

Your Faith Story

One of our goals for Connect Groups this year is to hear the faith stories of those in our group. Sharing our own faith story is a great way to begin these conversations. This weekend, we will be able to discuss our testimonies and help others process and share theirs.

Biblical Passage: Acts 22

Acts 22 is one of three times in Acts that Luke describes Saul's conversion. Along with Acts 9 and 26, chapter 22 displays the three main parts of a person's testimony. Spend time with your group reading and processing Paul's testimony in Acts 22, discovering how Paul shared:

- Who he was before Christ
- How he came to know Christ
- What his life has been like since his conversion and his mission as a result.

Using this passage as a guide, we can then discuss our own personal testimonies. People in our class should know our testimony and understand how and when we came to Christ. Connect Group members should know how Christ is making a difference in our life today as a result. Sharing your faith story clearly, concisely, and compellingly will be encouraging to those present.

Use the guide as a resource for building and presenting your testimony. Answering the questions will help you form the presentation of your testimony and give confidence and permission to others in the classroom to do the same.

Bridge the conversation between discussing Paul's testimony and your testimony to challenging class members to consider and develop their own testimony. Use the available handout to help others develop their own testimonies during class time. Here are some things you may discover in the process:

- Some in your group don't have a faith testimony: they have never trusted Christ
- Some in your group have never processed their story clearly, concisely, and compellingly
- Some in your group know their story, they have never shared it with others
- Some in your group have shared their story, but never used it as a bridge to hear the story of another.

Use this lesson to bring clarity to the faith journey of each member. Allow the Holy Spirit to work during your time together, challenging us all to be witnesses of God's gospel message, present in us.

NOTE: Additional training on how to build and share your testimony will be offered over a 2-week Equip Class led by Glynn Robinson on Wednesday, April 26 and May 3, 6:30PM. This will be a great time of training for group members and leaders who want to be more effective in their witness.

Register online for this class at: fbccov.org/equip.

Examine Paul's story in Acts 22 regarding his encounter with Jesus. Paul's manner of sharing His testimony followed this pattern:

- This is who I was before Christ. (22:3-5)
- This was the turning point. (22:6-9)
- This is who I am after Christ or the difference that Christ has made in my life. (22:10-21)

This outline will help you express what God has done in your life and give structure to your simple, easy-to-follow story. Start by writing out your answers in a format that you can practice. Using the guide below, aim to share each section in about one minute.

1. What was your life like before Christ? (Romans 3:23)

- What impact did faith have on your life?
- Where did you get your happiness and security?
- How did areas where you put your trust let you down?

2. When and under what circumstances did you receive Christ? (Romans 5:8)

- When was the first time you heard the Gospel? What was your reaction to it?
- What role did Christian relationships or community play in your journey?
- What led you to begin considering and then finally surrender your life to Jesus?
- What were the obstacles in your mind just before you received Christ?
- Repeat the prayer you said to God to ask for forgiveness for your sin and invite Christ into your life (Romans 10:9).

If you accepted Christ as a small child, then think about when your faith became your own.

3. What is your life like after receiving Christ? (2 Corinthians 5:17)

- How has God changed you, your relationships, etc., since receiving Christ?
- How did receiving Christ address the problems that you had in your life?
- If you had to describe what it means to become a Christian, what would you say?

As you prepare and practice your story, think about these suggestions to keep your story relevant and easy to follow:

- **Pray:** Ask God for wisdom as you share your story.
- **Clarity:** Avoid being too wordy or too vague. Be clear.
- **Christian words:** Don't use Christian words without an explanation.
- **Connection:** Describe your life in ways that will help others recognize similarities in their own lives.

Your Faith Story

Before you can share your story, you must know your story. This questionnaire will help you express what God has done in your life.

Most times, people will tend to give you two minutes of their attention while you share your faith story. That's enough if you are prepared. To practice, write your faith story on this page.

1. What was your life like before Christ (about 100 words)?

2. When and under what circumstances did you receive Christ (about 300 words)?

- How did you hear?

- What did you hear?

- How did you respond?

3. What is your life like after receiving Christ (about 100 words)?

Acts 22:1-21

¹ "Brothers and fathers, listen now to my defense."

² When they heard him speak to them in Aramaic, they became very quiet.

Then Paul said: ³ "I am a Jew, born in Tarsus of Cilicia, but brought up in this city. I studied under Gamaliel and was thoroughly trained in the law of our ancestors. I was just as zealous for God as any of you are today. ⁴ I persecuted the followers of this Way to their death, arresting both men and women and throwing them into prison, ⁵ as the high priest and all the Council can themselves testify. I even obtained letters from them to their associates in Damascus, and went there to bring these people as prisoners to Jerusalem to be punished.

⁶ "About noon as I came near Damascus, suddenly a bright light from heaven flashed around me. ⁷ I fell to the ground and heard a voice say to me, 'Saul! Saul! Why do you persecute me?'

⁸ "'Who are you, Lord?' I asked.

" 'I am Jesus of Nazareth, whom you are persecuting,' he replied. ⁹ My companions saw the light, but they did not understand the voice of him who was speaking to me.

¹⁰ "'What shall I do, Lord?' I asked.

" 'Get up,' the Lord said, 'and go into Damascus. There you will be told all that you have been assigned to do.' ¹¹ My companions led me by the hand into Damascus, because the brilliance of the light had blinded me.

