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Acts 9:1 - 9:25



Acts - Steve Gregg

Steve Gregg presents an analysis of Acts 9, a chapter that details the conversion of Paul, a central figure in Christianity. Gregg explains that the story of Paul's encounter with Jesus is told three times in the book of Acts, though with slight variations. He also notes that Paul's conversion led him to understand the concept of the church as the body of Christ, and that hurting Christians only hurts Jesus. Gregg further explores the skepticism that Paul faced as a professed apostle and highlights the praise given to the church in Ephesus for their actions in testing and exposing false apostles.

Transcript

Turning now to Acts chapter 9, we come to, no doubt, one of Luke's favorite chapters in the whole book, because he was a great fan of Paul, and a great follower of Paul, an assistant to Paul, very probably his personal physician, although we can't say that for sure. We know that Luke was a physician. We don't know if he served Paul as a physician or not, but the fact that he gives fully half of the book of Acts to Paul, and always about Paul's heroic activities and his vindication when attacked of things, we know that Luke really had a great fondness for Paul, and frankly, so do I. I've never understood Christians who don't.

I've known Christians who say, I like Jesus, but I don't like Paul. I've heard Christians say, I think Paul just had a bad attitude or something. I don't know, I've never understood criticism of Paul from Christians.

Paul wrote more books of the Bible than any other person did, and has given us much more understanding of Christ and the gospel than anyone else wrote about. It is true that Paul was an unnatural man, and had flaws, and he might have even made some mistakes. We know Peter did.

Peter made some mistakes, and if Peter did, then Paul could too. But the point is, Paul is a true hero of the Christian faith, and a martyr. But before he got martyred, he lived a life of virtual martyrdom.

He was beaten. He was imprisoned. He was threatened.

He was even stoned, apparently, to death once, or close to it, and that's what his life was like. But at one time, he was not a Christian, and he was like the greatest enemy of the Christian faith in his career as a persecutor. And we have his conversion in chapter 9, and two other places, by the way.

The whole conversion story of Saul occurs three times in the book of Acts. Now, the first is Luke's own account in the narration of Acts chapter 9, and if we include his interview with Ananias as part of the conversion story, this goes up to verse 19, from chapter 9, verse 1 through 19. Now, the same story is told, sometimes with a bit different detail, though not contradictory, but the same story, the same events are told by Paul himself.

Once, to the mob in Jerusalem that had tried to kill him before the Romans rescued him, he was given a chance to speak to them, and he told his conversion story there. That's in chapter 22, verses 3 through 16. So, the same story of his conversion, told by Luke in chapter 9, is told by Paul in chapter 22, verses 3 through 16.

And then, later still, Paul tells the story again to Agrippa, when Paul is a prisoner in Caesarea, and is called upon to explain himself, and he tells his story again about his conversion. Now, these stories are not told always the same way. In particular, the third case, he very much compresses the story and doesn't give as much of the defining details of some of the later events.

For example, what Jesus said to him on the road to Damascus is conflated with what Ananias said to him. Also, he just kind of combines all that Jesus said, whether it was on the road or through Ananias. So, I mean, Paul is shortening the story in chapter 26, and there are a few details which some readers, usually skeptical readers, have thought are contradictory between the way, especially Luke tells the story in chapter 9, and the way Paul tells it in some of the other places.

However, we shall find that to call these contradictory is quite unjust. There's nothing about them that is necessarily contradictory. And when we find passages that someone says are contradictory to each other in the Bible, we have to ask ourselves, is it really impossible that both can be true? If it is not impossible that both could be true, then they do not contradict each other.

The only way that you could really insist upon a contradiction is if two things absolutely cannot both be true. And many times, two stories about the same thing will give different detail, but not contradictory detail. We encountered this phenomenon when, in Acts chapter 1, the story of Judas' fate was given.

It says in chapter 1 of Acts that he fell headlong and his bowels gushed out on the ground. Kind of gross. The other story of Judas' fate is found in Matthew 27 where it says he went and hanged himself and nothing more is said about it.

So that's a totally different story. Well, it is certainly different parts of the story. Is it impossible that both things can be true is really the fair question to ask.

Is it possible that a man would hang himself at one point and that at some point subsequently his body would burst open on the ground and his bowels gush out? Maybe that doesn't happen very often, but there's certainly nothing about it that's impossible. And a great number of stories that we read in the news, though not impossible, are very unlikely or at least unique. Things unique happen all the time.

And, you know, so we have to be open to the fact that one story is giving us—one account is giving us only one part of the story. And we will see as we look at these that there is really no basis for the claim that they contradict each other. Likewise, skeptics often claim that the story of Paul's activities immediately after his conversion are in conflict with what Paul himself says in Galatians chapter one, where he tells the story of his immediate activities after his conversion.

Paul gives different details in Galatians one than Acts gives. But again, they can be harmonized. I once had a German trained—he'd been through Bible college in Germany, which is a pretty liberal place for Bible scholarship, and he came to my school as a student in Oregon.

And he said, oh, Galatians one and Acts chapter one, there's just no way they can be harmonized. In other words, he's saying they have to be contradictory. But that just isn't true.

