



## **The Conversion of a Persecutor (Acts 9:1-31)**

*Commentary: Week Seventeen*

*\*\*Scripture divisions used in our series and various commentaries differ from each other.  
This is the reason for the occasional discrepancy between  
the verse range listed in our series and the commentary notes provided in our Scripture Studies.*

### **New American Commentary<sup>1</sup>**

#### **IV. Peter Joins the Wider Witness**

Chapters [9–12](#) continue the story of the Christian breakthrough to a wider missionary outreach that began in chaps. [6–8](#) with the Hellenists Stephen and Philip. Chapters [9–12](#) are transitional, as can be seen in the roles played by the major characters of Acts: Peter and Paul. Paul was introduced briefly in connection with the martyrdom of Stephen ([7:58](#); [8:1, 3](#)). With the story of his conversion, the spotlight turned on him ([9:1–30](#)). Peter, on the other hand, was the primary figure in the first five chapters of Acts. The focus was once again placed on him as he witnessed in the coastal towns of Judea and served as God’s instrument in the conversion of the Gentile Cornelius ([9:32–11:18](#)). Peter’s escape from prison comprises the main subject of the last chapter in this portion of Acts ([12:6–19](#)) and is the last narrative in Acts that has Peter as its main character. From then on, Paul occupies center stage.

In content the major subject of these chapters is the Gentile mission. The conversion of Paul introduced at this point prepares for the major part he would play in taking the gospel to the Gentiles in chaps. [13–28](#). His conversion is closely linked to Peter’s conversion of the Gentile Cornelius in chap. [10](#). Peter was the first to witness to Gentiles, but Paul was the major figure who would carry out that witness. It is true that Philip had already witnessed to a God-fearing Gentile in the person of the Ethiopian eunuch. That, however, was an isolated incident and had no further repercussions for the church as a whole.

Such was not the case with the conversion of Cornelius and his household. That event attracted the attention of the Christians in Jerusalem and necessitated Peter’s defending it before them ([11:1–8](#)). Peter’s defense and the resulting endorsement of the Gentile mission by the Jerusalem church is absolutely programmatic for Acts and for the mission of Paul. It provided the church’s authorization and acceptance of the apostles’ Gentile mission. Paul, of course, was not alone in his outreach to Gentiles. The Hellenists who settled in Antioch began a major mission among them ([11:20f.](#)). Their concern for the Gentile mission must have had a profound influence on Paul, who worked among them for some time ([11:25f.](#)) and who was ultimately commissioned by them for missionary service ([13:1–3](#)).

Jerusalem’s role in these transitional chapters is instructive. It served primarily as the place where the apostles resided who guaranteed the authentic linkage of the church to the life and ministry of Christ. In these chapters the Jerusalem church primarily endorsed and authenticated the ever-widening Christian witness. This began with their acceptance of the Samaritan mission of Philip ([8:14–25](#)). It moved to their acceptance of Paul, who would become the primary missionary to the Gentiles ([9:26–28](#)). The Jerusalem

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1. John B. Polhill, *New American Commentary – Volume 26: Acts*, (Nashville, TN: Broadman Press, 1992), WORDsearch CROSS e-book, 228-243.

church, even if somewhat reluctantly, finally conceded its approval to the Gentile witness begun by Peter with Cornelius ([11:18](#)). Finally, through its representative Barnabas, the Jerusalem church supported the mission of the Antioch Christians among the Gentile “Greeks” ([11:22f.](#)). Not all the problems had been resolved at this point, and a final settlement would be reached only in the Jerusalem Conference of chap. [15](#). The major principle of the mission to the Gentiles, however, had been accepted by the Jerusalem church; and this provided the authorization for Paul’s Gentile witness that began in chap. [13](#).

