



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

Notes: Week Seventeen

Acts 9:1-31 (NIV)

Saul's Conversion

⁹ Meanwhile, Saul was still breathing out murderous threats against the Lord's disciples. He went to the high priest ² and asked him for letters to the synagogues in Damascus, so that if he found any there who belonged to the Way, whether men or women, he might take them as prisoners to Jerusalem. ³ As he neared Damascus on his journey, suddenly a light from heaven flashed around him. ⁴ He fell to the ground and heard a voice say to him, "Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?"

⁵ "Who are you, Lord?" Saul asked.

"I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting," he replied. ⁶ "Now get up and go into the city, and you will be told what you must do."

⁷ The men traveling with Saul stood there speechless; they heard the sound but did not see anyone. ⁸ Saul got up from the ground, but when he opened his eyes he could see nothing. So they led him by the hand into Damascus. ⁹ For three days he was blind, and did not eat or drink anything.

¹⁰ In Damascus there was a disciple named Ananias. The Lord called to him in a vision, "Ananias!"

"Yes, Lord," he answered.

¹¹ The Lord told him, "Go to the house of Judas on Straight Street and ask for a man from Tarsus named Saul, for he is praying. ¹² In a vision he has seen a man named Ananias come and place his hands on him to restore his sight."

¹³ "Lord," Ananias answered, "I have heard many reports about this man and all the harm he has done to your holy people in Jerusalem. ¹⁴ And he has come here with authority from the chief priests to arrest all who call on your name."

¹⁵ But the Lord said to Ananias, "Go! This man is my chosen instrument to proclaim my name to the Gentiles and their kings and to the people of Israel. ¹⁶ I will show him how much he must suffer for my name."

¹⁷ Then Ananias went to the house and entered it. Placing his hands on Saul, he said, "Brother Saul, the Lord—Jesus, who appeared to you on the road as you were coming here—has sent me so that you may see again and be filled with the Holy Spirit." ¹⁸ Immediately, something like scales fell from Saul's eyes, and he could see again. He got up and was baptized, ¹⁹ and after taking some food, he regained his strength.

Saul in Damascus and Jerusalem

Saul spent several days with the disciples in Damascus. ²⁰ At once he began to preach in the synagogues that Jesus is the Son of God. ²¹ All those who heard him were astonished and asked, "Isn't he the man who raised havoc in Jerusalem among those who call on this name? And hasn't he come here to take them as prisoners to the chief priests?" ²² Yet Saul grew more and more powerful and baffled the Jews living in Damascus by proving that Jesus is the Messiah.

²³ After many days had gone by, there was a conspiracy among the Jews to kill him, ²⁴ but Saul learned of their plan. Day and night they kept close watch on the city gates in order to kill him. ²⁵ But his followers took him by night and lowered him in a basket through an opening in the wall.

²⁶ When he came to Jerusalem, he tried to join the disciples, but they were all afraid of him, not believing that he really was a disciple. ²⁷ But Barnabas took him and brought him to the apostles. He told them how Saul on his journey had seen the Lord and that the Lord had spoken to him, and how in Damascus he had preached fearlessly in the name of Jesus. ²⁸ So Saul stayed with them and moved about freely in Jerusalem, speaking boldly in the name of the Lord. ²⁹ He talked and debated with the Hellenistic Jews,^[a] but they tried to kill him. ³⁰ When the believers learned of this, they took him down to Caesarea and sent him off to Tarsus.

³¹ Then the church throughout Judea, Galilee and Samaria enjoyed a time of peace and was strengthened. Living in the fear of the Lord and encouraged by the Holy Spirit, it increased in numbers.

Footnotes:

- a. [Acts 9:29](#) That is, Jews who had adopted the Greek language and culture

Holman Christian Standard Bible - *Study Bible*¹

Acts 9:1-31

9:1 The narrative returns to **Saul**, or Paul. His anger with Jesus' followers continued unabated, to the point that he was threatening to **murder** them. Paul later acknowledged his zeal in persecuting Christians ([Php 3:6](#)), and this is how he was known by others (e.g., Ananias, [Ac 9:13](#)).