And I think he just—I think he gave up too easy. I think he lacked imagination. But the thing is, some people are just willing to say, you know, the Bible can't be trusted because some things I read here don't sound like they easily meld and jibe with this other part.

But, you know, you're called on to think a little bit. You're supposed to be intelligent. And an intelligent person looking at this, it's not difficult to see those things as all true.

It takes a hostility to the Word of God to insist that those things are contradictory. So we're going to find, as we look at the story of Saul's conversion and his after behavior, that there are passages elsewhere in Scripture that give different details. Instead of considering this to be a contradiction, we'll simply supplement because all the statements are true.

And by the way, where do you think Luke got his information about Paul's conversion? Paul gives information in Galatians, for example. Do you think that Luke had a different source than Paul himself for the information of Paul's conversion? Saul and Luke were inseparable companions for years. How would he not have taken the story directly from Paul's lips? Likewise, it is Luke who records chapter 9 and who also records the accounts

of it that Paul gives in chapters 22 and 26.

Did Luke forget? You know, is he so incompetent that he contradicts himself between different chapters? Obviously, it's much more reasonable to say the accounts supplement each other. And that is, of course, what I think any reasonable person would assume. Let me read the story.

Then Saul, still breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord, went to the high priest and asked letters from him to the synagogues of Damascus, so that if he found any who were of the way, which the book of Acts frequently refers to Christianity as the way, whether men or women, he might bring them bound to Jerusalem. Now, this begins saying that Saul was still breathing threats. Up to this point, Saul has not been a major character.

We first encountered him back in chapter 7 when Stephen was stoned. One of the first references in Luke's account to Saul is chapter 7, verse 58, when it says they cast him out of the city and stoned him, that is, Stephen, and the witnesses laid down their clothes at the feet of a young man named Saul. So we find the name Saul for the first time, but no information of his activities, only that he was the cult monitor for the people who executed Stephen.

But then in chapter 8, verse 1, it says, now Saul was consenting to his death. Okay, so that tells us something. And it goes on to tell us a little more about Saul in chapter 8, verse 3. As for Saul, he made havoc of the church, entering every house and dragging off men and women, committing them to prison.

And then it cuts away from him and talks about Philip for those two stories we've just looked at. So we've left Saul persecuting the church in Jerusalem. When we come back to his story in chapter 9, verse 1, he's still at it.

He's still breathing threats. And he decides to take the campaign internationally because Damascus was the capital city of Syria, the country adjacent. And some of the fleeing Christians had fled to Syria and other places.

And so he thought, well, I've heard there's some of these people who are of the way, meaning Christianity, that have gone to Damascus. Now, let me say this, that the early Christians did often refer to their movement as the way. Paul himself, when speaking to the crowd, says, I persecuted those who are of this way, meaning the way he belongs to now.

So he had no problem with that label for the name of Christianity. The word Christianity never appears in the Bible. The word Christian does, but only three times.

The word Christian is not prominent and the word Christianity is not found in the Bible. But the name of the movement at that time was not called Christianity, it was called the

way. And so Luke kind of uses it quite naturally as if his readers know what it means.

And why they called it the way, we're never told. Of course, we're tempted to think of John 14, 6, where Jesus said, I am the way, the truth and the life. And no doubt this is perhaps the basis for them doing so.

We're not told. What does it even mean when Jesus says, I am the way? A way is a road. A way is a path.

And in Scripture, Old and New Testament, life is compared to walking and taking steps and traveling. We're really not traveling geographically so much as through time from the past to the future is how life is going on. But it's like compared metaphorically to moving along a road.

And a different road will take you different places and will have different road conditions. Jesus himself talked about there being a wide path, at least to a wide gate and a narrow path, at least to a narrow gate. Jesus is the way, which apparently means he's the path.

He is the means by which we access God. He said, no man comes to the Father, but by me in John 14, 6. But he's also a way of living. Christianity, as I said earlier, in the early days was not defined so much in terms of a complex set of theological propositions.

Those became more and more complex in later centuries after the ecumenical councils began to meet to try to decide what Christians are allowed to believe, what they're not allowed to believe. But that began in 325 A.D. with the Nicene Council and then a whole bunch of councils afterward. Up until then, yeah, there were discussions about theology.

But for the most part, Christianity or the way was not considered to be so much a way of thinking as a way of living, following Jesus. And so the movement wasn't called the opinion. It was called the way.

A way speaks of living and behaving a certain way. And so that's a term we find here, I think, for the first time in the Book of Acts, but is used frequently later in the Book of Acts. So Saul is now going to take the campaign to Syria, to Damascus, where he has apparently heard rumors there are some of the members of the way who are there.

And by the way, unfortunately, there is a cult that has called itself the way international. And it's you might say, oh, that must be, you know, it must be pretty scriptural if they call themselves by that scriptural name. Not so.

They are like a they're really a charismatic version of some of the Jehovah's Witnesses. Their theology is almost entirely Jehovah's Witness, except they believe, as JWs do not, in the gifts of the spirit. They're more charismatic, but but they're a heretical group.