## **1. Paul’s New Witness to Christ [9:1–31](#)**

It would be hard to overestimate the significance of Paul’s conversion, not only for the subsequent narrative of Acts but for the history of Christianity as a whole. He was, in his own words, called to be a missionary to the Gentiles (cf. [Gal 1:16](#)), and Acts certainly confirms that picture. For Luke and for Paul (cf. [1 Cor 15:9f.](#)) there was no more certain evidence of God’s power and grace than in his transformation of the church’s persecutor into its greatest witness. Paul’s was a radical conversion experience, a total turnabout accomplished by Christ himself. Its importance for Luke is evidenced by the fact that he told the story in some detail three times in Acts—here in [9:1–30](#), then in Paul’s speech before a Jewish crowd in the temple area ([22:3–21](#)), and finally in Paul’s defense before the Jewish King Agrippa ([26:2–23](#)).

[Acts 9:1–30](#) emphasizes the complete transformation of Paul from the persecutor of the church to the one who was persecuted for his witness to Christ. Scholars have often pointed to various stories that at certain points offer analogies to Paul’s experience, such as that of Heliodorus’s vision and resulting blindness as related in [2 Macc 3](#) or the radical repentance and conversion of Asenath in the story of Joseph and Asenath. The closest affinities of Paul’s conversion account, however, are to be found in the many Old Testament allusions and strong flavor of Old Testament language that permeates the narrative. The closest “parallel” is to be found in the emphasis on visions and the divine leading in the story of Cornelius’s conversion in the next chapters of Acts. Both incidents are essential to the Gentile mission, and both are wholly due to God’s direct intervention. Paul’s conversion account falls into two main parts: vv. [1–22](#) relate the story of his transformation from persecutor of the church to witness for Christ, and vv. [23–31](#) show how the former persecutor became the one persecuted for bearing the name of Christ.

### **(1) Paul the Converted [9:1–22](#)**

The first half of Paul’s conversion account divides into three main sections: the appearance on the Damascus road (vv. [1–9](#)), the ministry of Ananias to Paul (vv. [10–18a](#)), and the final confirmation of Paul’s conversion through his bold witness in the Jewish synagogues of Damascus (vv. [18b–22](#)).

#### **CHRIST’S APPEARANCE TO PAUL ([9:1–9](#)).**

[9:1–2](#) . The first two verses provide the chronological and geographical setting. More significantly, they picture the preconversion Paul, which contrasts radically with the picture of Paul after the encounter on the Damascus road. Verse [1](#) picks up the picture in [8:3](#). Paul was still the church’s number one enemy, still raging against it, “breathing out murderous threats.” Paul’s role was not one of executioner but of arresting officer. His intent was to stamp out the new movement; and when it did come to a question of

execution of Christians, he did not hesitate to vote for the death penalty (cf. [26:10](#)). Originally, Paul's activity had primarily been directed at the Christians in and around Jerusalem ([8:3](#); [26:10](#)). Evidently, some had fled the city and taken refuge in Damascus. Paul approached the high priest, who probably was still Caiaphas at this time. He requested not official extradition papers but more likely introductory letters from the Sanhedrin to the synagogues of Damascus in order to secure their support in his efforts to apprehend the Christian fugitives and return them to Jerusalem for trial.

Much debate centers on whether the Sanhedrin would have jurisdiction in such cases, but there is some evidence the high priest was given the right of extradition in an earlier time. The possibility remains open that the Romans still granted him similar rights. How much autonomy the Jewish synagogues enjoyed during the Roman period with regard to discipline of their members for religious offenses is unclear. Paul himself spoke of his receiving scourings from the synagogues on five occasions ([2 Cor 11:24](#)). His very desire to go to Damascus betrays his searing rage against the Christians, especially if one remembers that Damascus was a good six-day foot journey from Jerusalem. The detail that the Christians were referred to as those who belonged to "the way" (v. [2](#)) perhaps reflects an early self-designation of the Jewish Christian community in which they saw themselves as the "true way" within the larger Jewish community.