9:2 That Saul was authorized to travel to **Damascus** with warrants from the high priest to imprison people of **the Way** (a common name for early Christians; [19:9,23](#); [22:4](#)) indicates his high standing among Jewish religious leaders. He planned to bring them back to **Jerusalem** since this city was the center of Judaism.

9:3-4 **Nearing Damascus** and no doubt thinking that his acts there would help halt the spread of Christianity, Saul instead saw **a light from heaven** that changed his life and, eventually, world history.

9:5 It is doubtful that Saul immediately recognized the voice as that of Jesus. His use of **Lord** was probably honorific (equivalent to "sir") rather than recognition of divinity. Hence the voice said, **I am Jesus**.

9:6 Saul was not told at this point what his mission or purpose was. That was reserved for when he encountered Ananias later in the city of Damascus. This stepwise introduction to his future kept him from being overwhelmed all at once with the changes Jesus had initiated in his life, and it also allowed the Christians in Damascus to meet and accept the one whom they feared.

9:7 This is the first of three accounts of Saul's conversion that appear in the book of Acts ([22:6-11](#); [26:12-18](#)). Here it appears that Saul's traveling companions heard a noise but did not recognize the words that were spoken. The comments, it seems, were intended only for Saul.

9:10 We are not told how **Ananias** came to be a Christian. A possible scenario is that he or someone he knew had been in Jerusalem at Pentecost. There they would have seen and heard wondrous signs as God sent the Holy Spirit, and possibly accepted the message preached by the apostles. The pilgrims would then have taken their newfound faith back to Damascus, establishing the church that Saul now came to persecute.

9:13-14 Ananias's fear of Saul was such that he dared to question God's judgment. Saul's reputation as an enemy of the church was well earned, built as it was on the testimony of **many people**.

9:15-16 God revealed His purpose for Saul to Ananias first. This ensured that Saul would have a support network in place once he learned of his new purpose in life. Otherwise, imagine Saul coming to Ananias and delivering the news. Ananias would have scoffed, assuming he let Saul close enough to speak.

9:17-18 The ordering of events in Saul's conversion may have been altered from the standard pattern so that baptism rather than the filling of the Holy Spirit was the final event. The process may have been extended over several days rather than occurring all at once. But the result was the same: Saul became a follower of Jesus Christ.

1. Jeremy Royal Howard, ed., *HCSB Study Bible*, (Nashville, TN: Holman Bible Publishers, 2010), WORDsearch CROSS e-book, Under: "Acts 9".

9:19-20 Saul stayed **in Damascus for some days**, likely becoming oriented to basic Christianity even as **he began proclaiming Jesus in the synagogues**. He gave priority to the synagogues throughout his ministry, starting there before being forced to take the message elsewhere.

9:21-22 Understandably, the initial response to Saul was skeptical amazement, but as he **grew more capable** he was able to confound unbelieving Jews, **proving** that Jesus is **the Messiah**. Apparently, he was able to explain the messianic connections between the OT and Jesus so clearly that the Jews in Damascus could not refute him.

9:23-25 **After many days** pictures Saul dutifully preaching Jesus as Messiah for long enough to become the uppermost enemy of unbelieving Jews in Damascus. He had come to help their struggle against the growing Christian movement, but now he had become the chief cause of its growth. Thus they **conspired to kill him**. Unable to leave via the city gates, Saul escaped in a most undignified but effective manner: he was placed in a **large basket** and shoved **through an opening in the wall** (lit "through the wall").

9:26 Among believers in **Jerusalem**, Saul's reputation as a persecutor of the church was unchanged. Either news had not come from Damascus, or else **the disciples** in Jerusalem took a "wait and see" attitude. Perhaps they even suspected his conversion was just a ruse to infiltrate the fledgling Christian movement and destroy it from within. See note at [22:17-21](#).

