Study of Acts – Discussion Notes Chapter 9

Introduction

In chapter 9 of Acts, Luke begins to give a broader view of what is taking place in the New Testament church. He departs from a careful analysis of apostles experiences in Jerusalem. We are now seeing the power of the Holy Spirit touch and transform many lives if different areas.

Among those transformed is the most unlikely person to become a convert; Saul of Tarsus. We have spoken much about God’s determined will in our study of Acts. We have observed how God systematically established His church through the power of the Holy Spirit. But it is especially hard to imagine how God could turn the angry heart of Saul to believe in Jesus Christ.

Like every other chapter, our study of Acts 9 focuses not on men or women but on the power of the Holy Spirit. We continue to read with amazement as we see the Holy Spirit transform and empower ordinary people to do things they would never think of doing under their own initiative.

One can’t help but read Acts 9 and wonder. Has my life been changed significantly by the power of the Holy Spirit? Have I allowed the Holy Spirit to transform me and lead me in paths I would have otherwise feared? Or, have I rejected the urging of the Holy Spirit and insisted on my own way? I suppose for most of us the answer is a little yes and a little no. Perhaps Acts 9 will inspire us to trust in the leadership of the Holy Spirit more.

Discussion


What efforts did Saul go to in order to persecute Christians (vs. 9:1-2)?

What explanations can you give for Saul’s fanatic hatred toward Christians?

Saul was a highly educated Pharisee. He sat at the feet of the best teachers including Gamaliel, one of the greatest Hebrew intellectuals of the time. He was a Hellenistic Jew who was fluent in Hebrew, Greek and Aramaic. Highly committed to the Pharisaical law, Paul despised this new sect of Judaism who called themselves Christ followers.

Paul was a man of iron will and determination. One gets the impression he put his entire life on hold to fight against “The Way”. He was a fanatic full of anger and rage. In spite of his immense intellect, he was committed to the dirty work of dragging Christians out from their homes and places of worship in an effort to stop the news about this Jesus Christ.

But while Saul was tracking down His followers, the Lord was tracking Paul, waiting for the right moment to change Paul and change the world. The very one whose persecution caused Christians to flee to Damascus and start new churches was about to become the Lord’s great missionary.

Read all three accounts of Paul’s conversion in Acts 9:3-9, 22:6-11, 26:12-18.

Why did Jesus ask, “Why are you persecuting me?” (9:4)?

Everything was wrapped up in that one question. There was authority, judgment, penetration, grace and urgency? Just as Christ had done so often with others, He was piercing the heart of Saul and asking the perfect question that would cut to the very soul. Jesus was causing Saul to question the very essence of everything he stood for and everything he was doing. He was declaring to Saul that in persecuting His church, he was persecuting Jesus himself.
What did Jesus mean by “It is hard for you to kick against the goads” (26:14)?

This statement is not found in chapter 9 of the earlier manuscripts but is found in some manuscripts. Some think an overzealous monk along the way decided to include it when transcribing scripture. Regardless, we know from chapter 26 that Paul assures us this statement was made by the Lord.

Goads – Prod or poke with a sharp object. To nudge or push someone or an animal in a direction.

“Kick against the goads” is a metaphor for what the Holy Spirit had been doing to Paul all along. Paul had been there for the trials of Jesus, the trials of Peter and John and the stoning of Stephen. He witnessed all of it. He had been a part of the private conversations among the Pharisees and Sadducees about this Christ and His followers. And now he was on his own personal mission to arrest all those who followed Christ. But Jesus through the Holy Spirit was goading Paul all the while. He was tugging at Paul’s heart; telling him there was more to this than he was seeing.

Even in our modern day, there is man’s way and God’s way. We can fight God’s way and ignore His goading if we want but we aren’t hurting God, we are only hurting ourselves.

What question did Saul ask in response to Jesus (22:10)?

Trembling and astonished, Saul asked the question, “What should I do Lord?” At that moment, Saul understood the authority of the one to whom he was speaking. At that moment he knew this Jesus was definitely alive and had full authority over everything. That question “What should I do Lord?” would be the question that Paul would live by for the rest of his life. In every challenge and circumstance, that is the question for Christians to ask, “What should I do Lord?”

Why do you think Paul was blinded and forced to go to Damascus in that condition?

He was being taught already that he was to be completely obedient and dependent on the grace of God. The Holy Spirit could have dealt him the same fate as Ananias and Sapphira but instead he was being extended grace for God’s purpose. He was being taught humility and preparing for the suffering he would endure for Christ.

What are some things that Saul might have thought about during the remainder of his trip?