**[9:3–6](#)** As Paul approached the gates of Damascus, suddenly a great light from heaven flashed around him. The light must have been intense, for the time of the occurrence was "around midday" (cf. [22:6](#); [26:13](#)). The light represents the heavenly epiphany, the divine glory that enveloped the little caravan. At the sight the awe-struck Paul fell to the ground, a reaction found in the Old Testament from those who experienced a similar divine visitation. Then a voice came from heaven, "Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?" Paul answered, "Who are you, Lord?" Some note that at this point Paul did not recognize Jesus as the one speaking to him and that his reference to "Lord" need not mean more than a polite "sir," a meaning the Greek word *kyrie* often has. But Paul did recognize the voice of a heavenly messenger and probably intended "Lord" in that sense (cf. [Exod 3:13](#)). In any event, he quickly learned who the "Lord" was: "I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting." It would be hard to imagine how these words must have struck Paul. They were a complete refutation of all he had been. He had persecuted Christians for their "blasphemous lie" that Jesus was risen, that he was the Lord reigning in glory. Now Paul himself beheld that same Jesus and the undeniable proof that he both lived and reigned in glory.

From this point on, Paul said nothing. He was completely broken. How could he respond? He had not persecuted a band of miscreant messianists. In persecuting the church, he had persecuted the risen Lord himself. It is unlikely that the concept of the body of Christ is behind the expression here, but surely the germ of Paul's later theology of the church is. Christ is identified with his disciples. When they suffer, he suffers (cf. [Luke 10:16](#)). Jesus' final words to Paul were not a commission but a directive. He was to go into the city and await further instruction. There was no elaboration of Paul's vision. All the emphasis was on the fact that Paul saw the Lord—nothing more. This is very much in keeping with Paul's own testimony about his conversion, which concentrated on one fact—that he *saw* the Lord (cf. [1 Cor 9:1](#); [15:8](#); [Gal 1:16](#)). And that was enough. The certainty of the resurrection turned Paul from Jesus' most zealous persecutor to his most ardent witness.

**[9:7–9](#)** Paul's traveling companions served as authenticators that what happened to Paul was an objective event, not merely a rumbling of his inner psyche. They heard a sound, but they did not see the vision of Jesus. [Acts 22:9](#) says that they saw the light but did not hear the voice of the one who spoke with Paul.

The two accounts are not contradictory but underline the same event. Paul's companions heard a sound and saw a light. They could verify that an objective heavenly manifestation took place. They did not participate in the heavenly communication, however, neither seeing the vision of Jesus nor hearing the words spoken to Paul. The revelation was solely to Paul. So powerful was that revelation that Paul was totally blind when he rose to his feet and opened his eyes. The miracle was not a punitive one, as with Elymas the magician ([Acts 13:11](#)). Rather, the picture is of Paul in his brokenness and helplessness. The radiance of his vision had blinded him. Reduced to total powerlessness, he had to be led by others into the city. That he neither ate nor drank for three days could be an expression of penitence on Paul's part but is more likely the result of his shock, confusion, and utter brokenness of will. The raging persecutor had been reduced to a shambles.

THE CALL TO BE PERSECUTED ([9:10–18a](#)).

**9:10a** The second scene in Paul's conversion story took place in Damascus and revolved around a disciple named Ananias. Damascus was an ancient city, dating back at least into the second millennium B.C. It was an oasis city on the border of the Arabian desert and along the main trade route linking Egypt and Mesopotamia. From 64 B.C. it had been under Roman influence and belonged to the association of ten Hellenistic cities known as the Decapolis. It had a large Jewish population, as is attested by the many Jews Josephus reported were killed there during the Jewish war with Rome.

How Christians first reached Damascus is unknown. Ananias seems to have been a disciple in Damascus before the current stream of refugees from Paul's persecution arrived. Luke gave a selective, not a complete, picture of the geographical spread of Christianity. The evidence of Acts itself would indicate the early spread of the Christian witness to places like Damascus and Rome, perhaps through normal social routes such as trade, military service, and the like.