9:27 **Barnabas** was convinced of the genuineness of Saul's conversion, apparently because he **had talked to him**.

9:28-30 **Saul... conversed and debated with the Hellenistic Jews**, some of whom may have been involved with him in Stephen's stoning ([7:57-60](#)). A Hellenistic Jew himself, Paul had been born in **Tarsus** and spoke Greek as his primary language. Seeing one of their own, a former persecutor of the church no less, argue on behalf of Christianity was more than they could bear. They **attempted to kill** Saul, with the result that he was whisked away to his hometown.

9:31 This verse marks a significant point in the development of the early church (see note at [1:8](#)). The church, having been forced by persecution to scatter outward from Jerusalem, was at **peace in Judea, Galilee, and Samaria**. This set the church up for a second stage of growth, which would see the gospel boldly taken outside Israel.

English Standard Version - Study Bible²

Acts 9:1-31

9:1-31 The Conversion of Saul. The conversion of Saul may seem like something of an interruption in the Acts narrative, since in this section of Acts ([chs. 6-12](#)) Luke deals primarily with the witness of the Jerusalem church through the dispersed Hellenists (Greek-speaking Jews) and the apostle Peter. Paul's conversion fits into this time frame, however, and as a Greek-speaking Diaspora Jew he was a "Hellenist" himself and eventually the prime leader in their outreach to the Gentiles. His conversion is related in detail three times in Acts: here in narrative form, and twice subsequently in Paul's testimony before a Jewish mob ([22:3-11](#)) and before King Agrippa II ([26:2-18](#)). Luke does not record the date of Paul's conversion, but a reasonable estimate is c. A.D. 33-34.

9:1-9 Saul's Encounter with Christ. While traveling to Damascus to arrest any Christians who might be there, Saul encountered the risen Christ and, blinded by a dazzling light, was led into the city to await further instructions.

Paul's (Saul's) Conversion and Early Travels

c. A.D. 35-39

As Paul approached Damascus to arrest followers of the Way, Jesus appeared to him (1). [Galatians 1:17](#) makes it clear that soon after this Paul spent time in Arabia (2, 3) before going to meet church leaders in Jerusalem (4). When some believers learned of a plot to kill Paul in Jerusalem, they took him to Caesarea, and he returned to his hometown of Tarsus (5).



2. Lane T. Dennis, ed., *ESV Study Bible, The: English Standard Version*, (Wheaton, Illinois: Crossway Bibles, 2008), WORDsearch CROSS e-book, Under: "Acts 9".