¹² "A man named Ananias came to see me. He was a devout observer of the law and highly respected by all the Jews living there. ¹³ He stood beside me and said, 'Brother Saul, receive your sight!' And at that very moment I was able to see him.

¹⁴ "Then he said: 'The God of our ancestors has chosen you to know his will and to see the Righteous One and to hear words from his mouth. ¹⁵ You will be his witness to all people of what you have seen and heard. ¹⁶ And now what are you waiting for? Get up, be baptized and wash your sins away, calling on his name.'

¹⁷ "When I returned to Jerusalem and was praying at the temple, I fell into a trance ¹⁸ and saw the Lord speaking to me. 'Quick!' he said. 'Leave Jerusalem immediately, because the people here will not accept your testimony about me.'

¹⁹ "Lord," I replied, "these people know that I went from one synagogue to another to imprison and beat those who believe in you. ²⁰ And when the blood of your martyr^[a] Stephen was shed, I stood there giving my approval and guarding the clothes of those who were killing him."

²¹ "Then the Lord said to me, 'Go; I will send you far away to the Gentiles.' "

Additional Texts in Acts Related to Paul's Conversion and Testimony

Acts 9:1-31

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.

Acts 26:1-29

26 Then Agrippa said to Paul, "You have permission to speak for yourself."

So Paul motioned with his hand and began his defense: ² "King Agrippa, I consider myself fortunate to stand before you today as I make my defense against all the accusations of the Jews, ³ and especially so because you are well acquainted with all the Jewish customs and controversies. Therefore, I beg you to listen to me patiently.

⁴ "The Jewish people all know the way I have lived ever since I was a child, from the beginning of my life in my own country, and also in Jerusalem. ⁵ They have known me for a long time and can testify, if they are willing, that I conformed to the strictest sect of our religion, living as a Pharisee. ⁶ And now it is because of my hope in what God has promised our ancestors that I am on trial today. ⁷ This is the promise our twelve tribes are hoping to see fulfilled as they earnestly serve God day and night. King Agrippa, it is because of this hope that these Jews are accusing me. ⁸ Why should any of you consider it incredible that God raises the dead?

⁹ "I too was convinced that I ought to do all that was possible to oppose the name of Jesus of Nazareth. ¹⁰ And that is just what I did in Jerusalem. On the authority of the chief priests I put many of the Lord's people in prison, and when they were put to death, I cast my vote against them. ¹¹ Many a time I went from one synagogue to another to have them punished, and I tried to force them to blaspheme. I was so obsessed with persecuting them that I even hunted them down in foreign cities.

¹² "On one of these journeys I was going to Damascus with the authority and commission of the chief priests. ¹³ About noon, King Agrippa, as I was on the road, I saw a light from heaven, brighter than the sun, blazing around me and my companions. ¹⁴ We all fell to the ground, and I heard a voice saying to me in Aramaic,^[a] 'Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me? It is hard for you to kick against the goads.'

¹⁵ "Then I asked, 'Who are you, Lord?'

" 'I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting,' the Lord replied. ¹⁶ 'Now get up and stand on your feet. I have appeared to you to appoint you as a servant and as a witness of what you have seen and will see of me. ¹⁷ I will rescue you from your own people and from the Gentiles. I am sending you to them ¹⁸ to open their eyes and turn them from darkness to light, and from the power of Satan to God, so that they may receive forgiveness of sins and a place among those who are sanctified by faith in me.'

¹⁹ “So then, King Agrippa, I was not disobedient to the vision from heaven. ²⁰ First to those in Damascus, then to those in Jerusalem and in all Judea, and then to the Gentiles, I preached that they should repent and turn to God and demonstrate their repentance by their deeds. ²¹ That is why some Jews seized me in the temple courts and tried to kill me. ²² But God has helped me to this very day; so I stand here and testify to small and great alike. I am saying nothing beyond what the prophets and Moses said would happen— ²³ that the Messiah would suffer and, as the first to rise from the dead, would bring the message of light to his own people and to the Gentiles.”

²⁴ At this point Festus interrupted Paul’s defense. “You are out of your mind, Paul!” he shouted. “Your great learning is driving you insane.”

²⁵ “I am not insane, most excellent Festus,” Paul replied. “What I am saying is true and reasonable. ²⁶ The king is familiar with these things, and I can speak freely to him. I am convinced that none of this has escaped his notice, because it was not done in a corner. ²⁷ King Agrippa, do you believe the prophets? I know you do.”

²⁸ Then Agrippa said to Paul, “Do you think that in such a short time you can persuade me to be a Christian?”

²⁹ Paul replied, “Short time or long—I pray to God that not only you but all who are listening to me today may become what I am, except for these chains.”

COMMENTARY - Acts 22:1-21 (Primary Passage)

Paul's speech before the temple crowd was primarily aimed at establishing his full commitment to Judaism. What he evidently could not accomplish through his participation in the Nazirite vow he now sought to establish by this address. Basically, the speech was his own first-person narration of the events Luke related in chap. 9: his former zeal for Judaism (vv. 1–5), his encounter with the risen Christ on the Damascus road (vv. 6–11), and the visit of Ananias (vv. 12–16). The final portion of his speech is new to the Acts narrative but evidently occurred on Paul's first visit to Jerusalem after his conversion, the visit covered by 9:26–30. It relates a vision Paul had in the temple, where the risen Lord commissioned him for his mission to the Gentiles (vv. 17–21). Up to this point the crowd had listened attentively to Paul's words. With his reference to the Gentile witness, Paul was in trouble with them again (v. 22).