**9:10b–12** The "Lord" appeared to Ananias in a vision. That it was Jesus and not God who was so designated is clear from vv. [14–16](#). Ananias responded with, "Here am I, Lord" ("Yes, Lord," NIV), words reminiscent of the response of Old Testament characters to a vision of God, such as Abraham ([Gen 22:1f.](#); [11](#)) and the boy Samuel ([1 Sam 3:4–14](#)). Jesus instructed Ananias to seek out Paul. His instructions were precise, giving the exact location Paul was to be found. He was staying with a man named Judas who lived on "Straight Street." This street can still be seen today, though somewhat farther to the north from the ancient street, and is now known as the Darb-el-Mostakim. It runs in an east-west direction, and in Paul's day it had colonnades on both sides and large gates at both ends. One is intrigued by Jesus' informing Ananias of Paul's vision—a vision within a vision! The information was necessary for Ananias to know that Paul was prepared for him. Further, it emphasized the centrality of the divine leading in the entire episode.

This was the third vision in the story of Paul's conversion. The Lord was behind every detail in the story. Ananias learned of his own role through the vision of Paul. He was to enter Judas's house and lay his hands upon Paul so that Paul might recover his sight (v. [12](#)). Ananias in no way established the legitimacy of Paul. There was no "succession" through the laying on of his hands. He was merely a pious, but otherwise unknown, Jewish Christian of Damascus whom Jesus commissioned as his agent in the healing and baptism of Paul.

[9:13–14](#) Ananias at first protested the commission. He was all too aware of who Paul was. Perhaps he had learned of Paul’s reputation as a persecutor from some of the Christians who had fled Jerusalem and taken refuge in Damascus. Word was even out that he had papers from the Sanhedrin authorizing him to arrest any and every Christian. Surely Jesus did not want him to go to *this* man. Ananias’s reaction is understandable and should not be seen as his refusing the Lord. Much more it underlines once again the sheer miracle of Paul’s radical turnabout from his former role as persecutor.

[9:15–16](#) Verses [15–16](#) comprise the heart of Ananias’s vision, as the Lord outlined Paul’s future role. He was the Lord’s “chosen instrument.” The expression is an unusual one and finds its closest New Testament parallels in Paul’s own writings. The emphasis on Paul’s being “chosen” recalls his own strong sense of the divine call, which set him apart from birth ([Gal 1:15](#)). His call was described here in terms of his bearing Jesus’ name before Gentiles, kings, and the sons of Israel. His mission “to the ends of the earth” immediately comes to mind, but the reference probably is to Paul’s appearance in trial before these entities. The expression of bearing one’s witness “before” is the language of giving one’s testimony in a legal setting and is a fulfillment of Jesus’ words in [Luke 12:11f.](#) and [Luke 21:12](#). It is thus a picture of Paul on trial before Gentile rulers like Felix and Festus (chaps. [24–25](#)), before kings like Agrippa (chap. [26](#)), before local Jewish synagogues and even the Sanhedrin (chap. [23](#)). Verse [15](#) is thus closely linked to v. [16](#). Paul would *suffer* for the name of Christ. The one who once was the church’s most vehement persecutor would now be the one who would willingly accept persecution for the sake of the name (cf. [5:41](#)). This is the core point of the Pauline conversion narrative. It reappears at its conclusion as Paul is shown persecuted by the Jews both in Damascus ([9:23](#)) and in Jerusalem ([9:29](#)). In nothing is his conversion more clearly illustrated than in his transformation from persecutor to persecuted.

[9:17–19a](#) Ananias fulfilled his commission, going to Paul and laying his hands upon him as he had been instructed. Ananias’s greeting is striking: “Brother Saul.” He could have said this as a fellow Jew, but it was surely as a brother in Christ that Ananias greeted Paul. Something of a “conversion” had taken place in his own heart through *his* vision of the Lord, so that now he could receive as a fellow disciple the one whom he so shortly before had feared and distrusted. Ananias told Paul that the Lord had sent him with a dual purpose, the recovery of his sight and his receipt of the Spirit. The first occurs immediately as Ananias performed the healing gesture of laying his hands upon Paul. Something “like akes” fell from his eyes. Paul’s receipt of the Spirit is not narrated. It did not seem to have come with Ananias’s laying his hands on Paul. Recovery of his sight followed that. Perhaps it accompanied his baptism, since the two generally are closely connected in Acts. Certainly Paul did receive the Spirit, as his boldness in witness indicates in the following narrative. Paul’s bold witness, like the Ethiopian’s joy, expands the picture of the evidence of the Holy Spirit in believers’ lives. All believers should give evidence of the Spirit’s presence in their lives, but there is no normative evidence of that presence. The scene in Judas’s house concluded with Paul’s receiving nourishment and recovering his strength. Paul’s recovery was now complete. More than that, his conversion was now complete.