Major Events in the Life of the Apostle Paul

A.D. 5-10?	Born in Tarsus as an Israelite from the tribe of Benjamin and a Roman citizen (Acts 22:3 , 28 ; Rom. 11:1 ; Phil. 3:5); raised in either Jerusalem (Acts 22:3 ?) or Tarsus
15-20?	Trained as a Pharisee by Gamaliel I (Acts 22:3 ; 26:5 ; Gal. 1:14 ; Phil. 3:5-6)
30/33	Death, resurrection of Christ
31-34	Present at Stephen's stoning; persecuted Christians (Acts 7:58 ; 8:1 ; 22:4a ; 26:9-11 ; 1 Cor. 15:9 ; Gal. 1:13 ; Phil. 3:6)
33/34	Converted, called, and commissioned on the way to Damascus (Acts 9:1-19 ; 22:6-11 ; 26:12-18 ; Gal. 1:15-16)
33/34-36/37	Stays in Damascus a short time (Acts 9:19b); leaves for "Arabia" (i.e., Nabataean Kingdom; 2 Cor. 11:32 ; Gal. 1:17); returns to Damascus (Gal. 1:17 ; Acts 9:20-22 ?); Jews and the governor under King Aretas try to arrest and kill him; Paul escapes through the city wall (Acts 9:23-24 ; 2 Cor. 11:32-33)
36/37	Meets with Peter (and sees James) in Jerusalem (Acts 9:26-30 ; Gal. 1:18) Hellenists seek to kill him and he flees to Tarsus (Acts 9:28-30 ; Gal. 1:21)
37-45	Ministers in Syria/Cilicia (2 Cor. 11:22-27 ?)
42-44	Receives his "thorn in the flesh" (2 Cor. 12:7-9)
44	Herod Agrippa I dies (Acts 12:20-23)
44-47	Spends a year ministering with Barnabas in Antioch (Acts 11:25-26) Second Visit to Jerusalem ; time of famine (Acts 11:27-30 ; Gal. 2:1-10)
46-47	First Missionary Journey (Acts 13:4-14:26): 1.5 years?
48	Paul and Barnabas spend "no little time" in Antioch (Acts 14:28 ; cf. Gal. 2:11-14); Paul writes letter to the Galatians
48-49	Returns to Jerusalem for the apostolic council (Acts 15); Paul and Barnabas return to Antioch (Acts 15:30-33), but a dispute over John Mark causes them to part ways (Acts 15:36-41)
48/49-51	Second Missionary Journey (Acts 15:36-18:22): 2.5 years?
49	Edict of Claudius (Acts 18:2) Paul and Silas travel to southern Galatia through Asia Minor, on to Macedonia (notably Philippi [1 Thess. 2:2]); Thessalonica [1 Thess. 2:2 ; Phil. 4:15-16]; and Berea [Acts 17:10-15], and then Achaia (notably Athens [1 Thess. 3:1] and Corinth [2 Cor. 11:7-9])
49-51	Spends 1.5 years in Corinth (Acts 18:11); appears before Gallio (Acts 18:12-17); writes 1 and 2 Thessalonians
51	Returns to Jerusalem? (Acts 18:22)
52-57	Third Missionary Journey (Acts 18:23-21:17): 5 years?
52	Travels to Antioch, where he spends "some time"; then travels through Galatia and Phrygia (Acts 18:23)
52-55	Arrives in Ephesus (Acts 19:1 ; 1 Cor. 16:8); ministers there for three years (Acts 20:31) and writes 1 Corinthians in the spring, near the end of his ministry there; makes brief, "painful visit" to Corinth (2 Cor. 2:1), then returns to Ephesus and writes "tearful, severe letter" (now lost) to Corinth (2 Cor. 2:3-4 ; 7:8-16)
55-56	Travels north to Macedonia, where he meets Titus (Acts 20:1 ; cf. 2 Cor. 2:12-13); writes 2 Corinthians
57	Winters in Corinth (Acts 20:2-3 ; cf. 2 Cor. 9:4), writes letter to the Romans from Corinth; travels to Jerusalem and is arrested (Acts 21:27-36)
57-59	Imprisonment transferred to Caesarea, where he stays for two years (Acts 24:27)

60	Voyage to Rome; shipwrecked for three months on the island of Malta (Acts 28:11); finally arrives in Rome
62	Under house-arrest in Rome (Acts 28:30-31), writes Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, Philemon
62-67	Released from house-arrest in Rome, extends his mission (Spain?), writes 1 Timothy (from Macedonia?) and Titus (from Nicopolis); is rearrested, writes 2 Timothy from Rome shortly before his execution
64-67	Martyred in Rome

9:1-2 The account of **Saul** resumes from [8:3](#). Saul's papers from the high priest may have been official extradition documents or **letters** of introduction to the **synagogues at Damascus**. It is not known how Christianity had come to Damascus—perhaps through converts at Pentecost or by some of those “scattered” following Stephen's martyrdom ([8:1](#)). This is the first time in Acts that Christians are described as **belonging to the Way** (Gk. *hodos*, “road, highway, way of life”), meaning either the way of salvation ([16:17](#); cf. Jesus' teachings in [Matt. 7:14](#); [John 14:6](#)) or the true way of life in relation to God (cf. [Acts 18:25-26](#); cf. [Ps. 1:1](#), [6](#); [27:11](#)). The expression also occurs at [Acts 19:9](#), [23](#); [22:4](#); [24:14](#), [22](#).