The founder is dead, but they still exist. OK, so he went to the high priest because the

high priest would have authority over all the synagogues in the world because the synagogues were the Jewish community, the Jewish religion. The high priest was the head of the Jewish religion.

So if he would give papers, letters to Saul saying this man is authorized to yank anyone out of the synagogues who's believing in the way, then Saul could present them at the synagogue there and the synagogue authorities would not resist it. It's interesting, though, that he felt he could go to a foreign country and the local laws would not protect innocent people who had committed no crime from being bound and extradited back to Jerusalem. But I guess I guess most of the Gentile countries let the Jews manage their own affairs.

For example, we know in Israel when the Romans conquered that they did not allow the Sanhedrin to execute criminals for crimes like murder and things like that. But they had to get the had to get the Romans to do that. But they were allowed to kill people in certain cases if temple matters were violated.

That is, the Jews, even the Romans, let the Jews have almost total sovereignty over the temple business. So if you know, that's apparently why Stephen was stoned by the Jews and not by the Romans, that he was said to have blasphemed against the temple. And if the Romans had confronted the Jews, why did you stone this man? They would have said, well, it's a temple matter, you know.

So I guess synagogues were like extensions of the temple. And it's possible that the foreign countries would allow the high priest to extradite Jews from their countries back to Jerusalem to stand trial over things that were not criminal in the secular courts. And as he journeyed, he came near Damascus.

Now, he would have by this time from Jerusalem to Damascus, almost 150 miles at the rate of travel in those days. He would have traveled about about a week at this time. He was almost at the destination.

Jesus let him get that far without getting to it. He let him travel for a whole week, 150 miles almost without interrupting him. But now he's getting close enough to be a danger to the Christians there.

So Jesus said, OK, now I'm going to stop you. And it says a great light shone around him suddenly from heaven. And he fell to the ground and heard a voice saying to him, Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me? One thing that's just a little interesting color to the passages in the Greek.

Luke has actually retained the Aramaic form of the name Saul, Saul. And that is he does all the all the Aramaic speech of Jesus in the Gospels is brought to us in Greek in the Gospels. It's been translated into Greek, except for a few lines like to let the Kumi or Eli,

Eli, Lama, Sabbath, and these are still in Aramaic.

But the Gospels have basically taken the words of Jesus, which he almost certainly spoke in Aramaic and given to them in a Greek translation. And Luke is writing in Greek here also, but he retains the Aramaic Saul, Saul. And, of course, he's he's what he's writing are Paul's own reminiscences.

He's getting all this story from Saul. So apparently, Paul himself, it meant something to him to hear Jesus speak his name so much so that. You know that Jesus calling your name, it was kind of precious or sacred to remember the exact word that Jesus used addressing him rather than to translate it into its Greek form, as would normally be done.

But he says, why are you persecuting me now? Saul didn't at this point know who this was and did not therefore know that he was persecuting this person. He knew he was persecuting people, Christians, people of the way, but he didn't know he was persecuting this being from heaven, whoever that was. And so, of course, he inquired and said, who are you, Lord? And the Lord said, I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting.

Now, Paul in his writings is the only New Testament writer to describe the church as the body of Christ. None of the other authors of New Testament books use that term. It's a, we could say, appalling term.

And it apparently, Paul suggests that this is a mystery that was revealed to him in Ephesians chapter three, verses one through six. He mentions that this is a mystery that was not revealed to former generations, but was made known through the Holy Spirit to the holy apostles and prophets, himself included. And he said, and this is a mystery that the Jews and the Gentiles be one body in Christ.

And the first place Paul mentions the body of Christ is in his letter, his first letter to the Corinthians in chapter 12, where he gives the metaphor of a body and its body parts and things like that. Now, it may well be that Paul began to understand the church that way. In this first interview he had with Jesus, he was persecuting Christians.

And Jesus said, that's me. You're attacking my body. And Jesus himself had said in Matthew 25, in as much as you do it to the least of these, my brethren, you do it to me.

Though there was no description of the body of Christ concept, but we understand that that is so. If you do anything to any part of my body, you've done that to me. And so it may be that this was the manner in which Jesus first kind of sparked the awareness in Saul, who later manifested in his letters, that the body of Christ is not just the Jesus fan club.

It's an organic extension of his headship into the world. It's his flesh and his bones. It's his body.

And so you're hurting my body. You're hurting me. This is what Jesus is saying.

Now, we read if you've got the new King James, as I do, or the King James, as the next line in verse five, after Jesus said, I'm the Lord who you persecuted, is it is hard for you to kick against the goats. So he trembling and astonished said, Lord, what do you want me to do? And the Lord said to him, arise and go into the city and you'll be told what you must do. Now, the reason I mentioned the King James, the new King James, is this is another case where the manuscripts are somewhat different.

The modern translations omit the latter part of verse five and the first part of verse six. The part they omit that's not in the Greek manuscripts of the oldest manuscripts known is the line. It is hard for you to kick against the goats.

And then the line. So he trembling and astonished said, Lord, what is it you want me to do? And someone may have added those because it appears in later manuscripts, but not in the earliest manuscripts. However, we have no reason to doubt that those things actually were said because the statement about it's hard for you to kick against the goats is found in chapter 26, verse 14, when Paul's telling the story.