THE FORMER PERSECUTOR’S WITNESS TO CHRIST ([9:19b–22](#)).

[9:19b–22](#) This section of Acts illustrates the authenticity of Paul’s conversion experience. It begins with the brief notice that Paul spent several days with the disciples in Damascus after his baptism. This probably refers to their instructing him in Christ. Even though Paul was steeped in the Old Testament and would have had some familiarity with Christian views from his experience as persecutor, he was



still a new convert and needed further introduction to the teachings about Christ before he would be ready to strike out on his own witness. Evidently he was soon ready because we find him “at once” preaching in the Jewish synagogues that Jesus is the Son of God.

It is noteworthy that Luke described Paul as preaching Christ as “Son of God.” This is the only occurrence of the title in all of Acts, and yet for Paul it was a central concept. In fact, Paul connected the term “Son of God” with his call as an apostle in [Gal 1:16](#) and in [Rom 1:1–4](#). Luke’s close connection of this term with Paul’s conversion and call would seem to be a rather accurate reminiscence of Paul’s distinctive views. The astonishment of his Jewish listeners in the synagogue furnishes a sort of “choral response” to the completeness of Paul’s conversion. As Ananias before them (vv. [13–14](#)), they simply could not believe that the former persecutor had made such a radical about-face. Paul simply preached all the more forcefully. One could even say that his zeal as a Christian was even stronger than his former zeal as persecutor. Luke described him as “proving” (*syμβιβάζω*) that Jesus is the Christ. The Greek word means to *join or put together* and seems to picture his assembling Old Testament texts to demonstrate how Christ fulfilled them. No wonder the Damascene Jews were astounded and totally unable to respond to the skillful interpretations of the former student of Gamaliel.

Paul gave another picture of his experience following his conversion in Damascus. He stated in [Gal 1:15–17](#) that he did not consult anyone or go to the apostles in Jerusalem, but rather he went off for a period in Arabia before returning to Damascus. “Consult any man” does not rule out Paul’s interaction with the Damascene Christians or the Jewish synagogue. The “consulting” to which Paul alluded was the idea that he received his apostleship and his apostolic credentials from the apostles in Jerusalem. No, said Paul, he did not go to Jerusalem to confer with the apostles there and receive instructions from them. In Galatians, Paul took pains to emphasize in the face of his Judaizing opponents that his apostleship to the Gentiles was a direct call from God and in no way was dependent on or subservient to the Jerusalem apostolate. Acts would certainly verify that picture. Luke did not mention the Arabian period, it is true. Perhaps he was unaware of it. Perhaps he chose not to deal with it in order to concentrate on the Jewish opposition to Paul and the persecution that resulted.

### *Summary.*

Many attempts have been made to “explain” Paul’s conversion, often in the form of rationalistic explanations, such as a thunderstorm outside Damascus, or an epileptic seizure, or psychogenic blindness as the result of repressed guilt. Others see Paul’s conversion as a total rational experience, a coming to awareness of the correctness of the Christian views. Others have sought for the factors that prepared him for his conversion—his coming to the end of his rope with the utter hopelessness of Pharisaic legal righteousness or his being steeped in Pharisaic apocalypticism. All such attempts to get into the mind of Paul are at base speculative, for Paul never provided us with such an analysis of his conversion, nor did Luke. Surely experiences with the Christians must have impressed Paul. Surely the Stephen incident made its impression. But Luke never drew such connections, nor did Paul. What both picture is a *radical conversion* experience. Paul the persecutor was stopped dead in his tracks on the Damascus road. The risen Jesus showed himself to Paul; and with this confirmation that the Christian claims were indeed true, Paul was completely turned from persecutor to witness. Only one category describes Paul’s experience, a category not uncommon in Acts. It was a *miracle*, the result of direct divine action. When all is said and done, both Acts and Paul give strikingly similar pictures of his conversion. Both speak of Paul’s former life as persecutor of the church ([1 Cor 15:9](#)), even use the same