9:3 **Damascus** was 135 miles (217 km) northeast of Jerusalem, a six-day journey by foot. Settled as early as the second millennium B.C., Damascus was an oasis on the border of the Arabian desert and on the main route from Mesopotamia to Egypt. The Nabatean king Aretas IV maintained an ethnarch (i.e., governor) in Damascus ([2 Cor. 11:32](#)). Although the modern city of Damascus stands atop the ancient remains, one can still see the “street called Straight” ([Acts 9:11](#)) running east to west with its East Gate and monumental arch. Also visible are the ancient theater and the concentric courts of its temple to Jupiter (now replaced by a mosque). Jewish presence in Damascus (assumed by the mention of synagogues in [vv. 2](#), [20](#)) is confirmed in Josephus's record that many thousands of Jewish people were killed in Damascus during the time of the First Jewish Revolt (A.D. 66-73; see [Jewish War 2.559-561](#)). For the brilliance of the **light**, see [Acts 22:6](#) and [26:13](#), where it is described as exceeding the midday sun.

9:4 Jesus' reference to Saul's “**persecuting me**” shows his close identity with his followers: to persecute Christians was to persecute Christ.

9:5 “**Who are you, Lord?**” Though Paul was ultimately blinded by the bright light (cf. [vv. 3](#), [8-9](#)), he indicates elsewhere that he actually saw the risen Christ on this occasion (see [1 Cor. 9:1](#); [15:8](#); [Gal. 1:16](#); cf. [Acts 9:27](#)). The scene is significant not only because of Saul's conversion but also because it shows that he would have known of the resurrection from direct experience of Jesus and thus could come to appreciate why this was a key part of the Christian message (see [1 Corinthians 15](#)).

9:7 Saul's companions heard the **voice** but saw **no one**. In his later testimony to the Jews, Paul spoke of them seeing the light but not understanding the voice ([22:9](#)). They had no vision of Jesus nor did they hear the message to Saul, but they could testify to a brilliant light and a sound, which pointed to an objective event that was not a matter of Saul's imagination.

9:9 Saul's blindness and his fasting should not be seen as punishment but as a result of the intensity of his encounter with Christ. However, like the deaf-muteness of Zechariah in [Luke 1](#), it was designed to produce a time of reflection.

9:10-19a **Saul's Encounter with Ananias**. Jesus appeared to a believer in Damascus, instructing him to go to Saul, assist him in recovery of his sight, and inform him of his special calling.

9:10 The **Lord** is Jesus and not the Father (see [v. 17](#)). Ananias's response, **Here I am**, is reminiscent of OT predecessors such as Abraham ([Gen. 22:1, 11](#)), Jacob ([Gen. 31:11; 46:2](#)), Moses ([Ex. 3:11](#)), Samuel ([1 Sam. 3:4-8](#)), and Isaiah ([Isa. 6:8](#)).

9:11 The street called **Straight** is one of the world's oldest continually occupied streets, still existing today (see note on [v. 3](#)). **Tarsus**. See note on [v. 30](#).

9:15 In the remainder of Acts, Saul (later called Paul) preaches to Gentiles and also to **kings** (Agrippa II, [ch. 26](#)) as well as to the **children of Israel**, since in each city he always goes first to Jewish synagogues.

9:17 Ananias's **laying his hands** (see note on [6:6](#)) on Saul was a physical symbol of the invisible power of the Holy Spirit coming to heal Saul from his blindness and dwell within him in new covenant fullness (see note on [2:4](#)).

9:18 **something like scales fell from his eyes**. This physical event was also a symbol that Saul's spiritual blindness had been overcome and he could now see and understand the truth (cf. [2 Cor. 3:14](#) for a related image). (Note that the change of Saul's name to Paul [which will be first reported in [Acts 13:9](#)] is not connected with his conversion; he continues having a right to both names, the first Jewish, the second Roman; Paul continues to call himself [and to be called] Saul until his ministry in Cyprus [[13:9](#)].) **was baptized**. Through baptism Saul made an immediate public declaration of his faith in Jesus as the Messiah.

