

Commentary

THEMES

There are several big themes in this passage, particularly as we connect it with the surrounding context:

- **Jesus' authoritative presence.** There are obviously three key characters in the passage: Saul, Ananias and Jesus. Less obviously, **Jesus is the dominant character, not Saul.** He is referred to nine times, mostly by the title 'Lord', emphasising His **heavenly authority**: ultimately, *His* name will prevail (14-16; cf 2:21). It is *Jesus* who takes the initiative in transforming Saul, meeting him in heavenly glory on the Damascus road (3-6, 17). Furthermore, **Jesus is present with, and completely identifies with, His church**: to persecute them is to persecute Him (4-5), and He meets with His disciples to instruct and comfort them (10-16). It's a wonderful comfort for Christians: Jesus feels our pain.
- **Personal transformation.** Saul's transformation is a **two-stage process**, spread over three days (9), rather like Jesus' death and resurrection (cf 16). First he is met on the road by the risen and ascended Jesus (so meeting God in His holy supremacy) and '**dies**' – falling to the ground (4), then rising from the ground but seeing nothing and eating and drinking nothing (6-9). Then he is met in a house (~ a tomb?!) by the vulnerable, earthly Ananias (~ meeting God in His gracious faithfulness) and '**rises**' – being welcomed into God's community (17), receiving his sight (17-18), being empowered by the Spirit (17), and rising, being baptized and strengthened with food (v.18-19). (Surely Saul survives because of Stephen's prayer [7:60]?!)

All the **light/sight language** points to a **great (two-stage) event of heavenly spiritual enlightenment** (see 13:47; 26:18; cf Luke 1:76-79; 2:27-32). In v8 Saul has **physical blindness** but the first stage of **spiritual sightedness** (there may be a double sense to his eyes being 'opened').

Imagine the shock Saul would feel as he encounters the truth of the gospel of Jesus (v.4-5): "*I 'killed Jesus' (through the church, esp. Stephen) ... God raised Jesus ... and now I've met Jesus as Lord!*". In opposing the church, Saul has been opposing Jesus and therefore opposing God – no wonder he didn't eat or drink for three days.

- **Aggression/Suffering.** Saul comes to make Christians suffer (1-2, 13-14), but is himself made to suffer (3-4, 8-9). He comes to bind people (2, 14), and yet ends up himself having to be led like a prisoner (8-9). It's his first taste of what it means to be a Christ-like servant of the Lord, associating with His death (16; cf 8:32-35).
- **Covenant.** Saul represents a member of the **old covenant** (a Jewish *non-Christian*) desperately resisting the Spirit (7:51-53, 58; 8:1-3) yet clinging onto old covenant things that point to Jesus, i.e. the priesthood and Jerusalem (9:1-2; cf 6:11-14). Ananias represents a Jewish member of the **new covenant** (a Jewish *Christian*). In a way, the whole episode is about **the new covenant breaking into the old covenant and firing it**

outwards, as Saul sees the fulfilment of the old covenant in Jesus, and becomes a new covenant man, empowered by the Holy Spirit for mission to the Gentiles. (NB Saul's transformation isn't so much about abandoning Judaism as seeing Jesus as its fulfilment. The Kingdom ruled by Jewish King Jesus is for every nation [cf Ps. 18:49-50; 98:1-3]).

- **Geography.** In 8:1-3 the Saul persecutes the Jerusalem church, scattering them into Judea and Samaria, ironically fulfilling God's purposes (1:8). **The church is on the move.** (Notice that there's lots of 'road'/'way' language in Acts 8-9 - they're the same Greek word: *hodos*). Before his transformation, Saul was trying to bring Christians in Damascus **back to Jerusalem** (1-3, 13-14), the very opposite of Jesus' outwards-moving purpose in 1:8. Afterwards he became **the most outwards-moving witness in the whole Bible** (cf 15), starting again from Jerusalem (9:26-28) and travelling around the known world as far as Rome (28:14), and maybe even Spain (Rom. 15:24, 28). This is significant for the rest of Acts.

SAUL'S TRANSFORMATION IN ACTS THROUGH CONVERSION & COMMISSION

Saul's transformation is so important in Acts that it's repeated three times – in ch 9, 22 and 26. Only Peter's witness to Cornelius involves a similar degree of repetition (in ch 10-11). Both these episodes are about Jews – one (Peter) a disciple of Christ and the other (Saul) an opponent of Christ – encountering the heavenly Lord Jesus and coming to understand **God's acceptance of Gentiles**, in order that they might become **witnesses** to them (see 9:15; 10:28,34-35; 1:8). As Gentiles it's humbling to realise that **Christianity was for Jews before it was for us** (see 3:25-26; 13:44-48; cf Rom. 1:16; 11:17-18): it was a huge thing at this stage in history **for Gentiles to enter the company of God's people.** Unlike Peter, however, Saul needs to be '**converted**' before he is **commissioned**. Saul hated Christianity full stop (9:1-2), and had to be brought to his knees before Jesus before he was ready for Gentile mission (9:3-6).