When Paul tells the story before Grippa, that's where Paul actually does mention that Jesus said it's hard for you to kick against the goats. Knowing that some scribe apparently added it to chapter nine, too. So I agree with it.

And then the statement where he asked, Lord, what do you want me to do? That's only found in the other account in chapter 22. When Paul is talking to the mob in Jerusalem in chapter 22, 10, he mentions, I said, Lord, what would you have me to do? So, you know, both of these statements, though they're not in the oldest manuscripts of chapter nine, they are found in all the manuscripts of chapters 22 and 26. So these things actually were said whether they were recorded in chapter nine originally or not.

They are certainly recorded in chapter 22 and 26. Now, what's it mean it's hard for you to kick against the goats? We don't probably most of us don't have any familiarity with goats. A goat is a sharp stick or a sharp pole.

It might have a metal point on the end or just a sharp sharpened end. And it's used to poke animals with work animals, oxen. Stubborn animals, animals are supposed to be pulling a plow and just decide to take a break or to get them to go where you want them to go.

When they go the wrong way, you poke them in the butt with the with the sharp stick and they get moving. Now, animals often were managed this way. If you go to a circus, you'll see goats being used for the elephants.

Usually someone's walking along with a sharp stick and they poke them in the butt. That's cruelty to animals. Well, it's not exactly nice.

Probably even having been in a circus in the first place isn't very nice. But the point is, big animals that are stronger than people often will submit if they get poked in the butt with a sharp stick. And that's what a goat is.

It's goading them along. Now, if an animal is really rebellious and really determined not to move when you're poking it, it may kick. It may resist.

It may kick against the goat. Well, that's just going to puncture. You know, the normal use of the goat doesn't hurt as a puncture wound.

But if the if the animal resists it and kicks it, he's just he's hurting himself. And so to say it is hard for you to kick against the goat means you're just hurting yourself here. Now, by the way, this is not original with Jesus, because it's the same proverb.

It's hard to kick against the goat. It's found in some of the other ancient literature, Greek literature in particular. More than one place in Greek literature.

This this line is found. So it was a known it was a known proverbs and Jesus uses it. But what he's saying is that there has been a goading of Saul up to this point that we had not read about.

We had not heard of it. Jesus knew about it. He was being goaded and he was resisting it to his own hurt.

We have to assume that this goading had to do with an internal goading that God was trying to direct him to to to become a Christian. And he was convicting him. We read, for example, when Stephen finished his sermon of the Sanhedrin, it says they were pricked at their heart.

We also read that about the Jews on the day of Pentecost when when Peter preaches, their hearts were pricked. Now, the pricking of a heart may lead to conversion. That's what happened on the day of Pentecost.

Their hearts were pricked and they converted. But when Stephen preached, their hearts were pricked and they resisted. Now, Saul didn't participate in the stoning, but he kind of did.

He favored it. And his heart must have been among those that was pricked. But instead of saying, I should repent, he thought, I will resist.

And apparently, as I said in an earlier lecture in our series here, I think very possibly his unusually fierce resistance of the church. I mean, more than the rest of the Sanhedrin, he was he was on the warpath against the church. It's a little excessive, really.

I mean, what's what's it to him if these people want to believe in Jesus? How does that hurt him? You know, I mean, he's obviously being rather extreme. And this extremity of

his hatred may well have been his way of trying to compensate for his guilt that he was feeling. This pricking of his conscience and instead of repenting, he was resisting.

And that's Jesus. That's hurting him. That's just hurting him.

And so Saul finally did break. He did surrender. He didn't say, Lord, what do you want me to do? That's the right.

That's the right question for everyone to ask. You're the Lord. I'm the servant.

You give the instructions. What do you want me to do? And Jesus said to him, arise and go into the city. That'd be Damascus because he was nearly there.

And you'll be told what you must do. He doesn't say who will tell him. But we find out quickly who it is.

It says in verse seven, the men who journeyed with him stood speechless, hearing a voice, but seeing no one. Now, this is one of the areas where some people feel they find a contradiction. Because when Paul is telling this story in Jerusalem to the crowd in chapter 22, verse nine, he said, well, let me just read it here.

When he's talking about the reaction of those or the experience of those who were with him. Now, frankly, we don't know who was with him. Probably some police, probably the temple police sent some along with him to help him arrest these people.

We don't know who they were. Almost certainly Jews, because Romans would not be interested in going to Damascus and arresting Jews for believing in Jesus. That wouldn't be a Roman concern.

That'd be a temple concern. So these probably temple police were accompanying Paul because he was, by most accounts, he was a small man. The Corinthian false apostles who resisted him said he was unimpressive, physically unimpressive.

His very name, Paul, means small. Paulus, the Latin word Paulus, means small. And so, and it was a, seems like a nickname of his.

His given name as a Hebrew is Saul, which means asked for, like King Saul. But when he began to work among the Gentiles, he stopped using his Hebrew name, started using his Roman name, Paulus, which means small. And traditionally, Saul was a smallish man.