9:19b-31 *Saul's Witness in Damascus and Jerusalem*. This section reports Saul's witness to Christ in Damascus and Jerusalem. In [Gal. 1:11-24](#), Paul provides an account of this same period.

9:19b-20 Saul likely received instruction in the Christian "way" from the **disciples at Damascus**. In Galatians, Paul notes that during this time he "went away into Arabia, and returned again to Damascus" ([Gal. 1:17](#)). ("Arabia" here means the Nabatean Kingdom, northeast of the Dead Sea, not the Arabian Peninsula.) **synagogues**. The pattern of Paul's beginning his witness in the synagogues occurs throughout Acts, as does the pattern of opposition developing there ([Acts 9:23](#)).

9:23 **The Jews** does not mean all Jews, of course, since many Jews had believed in Jesus and Paul himself was a Jew. But from this point forward in Acts, Luke often uses the phrase "the Jews" as a shorthand expression to refer to Jewish people who opposed the gospel (see [12:3](#); [13:45](#), [50](#); [14:4](#); [17:5](#), [13](#); [18:12](#), [14](#), [28](#); [19:33](#); [20:3](#), [19](#); etc.). Often it is the leaders of communities who are involved in this rejection. **plotted to kill him**. Enemies of the gospel cannot defeat it by free and open debate, so they often resort to force, falsehood, murder, and governmental suppression (cf. [9:29](#)). But the gospel is from God and cannot be stopped. Elsewhere Paul specifies that "the governor under King Aretas" was helping in the attempt to kill him (see [2 Cor. 11:32-33](#)).

9:24 **their plot became known to Saul**. The Holy Spirit intervenes again and again to protect Saul (cf. [23:16-22](#)).

9:25 Sometimes God does not call his people to stand and lose their lives but rather to escape from the danger that he has revealed to them. Because **his disciples took** decisive action, Paul's life was preserved for his future ministry, for at this point he had not begun his major missionary journeys or written any of his letters.

9:27 Barnabas, “son of encouragement” ([4:36](#)), interceded for Saul, introducing him **to the apostles** (in Jerusalem), who were initially skeptical about his conversion. According to [Gal. 1:18-19](#), this visit took place three years (see note on [Acts 11:27-30](#)) after his conversion (which could make this c. A.D. 37), and Paul met with Peter for 15 days but had no substantial interaction with the other apostles, except for meeting James, the brother of Jesus.

9:29 The **Hellenists** here are not the same as the Jewish believers called “Hellenists” in [6:1](#); in this instance they were Jews and not Christians, perhaps some of the same who had seized Stephen ([6:8-14](#)). (For the term “Hellenist,” see note on [6:1](#).)

9:30 On **Caesarea**, see note on [8:40](#). Paul’s hometown of Tarsus was a strategically important Cilician city in southeast Asia Minor on the road from Syria into central Asia Minor. Paul calls it “no obscure city” ([21:39](#)). Founded on the banks of the river Cydnus, it oversaw the important harbor on Lake Rhegma (approximately 5 miles/8 km south on the Cydnus). The vital Cilician Gates, which allowed passage across the Taurus Mountains, were approximately 25 miles (40 km) north. Alexander the Great had stayed in Tarsus, Pompey had based his campaign against sea pirates on the city, and Antony first met Cleopatra in Tarsus. Tarsus was known as a home to philosophers, especially those of the Stoic school. Archaeologists have uncovered a basalt street with limestone gutters from the NT period, and one can also see the foundations of a huge second-century-A.D. temple (known as the Donuktash). **to Tarsus**. This corresponds to [Gal. 1:21](#), where Paul says he went to “Cilicia,” the province in which Tarsus was located. Paul would be based in Tarsus and minister in Syria-Cilicia for the next eight years (c. A.D. 37-45). Some of the events of [2 Cor. 11:23-27](#) perhaps occurred during this time, and probably also his intense vision of heaven ([2 Cor. 12:2-4](#)). Saul is not mentioned again in Acts until Barnabas goes to Tarsus to find him in [Acts 11:25](#). Saul will begin to be called Paul in [13:9](#).