Perhaps he remembered Stephens face as he was being stoned. Surely he remembered Stephen’s prayer to not hold them accountable for what they were doing to him. He probably rehashed in his mind the scriptures and prophesies about the Messiah. And surely the words of his wise teacher Gamaliel were coming to mind as well; “If it is of God, you will not be able to overthrow them. You may even be found fighting against God.” Acts 5:39

2. Courage by the power of the Holy Spirit (Ananias vs. 10-18).

As part of God’s determined will, he chose to work through another ordinary man empowered with courage by the Holy Spirit.

What do you think was going through Ananias’ mind?

Surely Ananias was fearful. Either Ananias was in Jerusalem during Pentecost and later fled or someone who was there and fled told him about Jesus Christ. And in hearing about Christ, he surely heard also about this man named Saul. He knew of his anger, his purpose and his authority.

How often does God lead us to do things that cause us to be totally dependent upon Him? Where our abilities end, God opportunity to begins. The Holy Spirit exist to gives us the courage to face what it leads us to do in the name of Jesus Christ.
**How did God show grace and kindness to Ananias?**

When Ananias questions the logic of going to Saul, God was gracious enough to give Ananias an explanation of His purpose behind what was to take place. God was careful to ease the fears of Ananias and give him the assurance that this was His will.

It’s also important to notice that God had a plan that was to take place by His determined will. This was not some “we’ll work it out as we go” plan. God had a specific purpose for Paul and He gives Ananias a portion of it as an explanation. God also tells Ananias to “Go!”

Consider what Ananias found when he obeyed God. The capturer was captured. The iron man with so much power and influence now sat alone, helpless and powerless. All the hurt and fright Ananias had felt for what this man had done to Christians suddenly went away.

The same Lord, who empowered Ananias to do the unthinkable, gave him the ability to love and forgive. Fear turned to compassion as Ananias laid his hand on Saul and said, “Brother Saul.”

We are compelled to ask ourselves what we would have done had we been in the place of Ananias. Would we have listened to the Holy Spirit? Would we have been obedient? Would we have been compassionate and allowed God to use us in this very powerful moment? Or, would we have kicked the enemy while he was down? Would we have allowed our fear and anger to rule or compassion to come forth through the Holy Spirit?

Note: Notice Paul received the Holy Spirit before being baptized. I am sure they have an explanation for this but to me this negates the idea that the Holy Spirit comes only after and from baptism as believed by some denominations.

**3. Compassion by the power of the Holy Spirit (Barnabas vs. 26-30).**

*What was the response of the disciples when Paul tried to meet with them?*

The disciples were fearful and avoided meeting with Paul. They probably figured this was a trap.

*Why do you think Barnabas was willing to take Paul to the disciples?*

The short and most significant answer to why Barnabas greeted Paul while others were fleeing him is the Holy Spirit. Christ influenced Barnabas and showed him Paul had truly been converted.

*What are some lessons we can learn from the action of Barnabas?*

Barnabas was willing to listen to the Holy Spirit and he had the understanding and faith that an experience with Christ could genuinely change even a brutal man like Saul. Barnabas was an encourager who believed in Paul and was willing to stand in the gap to see Paul become the person God planned for him. Barnabas was willing to put his own relationship with the disciples on the line.

Barnabas was full of compassion rather than resentment. He sought reconciliation rather than revenge. As Christians, we are all called to be reconcilers. We need to be like Barnabas; believing that Christ can truly change anyone’s life. We need to encourage forgiveness and healing. And when necessary, we need to stand in the gap to help others reconcile through the Holy Spirit.

Growing in Christ and being a peacemaker are one in the same process.
Conclusion

Notice that immediately following Paul’s conversion and baptism, he began speaking of Christ publicly. Paul now knew that Jesus Christ was in fact the Messiah and that He is alive. Psalms 107:2 says, “Let the redeemed of the Lord say so.” When we are saved and filled with the Holy Spirit, it is crucial that we declare our faith publicly. There is nothing more exciting and powerful than to hear the public profession of Jesus Christ.

Paul went on to author many books of the New Testament; Romans, I and II Corinthians, Galatians, Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, I and II Thessalonians, I and II Timothy, Titus, Philemon and Hebrews. He made three major missionary journeys, establishing many new churches.

No single person has influenced and impacted the New Testament church like Saul of Tarsus. Paul is responsible for explaining and laying the foundation of much of what we understand today about Christian theology. The capturer became the captured. The persecutor became the proponent. The Menace became the missionary. It all changed by the will of God.

The conversion of Saul serves as an inspiration to each of us that Christ can change anyone’s life. The goading of the Holy Spirit can lead even the worst of us to a life-changing encounter with Jesus Christ.

For Paul, his life’s purpose became his passion for his Lord. He explains this in short in Philippians 1:21 when he writes, “For me to live is Christ.” The secret of Paul’s life lies in that question that he never stopped asking, “What should I do Lord?”

May you and I ask the same question; What should I do Lord?