Now, for him to go and try to arrest Christians, some of them might be a lot bigger than him. Or any two of them might be able to successfully resist him. So he apparently was accompanied by some kind of police from the temple.

And what their experience was when Saul was having this vision, we've just read in chapter 9, verse 7. It says there, they stood speechless, hearing a voice, but seeing no

one. Now, in chapter 22, verse 9, these men are mentioned also. And it says, now those who are with me indeed saw the light and were afraid, but they did not hear the voice of him who spoke to me.

Now, if you're paying careful attention, chapter 9, verse 7 says they heard something, but there's something they didn't see. It says they heard a voice, but saw no one. So they heard, but did not see.

In chapter 22, 9, it says they saw, but did not hear. It says they saw the light, but they did not hear the voice of him who spoke to me. And so the fact that one passage says they saw something, but didn't hear something, and the other says they heard something, but didn't see something.

They said, oh, that's the opposite. No, it's not, really. What did they see? They saw a light.

What did they not see? They didn't see any man. They didn't see Jesus. See, Paul was having a vision of Christ, which he often referred to as having seen Jesus.

He saw Jesus at that time, just before he was blinded. Jesus appeared to him. The others saw only a bright light.

They didn't see Jesus. Now, what did they hear? They heard a sound or a voice. But what didn't they hear? They didn't hear the voice of him who spoke to me.

Now, that's interesting. What's that mean? Some scholars think it means they heard Paul's voice. There's a two-way conversation between Jesus and Paul, and they didn't hear the voice speaking to him, but they heard a voice.

Well, Saul was talking, too. They may have heard Saul's voice, but they didn't hear the answers that Jesus gave. They didn't hear the voice that spoke to him.

It's also important to note that the word hear, *akuo*, it means to hear, but it also could mean to understand. Like, don't you hear what I'm saying? Don't you understand me? Yeah, it has those meanings in Greek. So he could be saying they did not understand the voice.

They might have heard a voice to them as garbled, but they couldn't perceive what it was saying. In any case, both statements, though they are different statements, are entirely possible to be harmonized. And the fact that Luke records both of them makes it very unlikely that in one place he is saying something that's the exact opposite of the other thing.

Then it says in chapter 9, verse 8, Then Saul arose from the ground, and when his eyes were opened, he saw no one. So his eyes had been closed, but when he opened his eyes,

he still couldn't see. He was blind.

And that continued for three days. But they led him by the hand and brought him to Damascus. Now, being led by the hand, that's got to be humbling.

We read later on that Saul's nephew overheard a plot to kill Saul. And he called the guard and said, this boy has something to tell you. And the guard led the boy by his hand like an adult would lead a little child.

Here's Saul, who is a powerful man from the temple coming with armed escort, coming to wreak havoc. Now he's like a child being led along by the hand because he's blind. He doesn't want to trip over anything.

He needs someone to guide him. He's greatly humbled in this situation. And he's brought into Damascus.

He was three days without sight. And he also fasted from food and drink the whole time. Three days.

Now there was a certain disciple at Damascus named Ananias. And to him the Lord said in a vision, Ananias. And he said, here I am, Lord.

So the Lord said to him, arise and go to the street called straight and inquire at the house of Judas for one called Saul of Tarsus. For behold, he is praying. Now, we were not told before this exactly where Paul was staying.

Saul was staying. He's in the house of somebody named Judas. And by the way, aren't there an awful lot of Judas's in the Bible? Yeah.

And a lot of Simon's too. Yeah. Peter is staying in Joppa at this time in the house of Simon the Tanner.

Who is not to be confused with Simon the leper in the Gospels. Or Simon Peter. Or Simon the Zealot.

Or any of the other Simons. Lots of Simons. Lots of Judas's.

Why? These were the names of leaders of the tribes of Israel. Judas is the name Judah. The Greek form of Judah.

Simon was the Greek form of Simeon. And so, many of the Jews were named after tribal heads. And the 12 sons of Jacob were the tribal heads.

So, there's a lot of people. These names were disproportionately common in Israel. In fact, there's an interesting fact that I read in a book by Richard Bachum.

Called the, I forget, it's called the Testimony of the Eyewitnesses or something like that.

The Gospels. Jesus and the Eyewitnesses, I think it's called.

He says there's been research done in the Holy Land from this very period. Of how many individuals are known to us by name. Secularly or in the Bible.

Either in the Bible or outside the Bible. How many named individuals from that period in Palestine are known. And it turns out there's something like 2 or 3 thousand people.

Whose names are known to us from that region at that time. And they did a name frequency analysis. And they found out that Simon was the most popular name for men in that period of time.

And Judas was one of the very popular, high ranking, popular names too. And among women, what do you suppose was the most high ranking? Mary. Yeah, how many Marys are there in the Bible? Tons.

And so, what he said is, it just happens that when you do the same analysis on the New Testament itself. That the frequency of the names is the same as in the secular analysis. So, it doesn't prove that it's true.

But it proves that the New Testament realistically comes from that period. And is not doing strange things by naming so many people Mary or so many people Simon or Judas. There's another Judas.