9:31 the church throughout all Judea and Galilee and Samaria. There must have been hundreds of churches in the small cities and towns throughout this large region, but all of them together can be called a “church” (Gk. *ekklēsia*, singular in the earliest and best manuscripts of this verse, though some later manuscripts have the plural). The NT can apply the singular word “church” to the church meeting in a home ([Rom. 16:5](#); [1 Cor. 16:19](#)), in an entire city ([1 Cor. 1:2](#); [2 Cor. 1:1](#)), in a large region (as here), or throughout the whole world ([1 Cor. 12:28](#); [Eph. 5:25](#)). **Peace** came to the church after the conversion of its prime persecutor (see also [Gal. 1:22-24](#)). **Fear of the Lord** does not mean fear of final judgment but is a common theme in Acts referring either to fear as godly awe, reverence, and devotion (as in [Acts 2:43](#); [10:2](#); [13:26](#)) or fear of God’s displeasure and fatherly discipline (as in [5:5](#), [11](#); [16:29](#); [19:17](#); see also [Heb. 12:7-10](#)).

NLT Life Application Study Bible³

Acts 9:1-31

9:2 Saul (later called Paul) was so zealous for his Jewish beliefs that he began a persecution campaign against anyone who believed in Christ ("followers of the Way"). Why would the Jews in Jerusalem want to persecute Christians as faraway as Damascus? There are several possibilities: (1) to seize the Christians who had fled, (2) to prevent the spread of Christianity to other major cities, (3) to keep the Christians from causing any trouble with Rome, (4) to advance Saul's career and build his reputation as a true Pharisee, zealous for the law, (5) to unify the factions of Judaism by giving them a common enemy.

9:2-5 As Saul traveled to Damascus, pursuing Christians, he was confronted by the risen Christ and brought face to face with the truth of the Good News. Sometimes God breaks into a life in a spectacular manner, and sometimes conversion is a quiet experience. Beware of people who insist that you must have a particular type of conversion experience. The right way to come to faith in Jesus is whatever way God brings *you*.

9:3 Damascus, a key commercial city, was located about 150 miles northeast of Jerusalem in the Roman province of Syria. Several trade routes linked Damascus to other cities throughout the Roman world. Saul may have thought that by stamping out Christianity in Damascus, he could prevent its spread to other areas.

9:3-5 Paul refers to this experience as the start of his new life in Christ ([1 Corinthians 9:1](#); [15:8](#); [Galatians 1:15, 16](#)). At the center of this wonderful experience was Jesus Christ. Paul did not see a vision; he saw the risen Christ himself ([9:17](#)). Paul acknowledged Jesus as Lord, confessed his own sin, surrendered his life to Christ, and resolved to obey him. True conversion comes from a personal encounter with Jesus Christ and leads to a new life in relationship with him.

9:5 Saul thought he was pursuing heretics, but he was persecuting Jesus himself. Anyone who persecutes believers today is also guilty of persecuting Jesus (see [Matthew 25:40, 45](#)) because believers are the body of Christ on earth.

9:13, 14 "Not him, Lord; that's impossible. He could never become a Christian!" In essence, that's what Ananias said when God told him of Saul's conversion. After all, Saul had pursued believers to their death. Despite these understandable feelings, Ananias obeyed God and ministered to Saul. We must not limit God—he can do anything. We must obey and follow God's leading, even when he leads us to difficult people and places.

