

As God's people, we want to be guided by His Word and empowered by His Spirit to look more like Jesus. This Scripture Guide is based on this morning's passage to further equip you with what God's Word says.

Scripture Guide: Week 1 Acts 9:1-19

This passage begins detailing the life and actions of Saul, later Paul, of Tarsus. Luke introduces Saul into the narrative in Acts 7:58-8:3 detailing his job in the stoning of Stephen and other Christians. There is then a break from his story to focus on how the church of Christ is unaffected by persecution before returning to Saul and his mission to round up and imprison Christians.



9:1-9 In Acts 9 Saul went before the high priest of the Temple to have a letter written asking for them to report any people belonging to the Way¹ and bring them before the Temple leaders bound (v.1-2). Saul is not only continuing his persecution of Christians but attempting to travel outside of Jerusalem, all the way to Damascus² to find and imprison Christians. However, it was interrupted by a severe light from heaven and a voice that exclaimed, “Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?” (v.4). Saul immediately says, “Who are you, Lord?” immediately recognizing that what was speaking to him was not only divine, but God himself.³ The voice introduces himself not just as God, but specifically uses the name of Jesus to goad Saul. The voice then says that Saul is persecuting Jesus and to enter the city of Damascus and to wait for an instructor. It is recorded that the men with Saul saw the light, but heard or did not understand the voice. However, Saul was left from the light blinded while the rest of the men with him were left unscathed (vv.7-8). Saul's blindness should not be taken as a punishment from God, but as a result of the close encounter with God.⁴ This story produces a result similar to Zechariah from Luke 1:18-23 where Zechariah speaks out of ignorance and is rendered deaf. Saul refuses to see the truth and is reflected in his blindness. This also allows Saul a chance to fast and reflect on his actions after the other men lead him into Damascus (v.9).⁵

9:10-19 Luke now changes the narrative to a disciple of Jesus named Ananias. God comes to Ananias in a vision and tells the disciple to go and find Saul of Tarsus at the house of Judas⁶ and to help him regain his sight (vv.10-12). Ananias is naturally extremely hesitant and reminds God that Saul is here to bring

¹ Before the term Christian was invented, followers of Jesus called themselves the Way. Peter refers to followers of Jesus as Christians in 1 Pet 4:16 which would be dated around 54-68 AD.

² Damascus was about 135 miles northwest of Jerusalem, on the border of the Arabian desert. It is unexplained how these converts had already spread to Damascus, but had likely spread as a result of Saul's persecution in Acts 8:4!

³ N.T. Wright has a theory that Saul would be meditating on Ezekiel 1 as a practicing Pharisee, imagining the wheels then the seat of the chariot to the feet and finally the head of God. Saul would then retrace this in his own vision, but would instead see the face of Jesus. These stories are connected by both Saul and Ezekiel falling to the ground and hearing a voice after being confronted by the glory of the Lord (Eze 1:28 and Acts 9:3-4).

The Bible Project. “Acts E5: N.T. Wright Interview - Getting to Know the Apostle Paul.” Nov 2018.

<https://bibleproject.com/podcast/series-gospel-p9-acts-e5-nt-wright-interview-getting-know-apostle-paul/>

⁴ This is given evidence in Acts 22:11 as Paul relates his blindness with the brightness of the light and not a punishment.

⁵ Image taken from: http://www.jesuswalk.com/paul/02_arabia.htm

⁶ Ananias and Judas are names that have hampered the good news in the story already. It could be a coincidence that Ananias and Judas are the ones helping in the story of Saul, or it could be an inversion of expectations.

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Christians back to Jerusalem and that he has already participated in “much evil” to believers (vv.13-14). God ignores Saul's history and instead tells Ananias that Saul: is a “chosen instrument,” will “carry (His) name before the Gentiles and kings and the children of Israel,” and will “suffer for the sake of (His) name (vv.15-16).” Ananias then departs after God shares his divine plan with him to the house of Judas to lay his hands on Saul. Ananias then does so and tells Saul that he may regain his sight and be filled with the Holy Spirit (v.17). Luke then relates that something “like scales⁷” fell from his eyes and he regained his sight. Saul then rose and was baptized and ate some food, probably representing communion in his story.

Other Descriptions of Saul

This narrative introduces the reader to the central defining experience of the man who will be primarily known as Paul later on in the book of The Acts and in his letters. Paul will go on to write many letters widely circulated around greater Asia Minor. In these, we can glean more about Paul when he does choose to expound upon himself.

In Acts 22 Paul describes himself to the angry Jewish audience as a Jew (a full-blooded Jew, in this context), from Tarsus in Cilicia. Tarsus is a city between Palestine and Asia Minor, now in modern day Turkey. He is also able to speak to them “in the Jewish Language,” likely referencing to Aramaic, in order to prove his heritage as a Jew and not a Greek (v.2). Paul also claims that he was educated by Rabbi Gamaliel (v.3), a very influential Jewish teacher of the day.⁸ To be a man from Tarsus and also being educated by Gamaliel or a disciple of Gamaliel is an impressive feat. Gamaliel is also recorded in Acts 5:34 asking for leniency for the followers of Christ of the day from the Sanhedrin. This creates a contrast between the leniency of the teacher with the ruthlessness of the student. Paul gives the last bit of personal detail in Philippians 3. He can trace his Jewish lineage along with his and his family's adherence to the Jewish Law.

All of these details point to Paul being a very devout, knowledgeable, and respected man. Paul views his experience on the road to Damascus as the natural revealing of the Jewish Scriptures and the climax of everything written before him. To Paul, Jesus Christ is a meaningful and predestined step from the scriptures that he has been absorbed in his entire life. If Jesus is the Messiah, then Paul is now “a loyal Jew, in a new mode, and then commissioned to be the one who takes this message to the world which has got to hear it.”⁹

Conclusion

The story of Paul ends up being an archetypal character in the Christian faith. If a man who previously killed and imprisoned Christians can go on to preach the faith like Paul, it gives hope to many Christian who feel themselves ostracized from God and irredeemable. If Paul was set apart by God to do great things, other Christians can as well.

⁷ This scene is similar to what happens in Tobit 11, when Tobias heals his father Tobit's eyes and “white films” fall from them. Both stories involve seemingly righteous men who are forced to rely on God as opposed to their own righteousness.

⁸ Sotah 49a:16 says that the honor of the Torah disappeared after Gamaliel died. Shabbat 15a:10 refers to Gamaliel as *Nasi*, or prince, of the Sanhedrin, a role of great honor.

⁹ The Bible Project. “Acts E5: N.T. Wright Interview - Getting to Know the Apostle Paul.” Nov 2018.