Not Iscariot. There's another Judas among the disciples besides Judas Iscariot. So, anyway, he's staying with somebody named Judas in Damascus on a street that's called Straight.

I wonder why they called it that. That's still there. Straight Street is still there in Damascus, I understand.

It's one kilometer long. Yeah, so you could still go to that street. I wonder if you could find the spot where Judas used to live.

Can you? Is there a traditional spot? That's very cool. That's very cool. All right.

So, he goes there. Ananias says, but not immediately. He first objects to the instructions.

He's told to go speak to Saul of Tarsus. Well, he knows who Saul of Tarsus is. And he kind of objects.

And he says in verse 12. Well, Jesus isn't really finished talking yet. At the end of verse 11, he says, Saul is praying.

And in a vision he has seen a man named Ananias coming in and putting his hand on him so that he might receive his sight. Then Ananias answered, Lord, I have heard from

many about this man, how much harm he has done to your saints in Jerusalem. And here he has authority from the chief priests to bind all who call on your name.

In other words, are you saying for me to turn myself into the police? Basically, you know, this guy's here to arrest people like me. Shall I knock on his door and say, here I am, take me, you know. And Jesus said, go, for he is a chosen vessel of mine to bear my name before the Gentiles, kings, and the children of Israel.

So, primarily, he is sent to the Gentiles. He will also speak to kings and even to Jews, too. Although, we read in Galatians that there was an agreement between Saul or Paul, on the one hand, and the apostles in Jerusalem, that they would go to the circumcision.

He'd go to the uncircumcision. But he didn't limit himself to that. And he did speak before a number of kings, as it turns out, including Nero, eventually.

For I will show him how many things he must suffer for my name's sake. I said that Saul's whole life was almost like that of a living martyr. It's interesting that this would be the one feature that Jesus mentioned.

He didn't say, for I'm going to use him to convert lots of people and plant churches throughout the Gentiles. I'm going to show him how much he's going to suffer. He's caused a lot of suffering of my people.

And he's going to have to suffer a lot, too. Not because Jesus is holding a grudge against him, but it's just the way it's going to be. Saul, after all, is almost the initiator of persecution against Christians.

Being a Christian himself, he's going to suffer some of that persecution that he spawned. So, Ananias obediently does so. He went his way, verse 17, and entered into the house.

Laying his hands on Saul, he said, Brother Saul, the Lord Jesus, who appeared to you on the road as you came, has sent me that you may receive your sight and be filled with the Holy Spirit. Immediately there fell from his eyes something like scales. In the Greek, this is actually medical terminology, which is not uncommon.

Luke, as a physician, frequently uses known medical terminology from the Greek medical texts. And he received his sight at once. And he arose and was baptized.

And when he had received food, he was strengthened. Then Saul spent some days with the disciples at Damascus. I think it's touching that Ananias would come to this man who was a notorious enemy.

It's like, you know, in the days when Mao Tse Tung was persecuting the Christians, killing them, you know, in China, or when Stalin or someone was doing the same thing in the Soviet Union. If that person got converted, but no one knew it yet. Only Jesus knew it,

and it came to you.

And you're one of the Christians that's hiding from this guy. He says, you go. He's converted now.

You're going to go, you know, baptize him. And you go in there and say, Brother Mao. You know, I mean, that word brother is an affectionate term.

And it's just the difficulty with which a Christian would be able to make that adjustment. Just yesterday, I was thinking about this man as my potential killer. Now I'm calling him Brother Saul, you know.

What will the other Christians think of me calling him brother? They think he's an enemy too, but they'll find out soon enough. I think it's just really touching that coming to Christ suddenly builds a familial acceptance between people who are on opposite poles prior to that. And so he was sent to lay his hands on him so that he'd receive his sight, but also that he'd be filled with the Holy Spirit, and then to be baptized too.

So all these things happened to Saul on this occasion. And we read that he stayed some days with the disciples at Damascus. Now we have a few stories now from verse 20 through verse 30 about Saul.

And then it's going to break away and talk about Peter a little bit again. But these stories about Saul have to do with some of his movements and activities shortly after his conversion. And it's at this point that Galatians chapter 1 is sometimes thought to be in conflict.

And let's just first read the passage in Galatians 1, so it'll be in your mind as we read what Acts says, and we'll be able to harmonize it. But Paul gives the most thorough details about this period of his life in Galatians more than anywhere else. And so we can start at verse 15, Galatians 1, 15.

When it pleased God, who separated me from my mother's womb and called me through His grace to reveal His Son in me, that I might preach Him among the Gentiles. That is, when I got converted, I did not immediately confer with flesh and blood. He didn't go and learn his doctrines from other people.

Flesh and blood means human beings. We have no reason to believe that Ananias thoroughly trained Saul in theology. Nor did the other apostles, and that's the point Paul's mainly making.

Paul is trying to point out that he did not depend on the earlier apostles for his information. He got it by revelation. He's already said that in almost the opening verses of Galatians 1. He's trying to point out, if you think I'm just an echo of the other apostles and that I don't know anything firsthand, I want you to know I didn't get much of

anything from them.

When I got saved, I didn't even go to Jerusalem and consult with them. It was years before I met them. I got everything straight from Jesus, is basically the point he's making.