9:15, 16 Faith in Christ brings great blessings but often great suffering, too. Paul would suffer for his faith (see [2 Corinthians 11:23-27](#)). God calls us to commitment, not to comfort. He promises to be with us *through* suffering and hardship, not to spare us from them.

9:17 Ananias found Saul, as he had been instructed, and greeted him as "Brother Saul." Ananias feared this meeting because Saul had come to Damascus to capture the believers and take them as prisoners to Jerusalem ([9:2](#)). In obedience to the Holy Spirit, however, Ananias greeted Saul lovingly. It is not always easy to love others, especially when we are afraid of them or doubt their motives. Nevertheless we must follow Jesus' command ([John 13:34](#)) and Ananias's example, showing loving acceptance to other believers.

3. *Life Application Study Bible*, (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale, 1988), WORDsearch CROSS e-book, 1834-1835.

At least three years elapsed between [Acts 9:22](#) and [9:26](#). After time alone in Arabia (see [Galatians 1:16-18](#)), Saul (Paul) returned to Damascus and then to Jerusalem. The apostles were reluctant to believe that this former persecutor could have become one of them. Saul escaped to Caesarea, where he caught a ship and returned to Tarsus.

[9:17, 18](#) Although Acts makes no mention of a special filling of the Holy Spirit for Saul, his changed life and subsequent accomplishments bear strong witness to the Holy Spirit's presence and power in him. Evidently, the Holy Spirit had filled Saul when he received his sight and was baptized. See the second note on [8:15-17](#) for more on the filling of the Holy Spirit.

[9:20](#) Immediately after receiving his sight and spending some time with the believers in Damascus, Saul went to the synagogue to tell the Jews about Jesus Christ. Some Christians counsel new believers to wait until they are thoroughly grounded in their faith before attempting to share the Good News. Saul spent time with other believers to learn about Jesus before beginning his worldwide ministry, but he did not wait to witness. Although we should not rush into a ministry unprepared, we do not need to wait before telling others what has happened to us.

[9:21, 22](#) Saul's arguments were powerful because he was a brilliant scholar. Even more convincing, however, was his changed life. People knew that what Saul taught was real because they could see the evidence in the way he lived. It is important to know what the Bible teaches and how to defend the faith, but your life should back up your words.

[9:23](#) According to [Galatians 1:17, 18](#), Paul left Damascus and traveled to Arabia, the desert region just southeast of Damascus, where he lived for three years. It is unclear whether his three-year stay occurred between [verses 22](#) and [23](#) or between [verses 25](#) and [26](#). Some commentators say that "after a while" could mean a long period of time. They suggest that when Paul returned to Damascus, the governor under Aretas ordered his arrest ([2 Corinthians 11:32](#)) in an effort to keep peace with influential Jews. The other possibility is that Paul's night escape occurred during his first stay in Damascus, just after his conversion, when the Pharisees were especially upset over his defection from their ranks. He would have fled to Arabia to spend time alone with God and to let the Jewish religious leaders cool down. Regardless of which theory is correct, there was a period of at least three years between Paul's conversion ([9:3-6](#)) and his trip to Jerusalem ([9:26](#)).

[9:26, 27](#) It is difficult to change your reputation, and Saul had a terrible reputation with the Christians. But Barnabas, a Jewish convert (mentioned in [4:36](#)), became the bridge between Saul and the apostles. New Christians (especially those with tarnished reputations) need sponsors, people who will come alongside, encourage, teach, and introduce them to other believers. In what ways can you become a Barnabas to new believers?

[9:27](#) [Galatians 1:18, 19](#) explains that Paul was in Jerusalem only 15 days and that he met only with Peter and James.

[9:29, 30](#) In these short sentences we can see two characteristics of Paul, even as a new believer in Christ: He was bold, and he stirred up controversy. These would characterize Paul's ministry the rest of his life.

[9:30](#) Saul's visit to Tarsus helped quiet conflicts with the Jews and allowed him time to prove his commitment. After Saul, the most zealous persecutor, was converted, the church enjoyed a brief time of peace.