

## Thoughts on Acts Nine

In 1955, as I began my first studies in scripture, preparing myself to teach them, Acts nine was one of the passages I thought easy to learn. Now 67 years later, I am still studying this chapter with questions. Why do people call it the chapter on Paul's conversion rather than Paul's call to Apostleship or his call to office? How could a man turn so quickly from a mission of destruction to a mission of truth and mercy? Did Paul know enough about the Lord's church to preach about it so soon? Or did the Holy Spirit begin to speak through him the instant of his baptism? And the final question, do these questions matter within the context of the first 22 verses of chapter nine? The answer to this last one is an easy "No, they do not." However, something about being blind so that we can see clearly can be a thought-provoking study.

Before this chapter, only three verses, all in chapter eight, mentioned Paul. The witnesses stoning Stephen *"laid aside their robes at the feet of a young man named Saul"* (Acts 7:58). *"Saul was in hearty agreement with putting him to death"* (Acts 8:1), and *"Saul began ravaging the church, entering house after house, and dragging off men and women, he would put them in prison"* (Acts 8:3). Chapter nine begins with a story that the religious world has changed and added to with time and telling. Many refer to Paul falling off his horse, adding their belief that a leader would naturally ride. Luke does not include many details because they would add nothing to the lesson. Some preach that Saul was saved when he saw the light or understood that Jesus was alive, risen from the dead. The main point of these verses is to show that Paul, chosen as an apostle of Christ, was saved the same way all Christians are. Paul felt an overpowering need to obey Jesus' commands to believe, repent, and be baptized. Peter later mentioned this process of salvation to the Jews in Jerusalem when he told them that the Jews must be saved just like the Gentiles he baptized in Caesarea Maritima (Acts 15:11). Paul emphasized the one baptism for salvation in (Ephesians 4:5).

Acts 9 also provides a lesson about a man named Ananias (the name meaning God is gracious) that many in today's religions should learn. Jesus told Paul to *"get up and enter the city, and it will be told you what you must do"* (Acts 9:6). Jesus could not teach His plan of salvation. He had given that task to men (Matthew 28:19-20). Jesus did not say, "pray this prayer." He did not say, "believe in me and ask me to come into your heart and be your personal savior." Jesus directed Paul to go where there were Christians that were able to tell Paul what he needed to do. Jesus ensured that Paul would meet a man named Ananias. Luke includes many things to show that Ananias was faithful to God before and after learning of Jesus. Like with Stephen and Philip, Jesus and The Spirit communicated directly to him. The disciples in Damascus would believe him when he related Paul's conversion.

Ananias is called *"a disciple"* (Acts 9:10). No unique title as used by religious organizations today. Not a priest, prophet, clergyman, pastor, or other indication that Ananias was different from any other Christian capable of teaching and baptizing Paul. All we know about Ananias is contained in chapters 9 and 22 of Acts. These two chapters tell us all we know about Paul's baptism. From Ananias's words, we can surmise that he had been in Jerusalem, heard of Jesus and believed, was baptized, and received a miraculous gift of The Spirit from the Apostles. The lesson for today is that it is the faith of the one being baptized that counts. The status of the one doing the baptizing is unimportant.

Because Paul was to be an Apostle of Christ, to be a witness of the living Lord, Jesus was the one speaking to and directing Paul and Ananias rather than the Spirit that led Philip. The detailed logistics of the incident, the Road to Damascus, the street called Straight, and the specific house

where Paul was praying all show the planning and coordination of this otherwise random sequence of events. The vision allowed Ananias to locate Saul without delay. Each of us should be ready to serve at a moment's notice.

Verse 16 is a significant turning point in the gospel's spread and the church's growth. Jesus told Ananias what was in store for Paul. "I will show him how much he must suffer for My name's sake." Paul's blindness enabled him to see his position as a Jew and a persecutor of God's Son. When Ananias came to him, Paul was ready to listen and do whatever he was instructed to do. Ananias, *"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.' And immediately there fell from his eyes something like scales, and he regained his sight, and he got up and was baptized"* (Acts 9:16-18).