vocabulary to describe how he “ravaged it” ([Gal 1:13](#)). Both speak of his intense zeal ([Phil 3:6](#)). Both place the conversion in Damascus ([Gal 1:17](#)). Both describe the experience as a vision of the risen Lord, a Christophany ([1 Cor 15:8](#); [9:1](#); cf. [2 Cor 4:6](#)). Both speak of his testifying to Christ as “God's Son” immediately after his conversion ([Gal 1:16](#); [Acts 9:20](#)). For both it was a radical turning ([Phil 3:6–7](#)). For Paul and for Luke, a totally different man emerged from that vision of the risen Lord; and that is *conversion*.

## (2) Paul the Persecuted [9:23–31](#)

The remainder of the Pauline conversion narrative illustrates the fulfillment of [9:16](#). Paul the persecuted became Paul the sufferer, first in Damascus (vv. [23–25](#)) and then in Jerusalem (vv. [26–30](#)). The Jerusalem section also legitimizes the ministry of Paul because he was then accepted by the circle of apostles. A summary statement (v. [31](#)) caps off the whole of [9:1–30](#).

### PERSECUTED IN DAMASCUS ([9:23–25](#)).

[9:23–25](#) Unable to refute Paul (cf. [6:10](#)), the exasperated Damascene Jews finally “conspired to kill him.” With customary chronological imprecision, Luke described this as occurring “after many days.” Paul gave more definite data. In the third year after his conversion, Paul departed from Damascus for Jerusalem ([Gal 1:17–18](#)). When Paul and his disciples learned of the plot, plans were made for assuring his escape from the Jews. That Paul had “disciples” at this point (v. [25](#)) is somewhat surprising. Perhaps they were converts from the synagogues who had responded to his preaching and scriptural argumentation (vv. [20](#), [22](#)). Since the Jewish plotters were carefully watching the city gates for Paul, another route was selected for his escape. He was lowered in a basket through the window of a house built along the city wall.

Paul also referred to this event in [2 Cor 11:32–33](#). Although there are differences between the two accounts, the correspondences are remarkable: the setting in Damascus, the plot against Paul, the watching of the gates, the window in the wall, the lowering in a basket. The most significant difference is that in 2 Corinthians the Nabatean *ethnarch* (“governor”) is described as watching the gates for Paul, while in Acts it was the Jews who did so. Paul’s account raises problems itself. Why, for instance, were the Nabateans after Paul? Possibly Paul had carried on a mission among them during his Arabian period ([Gal 1:17](#)) and had incurred the resistance of the authorities. In that event Acts pictures a coalition against the common enemy, the Jews watching the gates from within and the Nabateans from without. The Nabateans perhaps held some jurisdiction over Damascus at this time, in which case the Jews would have enlisted the authorities in their attempt to apprehend Paul. In any case, Paul saw the incident as particularly humiliating, listing it as the crowning event of his trials as an apostle ([2 Cor 11:23–33](#)). Acts pictures the same—Paul under trial, Paul the persecuted.

PERSECUTED IN JERUSALEM ([9:26–31](#)). According to Paul’s account, in the third year after his conversion he went to Jerusalem. Paul’s version of this first postconversion visit to Jerusalem differs considerably from that in Acts. Paul and Luke referred to the occasion in order to make totally different points. In [Gal 1:18–23](#) Paul contended with Judaizing opponents who argued that Paul was not a “real” apostle but totally subordinate and inferior to the Jerusalem apostles. Paul’s account of his first Jerusalem visit thus reveals a definite “tendency.” In order to maintain the independence of his call to be an apostle to the Gentiles, he stressed the minimal contact with the apostles in order to show that he was in no way subordinate to them. Luke’s emphases were totally different. He too did not show Paul’s subordination

to the apostles, but he emphasized Paul's acceptance by them, which was essential in his unfolding picture of the church's mission to the ends of the earth. Paul was not a maverick missionary, nor were his Gentile converts maverick Christians. The apostles provided an unbroken continuity with the risen Lord and with his commission. Paul's acceptance by the apostles assures this continuity and the legitimacy of the mission to the Gentiles. Luke had another point to make—the further persecution of Paul at the hands of the Hellenist Jews in Jerusalem, additional evidence that the former persecutor was now the persecuted. No fact more fully illustrated the reality of his conversion.