He said, I did not go and confer with flesh and blood, nor did I go up to Jerusalem to those who were apostles before me. But I went to Arabia and returned again to Damascus. Now, he hadn't mentioned Damascus before, but I guess his readers knew that he had gotten saved on the outskirts of Damascus and been baptized in Damascus.

And he says, then I went away to Arabia and came back to Damascus. Now, there's no mention of going to Arabia in Acts 9. But then it says, verse 18, then after three years, I went up to Jerusalem to see Peter and remained with him 15 days. But I saw none of the other apostles except James, the Lord's brother.

He says, now concerning the things which I write unto you, indeed, before God, I do not lie. Afterward, I went into the regions of Syria and Cilicia, and I was unknown by faith to the churches of Judea, which were in Christ. Now, here's what he says.

When I got saved, I didn't go to Jerusalem right away. Instead, I spent three years in regions like Arabia, parts of Arabia, and then I came back to Damascus. And then three years after my conversion, I did go to Jerusalem, but I didn't really have a long time of indoctrination from the apostles.

They didn't teach me much. I was only there 15 days, and I only saw two of them, Peter and James. So, I mean, it's not like I've been immersed in the influence of these apostles.

After 15 days, I went away to Syria and Cilicia, and I was gone again, and next time we read it, it's 14 years later. He sees the apostles again. The point Paul is really trying to make in this selective autobiography in Galatians is that he was quite independent of the other apostles, not suggesting that he disagreed with them about anything, but rather that he was not passing along secondhand information.

He's emphasizing that he saw Jesus. Jesus has been in communication with him, just like the other apostles got theirs from Jesus. He got his from Jesus, not from them.

And so his selective autobiographical information is there to say, to emphasize how seldom he saw the apostles, how little they had opportunity to speak into his life. He didn't need that like most people would because he was getting revelations directly from Christ. That's what he's saying.

And like I say, he emphasized that very early on in the chapter before that. So, that's the information we have from Paul. What does Luke tell us? Okay, we've seen Saul is in Damascus spending some days there.

Immediately, he preached. This is verse 20, Acts 9, 20. Immediately, he preached the Christ.

The older manuscripts say he preached Jesus, no significant difference. In the synagogues that he is the son of God. Then all who heard were amazed and said, is this not he who destroyed those who called on this name in Jerusalem and has come here for the purpose so that he might bring them bound to the chief priests? But Saul increased all the more in strength and confounded the Jews who dwelt in Damascus, proving that this Jesus is the Christ.

Now, after many days were passed, the Jews plotted to kill him. But their plot became known to Saul. And they watched the gates day and night to kill him.

Then the disciples took him by night and let him down through the wall in a large basket. And when Saul had come to Jerusalem. Well, wait a minute.

Okay, so now we have him coming to Jerusalem. According to Galatians, this was three years after his conversion. So, these things we just read prior to him coming to Jerusalem.

How do they fit into those three years? Well, I think we have to say this. In verse 23, it says, now after many days, this plot came against his life. That is almost certainly after the three years.

Between verse 22 and 23, Saul has gone away to Arabia and come back. He says in Galatians, I didn't go down to Jerusalem immediately. I went to Arabia and returned to Damascus.

So, verse 23 occurred when he returned to Damascus. Between verse 22 and 23, this trip to Arabia existed. Now, why would I put it there instead of somewhere else? Interesting.

If you look at 2 Corinthians chapter 11, verses 32 and 33, Paul writes to them, In Damascus, the governor under Aretas, the king, was guarding the city of the Damascenes, that is Damascus, with a garrison, desiring to apprehend me. But I was let down in a basket through a window in the wall and escaped from his hands. Now, who's Aretas, the king? Aretas was actually the king of the Nabataeans, which was also a name for Arabia back in those days.

And the governor, or in the Greek, it's the ethnarch of Damascus, who served the king Aretas of the Nabataeans, who's known from secular history. I mean, the Bible doesn't tell us about Aretas, being that secular historians know about Aretas. Aretas was ruling in Arabia at the time that this happened.

The governor, or the ethnarch of Damascus, where Paul was, was under his authority.

And that governor, under Aretas, sought to arrest Paul. And that's when Paul escaped from his hands, it says, by being lowered in a basket from the wall.

Now, how does that differ from Acts? We see that very story is in Acts chapter 9, and we just read it in verses 23 through 25. Why would Aretas, the king of the Arabs, want to take Paul into custody? Why would he want to arrest him? If Paul had been in Damascus all this time, what does he care? This says the Jews made the plot. In Acts, it says the Jews plotted to kill him.

Well, Aretas was not a Jew. Obviously, the Jews were in cahoots with Aretas, just like the Sanhedrin was in cahoots with Pilate. Pilate was a Roman.

It was the Jews that plotted to kill Jesus, but Pilate authorized it. Apparently, the best way to understand this sequence is that Saul had gone to Arabia and stirred up trouble there, too. Enough so that the Jews of Arabia persuaded King Aretas to, you know, get rid of Paul, or arrest him.

