impact on him, so he takes Paul to meet with the Apostles and he, himself, repeats Paul's story to them. He doesn't say, "Hey, Paul tell the story!" He tells the story! And by retelling the story, Barnabas communicates his belief in the story. He is not asking them to assess Paul. He has assessed Paul and now communicates Paul's story with conviction of its truthfulness.

Following this introduction to the Apostolic community, Paul continues the ministry he had begun in Damascus, speaking boldly in the name of Jesus. You can imagine how hated he was. How loved and hated. His former compatriots would hate him as a traitor. And those persecuted would love the

story of his changed life. Though I imagine it is more complicated. Some Christians whose family members' lives had been ended or destroyed by Paul would likely struggle with God over Paul's conversion. Yeah, he can be converted, but there's no justice, there's no punishment, there's no retribution. This would be hard for many in the Christian community. Christian community involves a network of relationships with as many different personal responses and interactions as there are people. In Paul, the believers in Jerusalem are challenged with the transformative power of the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Can a life like that really be changed? And they are challenged with the need to trust in God's sovereignty, and in His mercy, and in His plan.

The Apostles trust God's work in Paul's life. They extend to him forgiveness and acceptance. And briefly, Paul joins with them in their ministry in Jerusalem. But his old friends did hate him and they sought to have him put to death. God is not quite ready to lift Paul up to his unique role so he is sent away for several years, continuing to witness and to grow, continuing his journey with Jesus until the point along the way that God is ready to bring him back into this story that Luke is telling.

Coming to the end of Paul's conversion story, we also come to the end of the second main part of Acts, indicated by Luke's second summary statement.

³¹ So the church throughout all Judea and Galilee and Samaria enjoyed peace, being built up; and going on in the fear of the Lord and in the comfort of the Holy Spirit, it continued to increase.

Persecution did not stamp out the Gospel. The work of Jesus Christ is not stopped. There is intense persecution for a while. Apparently, that fades out when Paul is removed. The summary statement says, "So", this is after the conversion of Paul, "So the church throughout all Judea and Galilee and Samaria enjoyed peace, being built up." So, we're in a lull of intense persecution against Christians. This is a moment of peace. The Jewish authorities tried to stamp out the fire, but inadvertently kicked up sparks that spread into the surrounding countryside. And so, the Gospel moved forward, just as Jesus foretold "from Jerusalem to Judea and Samaria." The move of the Gospel is both geographic and ethnic. Through Philip's story we see the Gospel making the half-step from Jew to Samaritan, and the full step from Jew to Ethiopian eunuch. Starting this part of Acts with the appearance of the God of glory to Abraham, we end with the appearance of the Son in glory to Paul. Like Abraham, he is a man of God's choosing. Abraham was promised he would be a blessing to the nations. Jesus Christ is that blessing to the nations. Paul will be His ambassador.

Reflection questions

1. Read Acts 9:1-31. What stands out to you as interesting, important, strange or confusing? What questions come to mind?
2. Use the metaphor of sight, blindness and light to describe Paul's spiritual state before meeting Jesus, meeting Jesus and after meeting Jesus.
3. Now use the metaphor to describe your own experience before knowing Jesus, meeting Jesus and after meeting Jesus.
4. In what way do you identify with Paul?
5. In what way do you identify with Ananias?
6. In what way do you identify with the apostles or Barnabas?
7. What words stand out to you in Acts 9:31, the summary of Acts, part II?
8. Considering Acts 1:8, 6:7 and 9:31, think back over the story that Luke has told up to this point. What stands out to you?