

Bible Stories

DAMASCUS

Acts 9:1-2
October 14, 2023

After the stoning of Stephen, Saul was out for blood. When his blood-lust could not be satisfied by simply persecuting the Believers in Jerusalem, he expanded his search. Eventually, he focused on Damascus ---- 200 miles away! He went with the intent of bringing back the followers of Jesus to Jerusalem – to imprison and punish them.

Here is Saul's own testimony as to what happened next:

"At about noon, as I came near Damascus, suddenly a bright light from heaven flashed around me. I fell to the ground and heard a voice say to me,

'Saul! Saul! Why are you persecuting me?'

'Who are you, Lord?' I asked.

'I am Jesus of Nazareth, whom you are persecuting,' he replied.

'Now get up and stand on your feet. I have appeared to you to appoint you as a servant and as a witness of what you have seen of me and what I will show you. I will rescue you from your own people and from the Gentiles. I am sending you to them to 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.'

My companions saw the light, but they didn't understand what was being said to me.

I had been blinded by the brilliance of the light, so my companions took me by the hand and lead me into Damascus. (Acts 22:6-11 and 26:16-18)

Saul was taken to the home of Judas, who lived on Straight Street. There he fasted and prayed for 3 days.

Meanwhile..... In Damascus there lived a believer named Ananias. A man, no doubt, on Saul's hit list.

Jesus came to him in a vision and told him to go to Judas' house on Straight Street and ask for a man from Tarsus, named..... Saul!!

Ananias: Wait, what? Saul? The persecutor of Your believers in Jerusalem? The same guy who has come to Damascus to arrest and imprison and do who knows what else to Your people here? THAT Saul? Are you sure?

Jesus: Go! I have chosen this man to be My instrument. He will carry My name to the Gentiles and their kings and to the people of Israel. I will show him how much he must suffer for my name.

Ananias went to Straight Street and found Saul. He placed his hands on Saul and said, "Brother Saul, the Lord Jesus, who appeared to you on the road has sent me so that you may see again and be filled with the Holy Spirit. The God of our fathers has chosen you to know his will and to see the Righteous One and to hear words from his mouth. You will be his witness to all men of what you have seen and heard. Get up now and be baptized and call on his name.

The Bible tells us that what appeared to be scales instantly fell from Saul's eyes so that he could see again. Then he got up and was baptized.

Saul spent several days with the believers in Damascus and he began to preach in the synagogues that Jesus is the Son of God.

Everyone who heard him was astonished. They recognized him as the man who had caused such chaos in Jerusalem and who had been sent to Damascus to bring prisoners back to the chief priests. Saul grew more powerful by the day while the Jews confusion increased as he provided evidence that Jesus was the Christ.

Many days past. Eventually the Jews in Damascus had had enough – Saul had to go – so they conspired to kill him. He learned of their plan. While the Jews kept a close eye on the city gates, hoping to catch him sneaking out, Saul's followers put him in a basket and lowered him over the city wall, under the cover of darkness.

Saul made his way back to Jerusalem. Once he arrived, he tried to join the disciples, but they were afraid of him, not believing that he had really changed.

Barnabas found Saul and brought him to the disciples. He told the story of Saul's conversion; How the Lord had spoken to him and how he had fearlessly preached Jesus in Damascus. Barnabas must have been quite the man, because the disciples believed his story and accepted Saul.

Saul stayed with the believers in Jerusalem and spoke boldly about Jesus wherever he went. He got into a debate with some Jews from Greece and they tried to have him killed. When the disciples heard this, they took Saul to Caesarea and put him on a boat headed for Tarsus.

The story concludes: "Then the church throughout Judea, Galilee and Samaria enjoyed a time of peace. It was strengthened; and encouraged by the Holy Spirit, it grew in numbers, living in the fear of the Lord."

What do we do with this story?

Saul, the vicious and enthusiastic persecutor became Saul, the zealous and outspoken witness for Jesus. What changed? Well, I am drawn back to this verse:

- Acts 4:13 - When they saw the courage of Peter and John and realized that they were unschooled, ordinary men, they were astonished and they took note that these men had been with Jesus.

Saul did not have much in common with Peter and John. He was not a simple fisherman. He was a well-educated Pharisee, trained by the great teacher, Gamaliel.

However, the Person who transformed Peter and John, the One who gave them courage and astonished their accusers is the same Person who transformed Saul. "and they took note that these men had been with Jesus."

Saul became a man sold out to Jesus, but his core did not change. His fire and zeal remained, but his priorities shifted from desiring to gain the approval of men to desiring only the approval of God. No matter what it cost him ---- only God mattered.

Saul, now Paul, would endure much for the cause of Christ:

- I have worked much harder, been in prison more frequently, been flogged more severely, and been exposed to death again and again. Five times I received from the Jews the forty lashes minus one. Three times I was beaten with rods, once I was stoned, three times I was shipwrecked, I spent a night and a day in the open sea, I have been constantly on the move. I have been in danger from rivers, in danger from bandits, in danger from my own countrymen, in danger from Gentiles; in danger in the city, in danger in the country, in danger at sea; and in danger from false brothers. I have labored and toiled and have often gone without sleep; I have known hunger and thirst and have often gone without food; I have been cold and naked. (2 Corinthians 11:23b-27)

Years later, despite all he had been through, this is what Paul would say about his life:

- Though I have reasons for such confidence. If anyone else thinks he has reasons to put confidence in the flesh, I have more: circumcised on the eighth day, of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews; regarding the law, a Pharisee; as for zeal, persecuting the church; as for legalistic righteousness, faultless. But whatever was to my profit I now consider loss for the sake of Christ. What is more, I consider everything a loss compared to the surpassing greatness of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whose sake I have lost all things. I consider them rubbish, that I may gain Christ..... (Philippians 3:4-8)
- I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith. Now there is in store for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous Judge, will award to me on that day-- and not only to me, but also to all who have longed for his appearing. (2 Timothy 4:7-8)