That's what they did to Paul in Jerusalem in his final visit there. They got the Romans to arrest him, and they tried to persuade Felix and Festus to, you know, kill him, the Romans. The Jews were continually trying to get the local Roman authorities to persecute the Christians, as the Jews— the local Roman authorities didn't usually want to, but Aretas apparently submitted to them.

And I have to assume that between verse—in Acts 9, 22, where— which is part of what Paul did immediately after his conversion. Verse 20 says immediately he began to preach. So as soon as Paul was converted, he's preaching in Damascus.

Acts 9, verses 20 through 22 tells of that. But then there's a gap of like three years, which is called now after many days. And in that gap of three years, Paul had gotten Aretas, the king of the Arabs, mad at him.

That must be when he went to Arabia. That's probably when he got in the face of the king, or of the Jews, and they got in the face of the king. And so this plot of the Jews to arrest and kill Paul, they had Aretas, the king of the Arabs, involved too.

But the fact that Aretas did get involved means that this plot against him apparently came after Aretas became aware of Paul, Saul. And that was probably through Saul's time that he spent in the kingdom of Aretas in Arabia. So again, this can all be harmonized.

It's just that Luke is leaving out stuff. He's only got so much ink, you know, he can't tell everything. So he skips over those three years, comes to the end of Saul's second stay in Damascus, because Saul said, I went away to Arabia and returned to Damascus.

That's what he says in Galatians. So he's back in Damascus. That's where this plot takes

place.

He escapes, and when he escapes, he can't stay around there. So he's got to go to Jerusalem. He's got to go somewhere.

And he takes this opportunity to go to Jerusalem for the first time since his conversion. He's been away for three years. And the last time anyone saw him in Jerusalem, he was a persecutor, breathing threats against the church.

Now he arrives back in Jerusalem and he's a professed Christian. And it says in verse, excuse me, Acts 9, 26, when Saul did come to Jerusalem. And we know from Galatians at this time that we're reading about in verses 26 through 30, this visit to Jerusalem.

That was only 15 days long. Acts doesn't tell us that. You'd get the impression it was longer.

But in Galatians, I was there for 15 days. And he says when he did come to Jerusalem, he tried to join the disciples as he tried to join the church. But they were all afraid of him and they didn't believe that he was a disciple.

They weren't sure he was saved. Well, why would they be unsure he'd been saved for three years? Hadn't they had time to get used to that idea? Well, they hadn't seen him. They'd heard rumors.

And that's what Paul says in Galatians. The churches of Judea didn't know me by face, but they'd heard that he who once persecuted the church was now a believer. They'd heard rumors.

But they no doubt had various theories about this. Okay, maybe he did get saved. Or maybe he's lying.

Maybe he's a fifth columnist. Maybe he's an infiltrator. Maybe he wants to come and pretend to be one of ours under a false flag so he can destroy us from within.

Who knows? Who knows his motives? I mean, this guy wasn't exactly an obvious candidate for conversion last time we saw him. And here he's coming back saying he's a Christian. I'm not so sure.

And they had every reason to be cautious because they'd only heard rumors. And it was kind of dangerous to expose themselves to him since if he had not changed, he might arrest them all. They'd been hiding from him before.

They weren't sure. Should we still hide from him? Maybe. Now, we know that they did become convinced that he was an apostle, which is an amazing thing when you think about it.

Because he didn't just come back and say, hey, I'm a Christian now. He said, I'm an apostle. Now, I know a lot of pastors call themselves apostles today rather glibly, and I don't believe any of them.

But remember, the word apostle spoke of the highest-ranking authorities in the church in Jerusalem. There were 12 of them chosen by Jesus himself with the exception of Matthias. And they were the people that everybody listened to.

They all sat under the teaching of the apostles, the Bible says. The apostles gave witness. The apostles did signs and wonders.

The apostles were the main guys. What the apostles said the church had to do, they were the principal authorities in the church. And Saul doesn't just come back and say, trust me, I'm saved now.

That's hard enough. He says, oh, I'm not just saved. I'm an apostle now, too.

That's not going to go down easy. I mean, to tell you the truth, even if he was not Saul, if he was just any other Christian, oh, Peter, I'm an apostle like you now, too. Peter's saying, the heck you are.

Who sent you? You know? I mean, these guys, if they accept another apostle or any other apostles, they are diluting their own power base. If they were thinking like carnal men, if they were thinking like carnal church leaders who often do worry about such things. They'd be saying, wait a minute, the 12 of us, we're the bosses here.

This guy comes in and we don't know who he is. We can't trust him. Give him authority, recognize him.

They'd be more likely to say he's a false apostle. You see, if a man doesn't claim to be an apostle, he's not a false apostle. But if a man claims to be an apostle, he's either a real one or a false one.

And if you're reluctant to call him a real one, then you're going to have to call him a false one. And by the way, the Church of Ephesus tested, according to Revelation chapter 2, tested those who claimed to be apostles and were not and found them to be liars. That's good.

These guys did, however, come around. We're going to have to wait till next time to talk about how he won their confidence and how his ministry began among the Jews and how he got sent off to the Gentiles again. All right, so we're going to have to stop there.