His Former Zeal (22:1–5)

22:1 In his opening words Paul addressed the crowd with the formal introduction Stephen used before the Sanhedrin, "Brothers and fathers" (v. 1; cf. 7:2). Both were making a defense and were concerned to establish their loyalty to Judaism; hence this deferential Jewish address. Paul described his address in formal language as a "defense" (apologia). His speech did not, however, address the charge that started the riot—that he had desecrated the temple. It did address the larger issue—Paul's faithfulness to Judaism. This defense continues to unfold in the speeches that follow—before Felix and the Jews in chap. 24 and before Agrippa in chap. 26. In a sense all the remainder of Acts is Paul's defense before the Jews. Paul is shown to be a faithful Jew, particularly when one agrees with him that faith in the risen Christ is the true culmination of Judaism.

22:2–3 As in 21:40, Paul's use of their native tongue underlined his Jewishness and brought a hush over the crowd (v. 2). Paul then showed how his early life was in every respect that of a strict, practicing Jew. He was born in Tarsus, reared in Jerusalem, and educated under Gamaliel (v. 3). "Born, reared, educated" was a fixed biographical formula common in Greek writings. The significance to this is that when Paul referred to his being "brought up" in Jerusalem, the most natural meaning is that he was reared from childhood in Jerusalem, not in Tarsus, as is commonly supposed. His family must have moved to Jerusalem when he was still quite young. This ties in with the later reference to his nephew's being in Jerusalem (23:16). It underscores the point Paul wanted to make to the Jerusalem crowd: he was no Diaspora maverick but was nurtured from childhood in the holy city itself. Acts 22:3 is the sole New Testament reference to Paul's education under Gamaliel, and this tradition has often been challenged by scholars on the grounds that his letters do not reflect formal rabbinic training. More recent scholarship, however, has indicated many points at which Paul reflected thoroughly rabbinic thought, and in his letters Paul himself referred to his thorough training in and zeal for the law (cf. Gal 1:14; Phil 3:4–7). Again, this is the very point Paul wanted to underscore with the Jerusalem Jews: far from being a lawbreaker, as they were now accusing him (21:21, 28), Paul's former life had been marked by a zeal for the law that matched or exceeded their own.

22:4–5 Paul then described his former days as a persecutor of the Christian movement. Here his own account parallels Luke's earlier description of Paul's days as persecutor of the Christians

(8:3; 9:1f.; cf. 26:9–11), and these other texts supplement the present passage. As in 9:2 Paul referred to Christianity as “the Way,” a designation that will recur throughout his defense speeches. It not only serves to link Christianity closely with Judaism but also with Christ. It was “the Way” Christ established; to persecute the Way was to persecute Christ himself (9:5; 22:8).

The Encounter on the Damascus Road (22:6–11)

At this point Paul related his vision of Christ on the Damascus road. This is one of three detailed accounts of Paul’s conversion given in Acts. The first, contained in 9:1–30, is Luke’s third-person narrative of Paul’s experience. The present account and that of 26:4–23 are Paul’s own testimony to the event, delivered in the course of his defense speeches. The three accounts are parallel in their essentials but differ in small details. The most striking differences are to be seen in a comparison between the two accounts given in Paul’s defense speeches. These are very much adapted to the audience to whom they were addressed. For instance, in the present speech before the Jewish mob, Paul gave close attention to Ananias and his devout Jewishness. In the speech of chap. 26 before Agrippa and the Roman officials, Ananias is not even mentioned. Paul considered the role of this pious Jewish Christian not as important for the predominantly Gentile audience. The significant matter is that Luke included a detailed treatment of Paul’s conversion three times, this device of repetition underscoring the event and testifying to its importance.

22:6–9 Verses 6–11 are essentially parallel to 9:3–8, the only differences being in small details and the first-person narration. Only 22:6 gives the specific detail that it was “about noon” when the vision came upon Paul. This heightened the emphasis on the brightness of the vision. This was no nighttime experience but occurred in broad daylight, at noon when the sun was at its brightest. Verse 7 is closely parallel to 9:4, relating how Paul fell to the ground and heard the heavenly voice addressing him by his Hebrew name, “Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?” As in 9:5, Paul responded by asking the heavenly visitant to identify himself—“Who are you, Lord?” Of all three conversion accounts, only in 22:8 do the words “of Nazareth” occur. The full designation “Jesus of Nazareth” was appropriate to the Jewish audience before whom Paul was relating his experience. The most significant difference between Paul’s account and the earlier conversion narrative occurs in 22:9, where it is said that Paul’s traveling companions saw the light but did not understand the voice speaking to Paul. In 9:7 the companions are said to have heard the sound but not to have seen anyone. Paul’s account emphasizes their seeing; the earlier account, their hearing. Both accounts make the same point. The companions were witnesses to the experience and could verify that something objective took place. It was not merely an inner experience of Paul’s psyche. On the other hand, the companions were not participants in the experience: they heard a sound but did not receive the message, saw a light but not the risen Lord. The vision itself was solely Paul’s experience.