**9:26–28** The emphasis on Paul as the converted persecutor is first struck in v. [26](#). On arriving in Jerusalem, Paul attempted to join up with the Christian community there but was at first spurned. Like Ananias, they knew his reputation as persecutor and were not convinced that so vehement an enemy could now be a Christian brother. Barnabas then entered the picture as mediator, his characteristic role in Acts. He took Paul to the apostles and testified to his conversion. Through Barnabas's words the reader is once again reminded of the absolute centrality of this event and the divine action that brought it about. Why Barnabas did not share the fear of the other Jerusalem Christians is not specified. Perhaps he had learned of Paul's conversion through some of his fellow Greek-speaking Christians who had come from Damascus. In any event, Barnabas fulfilled his mediating role, securing Paul's acceptance in the apostolic circle. Paul was now "with them" (v. [28](#)). The Greek text says literally that he was "going in and out among them" in Jerusalem. The expression is familiar from [Acts 1:21](#), where it refers to the circle of apostles. That meaning may well be intended here. Paul was fully accepted into the apostolic circle. He too was a "witness" for Christ.

**9:29–30** In vv. [29–30](#) the pattern begun in Damascus again repeats itself. Paul witnessed in the synagogues and was resisted. This time Paul debated with his fellow Greek-speaking Jews. One is reminded of Stephen, and it may have been in the same synagogue that Paul gave his testimony for Christ (cf. [6:9–10](#)). Earlier they had succeeded in having Stephen killed. Now they determined to do the same to Paul. Again the Christians learned of the plot and hastened Paul off to the port of Caesarea and thence, presumably by boat, to his hometown of Tarsus. Paul gave the same itinerary in [Gal 1:21](#): from Jerusalem he went to "Syria and Cilicia." Tarsus was located in Cilicia and came under the Roman provincial administration of Syria.

During this residence in his home territory, Paul presumably continued his witness for Christ. There we leave him until Barnabas brought him back to Antioch ([Acts 11:25f.](#)). The time span between Paul's sailing to Tarsus and Barnabas's bringing him to Antioch covered some ten years or so. Since neither the Pauline Epistles nor Acts covers his activity during this period in Syria-Cilicia, these are often referred to as Paul's "silent years."

**9:31** Verse [31](#) concludes the Pauline conversion narrative and completes the entire "persecution" story that began in [8:1b](#). The persecution was now over with the conversion of its most ardent advocate into a witness for Christ. The "church" was at peace. Luke's use of the singular "church" could be taken in the "universal sense" as the whole body of Christians in all their local assemblies. That meaning does seem to be found in Paul's speech at Miletus ([Acts 20:28](#)), but everywhere else in Acts "church" refers to a local body of believers. Perhaps the church that Luke focused on here is the Jerusalem church pictured in its witness, which extended throughout all these regions. This is the only mention of Galilean Christians in Acts. Galilee is probably to be included within the reference to "all Judea" in [Acts 1:8](#). Here Luke mentioned it separately to emphasize how the commission to "all Judea" was being fulfilled.



Already the witness had reached Galilee. The following passage will show its extension to the coastal towns of Judea. The “peace” of the church is described in terms of the encouragement of the Spirit, the growth of the church, and its reverence and worship (“the fear of the Lord”), terms reminiscent of the earlier summaries in Acts (cf. [2:43–47](#)). It is a familiar pattern. The Lord brings his people through a time of crisis. Through his deliverance the church finds peace and continues to flourish (cf. [5:42](#)). In this case the respite would last until a fresh outbreak of persecution occurred under Herod in chap. [12](#).