The **three accounts** of Saul's transformation each have a **distinct emphasis**, reflecting both the needs of the particular audience and its place in the unfolding story of Acts. **Acts 9** is told by the narrator, with the emphasis on **conversion** – the aggressively active persecutor becomes the passively suffering preacher. In **Acts 22** and **26** the emphasis is on **commission** – Paul defends his mission as authentically Jewish and then demonstrates his faithfulness to his call to bring gospel light to outsiders. Acts 26 (esp. v18) can be seen as the **climax** of the repetition.

STRUCTURE OF THE TEXT, WITH MINOR COMMENTS

- 1-9 **Jesus confronts Saul** (1-2, 14). The letters were probably written to introduce the local synagogues to Saul, to give them the official Jewish line against Christianity and to give Saul authority to take prisoners.
- 10-16 **Jesus calls Ananias** (13-16). We can understand Ananias' reluctance – he was just the sort of person Saul had come to imprison, and so just the sort of person the Lord would use to comfort, heal and empower the now humbled Saul.
- 17-19 **Ananias comforts Saul**

Group Study Outline

Acts 9:1-19 Theme Sentence

The Lord Jesus, at one with His church, transforms Saul the aggressive Jewish persecutor into Saul the suffering missionary to the Gentiles.

Launching Question

How is a caterpillar transformed – in terms of what it is and what it does – when it changes into a butterfly? Why does that transformation seem so *nice*?!

READ Acts 7:59-8:1-3 and then 9:1-2

What kind of person was Saul? What was he trying to do? Why (see 6:11-14)?

Would *he* have thought of himself as 'religious'? ... or as 'good'?

Would *you* describe him as religious or good?

Thinking of 9:1-2, how was Saul fitting in with God's purposes in 1:8?

READ Acts 9:3-9

Describe the experience Saul had on the road to Damascus.

What did he see and what did he hear?

What did he suddenly realise about Jesus? ... and about Christians?

Why is v5 surprising?

How would Saul's encounter have left him feeling, given what he'd been doing?

What was the principal problem with the way he was trying to live for God?

What was the *real* way God would establish the Jewish hopes?

Thinking it through

Why is attacking Christians such a serious thing to do?

How does 5 encourage us if we're feeling under pressure from non-Christians?

What would Jesus want us to know?

How could we be like Saul before his conversion? Where should our principal religious focus be? Where do our hopes lie (see also 7:54-60)?

READ ACTS 9:10-18

Describe Ananias.

What's the big thing he gets right about Jesus (unlike Saul in 1-5a)?

How is his response to Jesus understandable?

What's amazing about the way the Lord uses Ananias?

... given the situation he was in, and the person he's sent to?

How might it have felt for Saul, having Ananias minister to him?

When did Paul see?

What's amazing about the way the Lord would use Saul?

... given Saul's previous plans? (Compare v.1-2 with v.15-16)

How is Saul's transformation like that of a caterpillar into a butterfly?!

Thinking it through

What encouragements are there here when respected people (especially those in positions of power or influence) zealously attack Christianity and us?

What could Jesus do with them? How could their experience be like Saul's?

What could Jesus do with us? How could our experience be like Ananias'?

Acts 9:1-19



Introduction

Not only is Acts all about **geography**, it's also all about **covenant**, and these two ideas fit together in important ways.

The **geography** is spelled out and summarised in 1:1-12: Jesus, raised from the dead, spends time with the apostles in and around *Jerusalem*, before being taken up to *heaven*. He will empower them, through the Holy Spirit, to be His witnesses in *Jerusalem, Judea and Samaria*, and to *the end of the earth*. **Geographically, Jesus moves upwards so that His people might move outwards.** So far the Christian witness has covered Jerusalem (ch.1-7), and is now spreading out across the whole of Judea and Samaria (8:1-40, esp. v.1). Next stop, **the ends of the earth...**

But it's not quite as simple as that. Christianity didn't start from scratch in 1st century Jerusalem – it's **the continuation of an old, old, story**. It's about God fulfilling His OT promises, His **covenants** with His people, Israel. We see that in all the many references to Israel (1:6; 2:22,36), Abraham (3:13,25; 7:2; 13:26), Moses (3:22; 7:37; 26:22-23), David (2:25-36; 13:22-23,34) and the prophets (2:16; 3:18,24-25; 7:52; 8:27-35)! The story of Cornelius in Acts 10-11 shows the lengths to which God has to go to persuade converted Jews that God's promises are for all: **how can the Christian witness** (with its theological and cultural basis in Judaism, and therefore with Israelites as 'its people' and Israel as 'its place') **spread beyond the borders of Israel to the ends of the earth?** The answer is that, in Jesus, there has been a fulfilling and a progressing of the covenant (see Hebrews for more details!) so that in the **new covenant** God's community is even open to those beyond Israel. **It's all about Jesus**, and (as Stephen's sermon explains in Acts 7) is **not to be tied to the temple or to Jerusalem**.

But some stubborn Jews (Saul!) will need some persuading of that ...

[MS]

Acts 9:1-19 Theme Sentence

The Lord Jesus, at one with His church, transforms Saul the aggressive Jewish persecutor into Saul the suffering missionary to the Gentiles.

Application

- To persecute Christians is to persecute Jesus; it's hazardous to your health!
- Be encouraged, Christian, that Jesus is at one with you and feels the pain of your persecution. That doesn't stop him sending us in daunting ministry.
- Complacently religious people in positions of power can be the most aggressive opponents of God. But even they can be transformed by Jesus to serve God and others sacrificially.