22:10 Verse 10 parallels 9:6 with the difference that in Paul’s account he referred to Jesus as “the Lord” when relating the command to rise and go into Damascus. Paul made his confession known before his Jewish audience. At the outset of his vision he may not have known whom he was addressing as Lord (v. 8). Now he knew that it was Jesus, the risen Lord. Up to this point in his speech, Paul had identified closely with his Jewish listeners. In every way he had shown himself to be as Jewish as they were. Now he began to draw the line that differentiated himself from them. On the Damascus road he had seen the risen Jesus. Now he confessed Jesus as Lord.

He surely wished the same for them. It was not inappropriate for a faithful Jew to confess Jesus as Lord. He was himself a living witness to that.

22:11 Verse 11 concludes the opening scene of Paul's conversion account. It closely parallels 9:8, relating Paul's blindness and how his companions had to lead him by hand into Damascus. The most significant difference from the earlier account is the reference to "the brilliance of the light" in Paul's account. Indeed, the emphasis on light is striking when one compares chap. 9 with chap. 22. The light was so great it overwhelmed the noonday sun (v. 6). Paul's companions "saw the light" (v. 9). Paul was blinded by "the brilliance of the light" (v. 11). None of these details occur in chap. 9. Perhaps this was Paul's way of highlighting the significance of his conversion. In his experience on the Damascus road, he came to a confession of the risen Lord. He had "seen the light." He wished the same for his fellow Jews in the temple square.

The Role of Ananias (22:12–16)

The account of Ananias's visit to Paul parallels 9:10–17. Although the substance of the two accounts is basically the same, there is not the close verbal agreement that one finds in the two accounts of the vision on the Damascus road. The primary difference is due to the fact that this is Paul's account of his own experience. Thus he did not relate the vision that came to Ananias (9:10–16) but rather Ananias's visit to him. The substance of Ananias's vision is transferred to his visit with Paul as Ananias related that experience to him.

22:12 Paul introduced Ananias as a pious Jew, a strict observer of the Torah, and a person held in high esteem by the Jewish community in Damascus. This is in striking contrast to 9:10, where Luke introduced Ananias as a Christian disciple. The difference is due to the different settings of the two accounts. In Luke's account in chap. 9 Ananias was the essential link-up between the newly converted Paul and the Christian community. In Paul's account before the Jerusalem Jews, Ananias's devotion to Judaism was stressed. Paul wished to make the same point about Ananias he had been making about himself—that his Christian faith in no way detracted from his loyalty to Judaism. This emphasis continues throughout Paul's account of Ananias, where he is consistently portrayed as very Jewish.

22:13–15 Verse 13 parallels 9:17–18 with considerably less detail, relating how Paul recovered his sight through the intercession of Ananias. Verse 14 is not really paralleled in chap. 9, although the idea of Paul's being "chosen" is related in Ananias's vision at 9:15. Ananias's words to Paul have a strong Jewish flavor. "God of our fathers" is strong Old Testament language. The "Righteous One" is a Jewish messianic title, found earlier in the speeches of Peter and of Stephen to Jews (3:14; 7:52). Ananias delivered Christ's commission to Paul. He was to be a witness to all people (v. 15; cf. 9:15). The commission was rather general at this point. Obviously the Jewish crowd did not catch on that all people included the Gentiles. This became much more specific in Paul's account of his temple vision (v. 21). At that point the Jewish crowd got the message all too clearly (cf. v. 22).

22:16 The scene with Ananias concludes with v. 16, which relates Paul's baptism (cf. 9:18b). The phrase translated "what are you waiting for?" is a common Greek idiom and implies that it

was time Paul acted on this commission from the Lord. The first step obviously was to be baptized into the community of believers. “Be baptized and wash your sins away” could be taken as a proof text for baptismal regeneration. The overarching term, however, is “calling upon the name of the Lord,” the profession of faith in Christ that is the basis for the act of baptism.

The Commission in the Temple (22:17–21)

22:17 Paul concluded his conversion account by telling of a vision he had in the temple which occurred on his “return” to Jerusalem (v. 17). This would indicate that it took place on his first visit to Jerusalem following his conversion (Acts 9:26–30). The account of Acts 9 does not relate this incident. Perhaps the reason Paul referred to it is that it indirectly answers the mob’s charge that he had defiled the temple. A person who goes to the temple for prayer is not likely to desecrate it. In the temple Paul fell into a trance and had a vision of the Lord. In many ways Paul’s vision in the temple parallels the call of Isaiah (Isa 6:1–13). Just as with Isaiah, Paul had a vision of the Lord (for Isaiah the Lord was Yahweh). Both experienced a call, a commission. Both were told that the people would resist their message. In Isaiah’s case the prophet was told to remain in the city in the face of the resistance. Paul was told to leave. The content of Paul’s commission in the temple is also paralleled by Paul’s own references to the experience in his letters. Paul expressed his call to the apostolate in terms of a vision of the Lord (1 Cor 9:1; 15:8). As here, Paul connected his call directly with his conversion and transformation from persecutor to witness for Christ (Gal 1:13–16; 1 Cor 15:9–11). Finally, Paul interpreted his call specifically as a call to the Gentiles (v. 21; Gal 1:16).

22:18–21 Paul’s command to leave Jerusalem (v. 18) was perhaps connected with the conflict he encountered in the synagogue of the Hellenistic Jews (9:29). They certainly would not accept Paul’s testimony. Still, Paul protested against the order to leave (vv. 19–20). Such protests are a common feature of biblical commissioning narratives. Isaiah protested his unworthiness (Isa 6:5). Paul’s protest was that he had a convincing testimony to bear. All Jerusalem knew his former reputation as a persecutor of the Christians, even to the point of participation in Stephen’s martyrdom (cf. 7:58b; 8:1a). They would know that something dramatic must have happened to reverse his direction. Still the Lord insisted that Paul go from Jerusalem (v. 21). He had another task for him—to witness to the Gentiles. Paul’s Gentile mission was thus connected closely to the refusal of the Jews to accept his witness to Christ. One recalls Jesus’ parable of the great banquet that makes this same point (Luke 14:16–24). It also was the problem Paul wrestled with in Rom 9–11. His answer there was that the obduracy of Israel was perhaps a temporary hardening to allow for the gospel to be taken to the Gentiles. In any event, the reference to the Gentiles led to an immediate fulfillment of Jesus’ warning that the people would not accept his testimony. This was certainly true of the temple crowd listening to Paul. With the mention of the Gentiles, the silence ceased, the mob mentality resumed, and Paul was cut off (v. 22).

John B. Polhill, *Acts*, vol. 26, The New American Commentary (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1992), 457–463.

ADDITIONAL COMMENTARY – Acts 9

Paul's New Witness to Christ (9:1–31) It would be hard to overestimate the significance of Paul's conversion, not only for the subsequent narrative of Acts but for the history of Christianity as a whole. He was, in his own words, called to be a missionary to the Gentiles (cf. Gal 1:16), and Acts certainly confirms that picture. For Luke and for Paul (cf. 1 Cor 15:9f.) there was no more certain evidence of God's power and grace than in his transformation of the church's persecutor into its greatest witness. Paul's was a radical conversion experience, a total turnabout accomplished by Christ himself. Its importance for Luke is evidenced by the fact that he told the story in some detail three times in Acts—here in 9:1–30, then in Paul's speech before a Jewish crowd in the temple area (22:3–21), and finally in Paul's defense before the Jewish King Agrippa (26:2–23). Acts 9:1–30 emphasizes the complete transformation of Paul from the persecutor of the church to the one who was persecuted for his witness to Christ.

Paul's conversion account falls into two main parts: vv. 1–22 relate the story of his transformation from persecutor of the church to witness for Christ, and vv. 23–31 show how the former persecutor became the one persecuted for bearing the name of Christ.

Christ's Appearance to Paul (9:1–9)

9:1–2 - The first two verses provide the chronological and geographical setting. More significantly, they picture the pre-conversion Paul, which contrasts radically with the picture of Paul after the encounter on the Damascus road. Verse 1 picks up the picture in 8:3. Paul was still the church's number one enemy, still raging against it, "breathing out murderous threats." Paul's role was not one of executioner but of arresting officer. His intent was to stamp out the new movement; and when it did come to a question of execution of Christians, he did not hesitate to vote for the death penalty (cf. 26:10). Originally, Paul's activity had primarily been directed at the Christians in and around Jerusalem (8:3; 26:10). Evidently, some had fled the city and taken refuge in Damascus. Paul approached the high priest, who probably was still Caiaphas at this time. He requested not official extradition papers but more likely introductory letters from the Sanhedrin to the synagogues of Damascus in order to secure their support in his efforts to apprehend the Christian fugitives and return them to Jerusalem for trial. Much debate centers on whether the Sanhedrin would have jurisdiction in such cases, but there is some evidence the high priest was given the right of extradition in an earlier time. The possibility remains open that the Romans still granted him similar rights. How much autonomy the Jewish synagogues enjoyed during the Roman period with regard to discipline of their members for religious offenses is unclear. Paul himself spoke of his receiving scourgings from the synagogues on five occasions (2 Cor 11:24). His very desire to go to Damascus betrays his searing rage against the Christians, especially if one remembers that Damascus was a good six-day foot journey from Jerusalem. The detail that the Christians were referred to as those who belonged to "the way" (v. 2) perhaps reflects an early self-designation of the Jewish Christian community in which they saw themselves as the "true way" within the larger Jewish community. 9:3–6 As Paul approached the gates of Damascus, suddenly a great light from heaven flashed around him. The light must have been intense, for the time of the occurrence was "around midday" (cf. 22:6; 26:13). The light represents the heavenly epiphany, the divine glory that enveloped the little

caravan. At the sight the awe-struck Paul fell to the ground, a reaction found in the Old Testament from those who experienced a similar divine visitation. Then a voice came from heaven, “Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?” Paul answered, “Who are you, Lord?” Some note that at this point Paul did not recognize Jesus as the one speaking to him and that his reference to “Lord” need not mean more than a polite “sir,” a meaning the Greek word *kyrie* often has. But Paul did recognize the voice of a heavenly messenger and probably intended “Lord” in that sense (cf. Exod 3:13). In any event, he quickly learned who the “Lord” was: “I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting.” It would be hard to imagine how these words must have struck Paul. They were a complete refutation of all he had been. He had persecuted Christians for their “blasphemous lie” that Jesus was risen, that he was the Lord reigning in glory.

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

The certainty of the resurrection turned Paul from Jesus’ most zealous persecutor to his most ardent witness. 9:7–9 Paul’s traveling companions served as authenticators that what happened to Paul was an objective event, not merely a rumbling of his inner psyche. They heard a sound, but they did not see the vision of Jesus. Acts 22:9 says that they saw the light but did not hear the voice of the one who spoke with Paul. The two accounts are not contradictory but underline the same event. Paul’s companions heard a sound and saw a light. They could verify that an objective heavenly manifestation took place. They did not participate in the heavenly communication, however, neither seeing the vision of Jesus nor hearing the words spoken to Paul. The revelation was solely to Paul. So powerful was that revelation that Paul was totally blind when he rose to his feet and opened his eyes. The miracle was not a punitive one, as with Elymas the magician (Acts 13:11). Rather, the picture is of Paul in his brokenness and helplessness. The radiance of his vision had blinded him. Reduced to total powerlessness, he had to be led by others into the city. That he neither ate nor drank for three days could be an expression of penitence on Paul’s part but is more likely the result of his shock, confusion, and utter brokenness of will. The raging persecutor had been reduced to a shambles.

The Call to be Persecuted (9:10–19a) 9:10a

The second scene in Paul’s conversion story took place in Damascus and revolved around a disciple named Ananias. Damascus was an ancient city, dating back at least into the second millennium b.c. It was an oasis city on the border of the Arabian desert and along the main trade route linking Egypt and Mesopotamia. From 64 b.c. it had been under Roman influence and belonged to the association of ten Hellenistic cities known as the Decapolis. It had a large Jewish

population, as is attested by the many Jews Josephus reported were killed there during the Jewish war with Rome. How Christians first reached Damascus is unknown. Ananias seems to have been a disciple in Damascus before the current stream of refugees from Paul's persecution arrived. Luke gave a selective, not a complete, picture of the geographical spread of Christianity. The evidence of Acts itself would indicate the early spread of the Christian witness to places like Damascus and Rome, perhaps through normal social routes such as trade, military service, and the like. 9:10b–12 The "Lord" appeared to Ananias in a vision. That it was Jesus and not God who was so designated is clear from vv. 14–16. Ananias responded with, "Here am I, Lord" ("Yes, Lord," NIV), words reminiscent of the response of Old Testament characters to a vision of God, such as Abraham (Gen 22:1f.; 11) and the boy Samuel (1 Sam 3:4–14). Jesus instructed Ananias to seek out Paul. His instructions were precise, giving the exact location Paul was to be found. He was staying with a man named Judas who lived on "Straight Street."

One is intrigued by Jesus' informing Ananias of Paul's vision—a vision within a vision! The information was necessary for Ananias to know that Paul was prepared for him. Further, it emphasized the centrality of the divine leading in the entire episode. This was the third vision in the story of Paul's conversion. The Lord was behind every detail in the story. Ananias learned of his own role through the vision of Paul. He was to enter Judas's house and lay his hands upon Paul so that Paul might recover his sight (v. 12). Ananias in no way established the legitimacy of Paul. There was no "succession" through the laying on of his hands. He was merely a pious, but otherwise unknown, Jewish Christian of Damascus whom Jesus commissioned as his agent in the healing and baptism of Paul.

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

9:15–16 Verses 15–16 comprise the heart of Ananias's vision, as the Lord outlined Paul's future role. He was the Lord's "chosen instrument." The expression is an unusual one and finds its closest New Testament parallels in Paul's own writings. The emphasis on Paul's being "chosen" recalls his own strong sense of the divine call, which set him apart from birth (Gal 1:15). His call was described here in terms of his bearing Jesus' name before Gentiles, kings, and the sons of Israel. His mission "to the ends of the earth" immediately comes to mind, but the reference probably is to Paul's appearance in trial before these entities. The expression of bearing one's witness "before" is the language of giving one's testimony in a legal setting and is a fulfillment of Jesus' words in Luke 12:11f. and Luke 21:12. It is thus a picture of Paul on trial before Gentile rulers like Felix and Festus (chaps. 24–25), before kings like Agrippa (chap. 26), before local Jewish synagogues and even the Sanhedrin (chap. 23). Verse 15 is thus closely linked to v. 16. Paul would suffer for the name of Christ. The one who once was the church's most vehement persecutor would now be the one who would willingly accept persecution for the sake of the name (cf. 5:41). This is the core point of the Pauline conversion narrative. It reappears at its conclusion as Paul is shown persecuted by the Jews both in Damascus (9:23) and in Jerusalem

(9:29). In nothing is his conversion more clearly illustrated than in his transformation from persecutor to persecuted.

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

The Former Persecutor’s Witness to Christ (9:19b–22) 9:19b–22

This section of Acts illustrates the authenticity of Paul’s conversion experience. It begins with the brief notice that Paul spent several days with the disciples in Damascus after his baptism. This probably refers to their instructing him in Christ. Even though Paul was steeped in the Old Testament and would have had some familiarity with Christian views from his experience as persecutor, he was still a new convert and needed further introduction to the teachings about Christ before he would be ready to strike out on his own witness. Evidently he was soon ready because we find him “at once” preaching in the Jewish synagogues that Jesus is the Son of God. It is noteworthy that Luke described Paul as preaching Christ as “Son of God.” This is the only occurrence of the title in all of Acts, and yet for Paul it was a central concept. In fact, Paul connected the term “Son of God” with his call as an apostle in Gal 1:16 and in Rom 1:1–4. Luke’s close connection of this term with Paul’s conversion and call would seem to be a rather accurate reminiscence of Paul’s distinctive views. The astonishment of his Jewish listeners in the synagogue furnishes a sort of “choral response” to the completeness of Paul’s conversion. As Ananias before them (vv. 13–14), they simply could not believe that the former persecutor had made such a radical about-face. Paul simply preached all the more forcefully. One could even say that his zeal as a Christian was even stronger than his former zeal as persecutor. Luke described him as “proving” (*symbibazō*) that Jesus is the Christ. The Greek word means to join or put together and seems to picture his assembling Old Testament texts to demonstrate how Christ fulfilled them. No wonder the Damascene Jews were astounded and totally unable to respond to the skillful interpretations of the former student of Gamaliel. Paul gave another picture of his experience following his conversion in Damascus. He stated in Gal 1:15–17 that he did not consult anyone or go to the apostles in Jerusalem, but rather he went off for a period in Arabia before returning to Damascus. “Consult any man” does not rule out Paul’s interaction with the Damascene Christians or the Jewish synagogue. The “consulting” to which Paul alluded

was the idea that he received his apostleship and his apostolic credentials from the apostles in Jerusalem. No, said Paul, he did not go to Jerusalem to confer with the apostles there and receive instructions from them. In Galatians, Paul took pains to emphasize in the face of his Judaizing opponents that his apostleship to the Gentiles was a direct call from God and in no way was dependent on or subservient to the Jerusalem apostolate. Acts would certainly verify that picture. Luke did not mention the Arabian period, it is true. Perhaps he was unaware of it. Perhaps he chose not to deal with it in order to concentrate on the Jewish opposition to Paul and the persecution that resulted. Summary. Many attempts have been made to “explain” Paul’s conversion, often in the form of rationalistic explanations, such as a thunderstorm outside Damascus, or an epileptic seizure, or psychogenic blindness as the result of repressed guilt.

Others see Paul’s conversion as a total rational experience, a coming to awareness of the correctness of the Christian views. Others have sought for the factors that prepared him for his conversion—his coming to the end of his rope with the utter hopelessness of Pharisaic legal righteousness or his being steeped in Pharisaic apocalypticism. All such attempts to get into the mind of Paul are at base speculative, for Paul never provided us with such an analysis of his conversion, nor did Luke. Surely experiences with the Christians must have impressed Paul. Surely the Stephen incident made its impression. But Luke never drew such connections, nor did Paul. What both picture is a radical conversion experience. Paul the persecutor was stopped dead in his tracks on the Damascus road. The risen Jesus showed himself to Paul; and with this confirmation that the Christian claims were indeed true, Paul was completely turned from persecutor to witness. Only one category describes Paul’s experience, a category not uncommon in Acts. It was a miracle, the result of direct divine action. When all is said and done, both Acts and Paul give strikingly similar pictures of his conversion. Both speak of Paul’s former life as persecutor of the church (1 Cor 15:9), even use the same vocabulary to describe how he “ravaged it” (Gal 1:13). Both speak of his intense zeal (Phil 3:6). Both place the conversion in Damascus (Gal 1:17). Both describe the experience as a vision of the risen Lord, a Christophany (1 Cor 15:8; 9:1; cf. 2 Cor 4:6). Both speak of his testifying to Christ as “God’s Son” immediately after his conversion (Gal 1:16; Acts 9:20). For both it was a radical turning (Phil 3:6–7). For Paul and for Luke, a totally different man emerged from that vision of the risen Lord; and that is conversion.

The remainder of the Pauline conversion narrative illustrates the fulfillment of 9:16. Paul the persecuted became Paul the sufferer, first in Damascus (vv. 23–25) and then in Jerusalem (vv. 26–30). The Jerusalem section also legitimizes the ministry of Paul because he was then accepted by the circle of apostles. A summary statement (v. 31) caps off the whole of 9:1–30. Persecuted in Damascus (9:23–25) 9:23–25 Unable to refute Paul (cf. 6:10), the exasperated Damascene Jews finally “conspired to kill him.” With customary chronological imprecision, Luke described this as occurring “after many days.” Paul gave more definite data. In the third year after his conversion, Paul departed from Damascus for Jerusalem (Gal 1:17–18). When Paul and his disciples learned of the plot, plans were made for assuring his escape from the Jews. That Paul had “disciples” at this point (v. 25) is somewhat surprising. Perhaps they were converts from the synagogues who had responded to his preaching and scriptural argumentation (vv. 20, 22). Since the Jewish plotters were carefully watching the city gates for Paul, another route was selected for his escape. He was lowered in a basket through the window of a house built along the city wall. Paul also referred to this event in 2 Cor 11:32–33. Although there are differences

between the two accounts, the correspondences are remarkable: the setting in Damascus, the plot against Paul, the watching of the gates, the window in the wall, the lowering in a basket. The most significant difference is that in 2 Corinthians the Nabatean ethnarch (“governor”) is described as watching the gates for Paul, while in Acts it was the Jews who did so. Paul’s account raises problems itself. Why, for instance, were the Nabateans after Paul? Possibly Paul had carried on a mission among them during his Arabian period (Gal 1:17) and had incurred the resistance of the authorities. In that event Acts pictures a coalition against the common enemy, the Jews watching the gates from within and the Nabateans from without. The Nabateans perhaps held some jurisdiction over Damascus at this time, in which case the Jews would have enlisted the authorities in their attempt to apprehend Paul. In any case, Paul saw the incident as particularly humiliating, listing it as the crowning event of his trials as an apostle (2 Cor 11:23–33). Acts pictures the same—Paul under trial, Paul the persecuted. Persecuted in Jerusalem (9:26–31) According to Paul’s account, in the third year after his conversion he went to Jerusalem. Paul’s version of this first postconversion visit to Jerusalem differs considerably from that in Acts. Paul and Luke referred to the occasion in order to make totally different points. In Gal 1:18–23 Paul contended with Judaizing opponents who argued that Paul was not a “real” apostle but totally subordinate and inferior to the Jerusalem apostles. Paul’s account of his first Jerusalem visit thus reveals a definite “tendency.”

In order to maintain the independence of his call to be an apostle to the Gentiles, he stressed the minimal contact with the apostles in order to show that he was in no way subordinate to them. Luke’s emphases were totally different. He too did not show Paul’s subordination to the apostles, but he emphasized Paul’s acceptance by them, which was essential in his unfolding picture of the church’s mission to the ends of the earth. Paul was not a maverick missionary, nor were his Gentile converts maverick Christians. The apostles provided an unbroken continuity with the risen Lord and with his commission. Paul’s acceptance by the apostles assures this continuity and the legitimacy of the mission to the Gentiles. Luke had another point to make—the further persecution of Paul at the hands of the Hellenist Jews in Jerusalem, additional evidence that the former persecutor was now the persecuted. No fact more fully illustrated the reality of his conversion. 9:26–28 The emphasis on Paul as the converted persecutor is first struck in v. 26.

On arriving in Jerusalem, Paul attempted to join up with the Christian community there but was at first spurned. Like Ananias, they knew his reputation as persecutor and were not convinced that so vehement an enemy could now be a Christian brother. Barnabas then entered the picture as mediator, his characteristic role in Acts. He took Paul to the apostles and testified to his conversion. Through Barnabas’s words the reader is once again reminded of the absolute centrality of this event and the divine action that brought it about. Why Barnabas did not share the fear of the other Jerusalem Christians is not specified. Perhaps he had learned of Paul’s conversion through some of his fellow Greek-speaking Christians who had come from Damascus. In any event, Barnabas fulfilled his mediating role, securing Paul’s acceptance in the apostolic circle. Paul was now “with them” (v. 28). The Greek text says literally that he was “going in and out among them” in Jerusalem. The expression is familiar from Acts 1:21, where it refers to the circle of apostles. That meaning may well be intended here. Paul was fully accepted into the apostolic circle. He too was a “witness” for Christ. 9:29–30 In vv. 29–30 the pattern begun in Damascus again repeats itself. Paul witnessed in the synagogues and was resisted. This time Paul debated with his fellow Greek-speaking Jews.

One is reminded of Stephen, and it may have been in the same synagogue that Paul gave his testimony for Christ (cf. 6:9–10). Earlier they had succeeded in having Stephen killed. Now they determined to do the same to Paul. Again the Christians learned of the plot and hastened Paul off to the port of Caesarea and thence, presumably by boat, to his hometown of Tarsus. Paul gave the same itinerary in Gal 1:21: from Jerusalem he went to “Syria and Cilicia.” Tarsus was located in Cilicia and came under the Roman provincial administration of Syria. During this residence in his home territory, Paul presumably continued his witness for Christ. There we leave him until Barnabas brought him back to Antioch (Acts 11:25f.). The time span between Paul’s sailing to Tarsus and Barnabas’s bringing him to Antioch covered some ten years or so. Since neither the Pauline Epistles nor Acts covers his activity during this period in Syria-Cilicia, these are often referred to as Paul’s “silent years.” 9:31 Verse 31 concludes the Pauline conversion narrative and completes the entire “persecution” story that began in 8:1b. The persecution was now over with the conversion of its most ardent advocate into a witness for Christ. The “church” was at peace. Luke’s use of the singular “church” could be taken in the “universal sense” as the whole body of Christians in all their local assemblies. That meaning does seem to be found in Paul’s speech at Miletus (Acts 20:28), but everywhere else in Acts “church” refers to a local body of believers. Perhaps the church that Luke focused on here is the Jerusalem church pictured in its witness, which extended throughout all these regions. This is the only mention of Galilean Christians in Acts. Galilee is probably to be included within the reference to “all Judea” in Acts 1:8. Here Luke mentioned it separately to emphasize how the commission to “all Judea” was being fulfilled. Already the witness had reached Galilee. The following passage will show its extension to the coastal towns of Judea. The “peace” of the church is described in terms of the encouragement of the Spirit, the growth of the church, and its reverence and worship (“the fear of the Lord”), terms reminiscent of the earlier summaries in Acts (cf. 2:43–47). It is a familiar pattern. The Lord brings his people through a time of crisis. Through his deliverance the church finds peace and continues to flourish (cf. 5:42). In this case the respite would last until a fresh outbreak of persecution occurred under Herod in chap. 12.

John B. Polhill, [Acts](#), vol. 26, The New American Commentary (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1992), 231–245.