

Saul's Salvation

Acts 9:3—19

Acts 9 begins the turning point for when God changed His dealings with Israel and began to work with the Church, the Body of Christ. Everything previous to this was written about Israel under their prophetic program. It was a continuation of what was going on in Matthew, Mark, Luke and John, which was an advancement of the promises given to Israel in the Old Testament.

However, with the stoning of Stephen, God began putting Israel, and her prophetic program, on the back burner. He will no longer deal with her on the basis of the Kingdom, but will now be dealing with a new entity, the Body of Christ, the new man that was formed with the rising up of Saul (Ephesians 2:15). God is no longer setting Israel over the Gentile nations, but has now allowed individuals to come to Him apart from Israel (Romans 9:4; Ephesians 2:11—13). There is now no distinction between the circumcised and uncircumcised.

Saul's conversion

There are three accounts of Saul's encounter with Jesus Christ on the road to Damascus in the book of Acts. Most of the information is contained in the first account (Acts 9), but a couple of other details can be found in Acts 22 and 26.

At midday, around noon, A great light shone from heaven, brighter than the sun. A voice came out of heaven and said to Saul in the Hebrew dialect, "Why are you persecuting me?" Saul answered back saying, "Who are you, Lord?" The voice answered back, "I am Jesus of Nazareth whom you are persecuting." Paul asked, "What do you want me to do, Lord?"

The Lord Jesus Christ responded by telling Saul to arise, and that He appeared unto him to make him a minister and witness for what he has seen and will be shown in the future. He will be used to turn people from darkness to light. Jesus then told him to go into the city and there it would be told him about the things that He had appointed for him to do.

Paul was led into the city, being blinded by the intense light. He was staying on the street named Straight at the home of Judas. The Lord came to Ananias, a prophet who was a devout man according to the Law, and had a good reputation among the Jews in the city of Damascus. He was told to go and see Saul, who was a chosen vessel to bear the name of Jesus Christ before Gentiles, kings and the children of Israel. Ananias hesitated because of Saul's reputation for persecuting believers.

While at the house of Judas, Saul was praying and fasting, not eating or drinking for three days. During that time, he had a vision from the Lord telling him that Ananias was going to come and he would give him back his sight.

Once Ananias entered the house, he put his hands on Saul and said, "Brother Saul, receive your sight." Immediately, Saul was able to see, like scales had fallen from his eyes. He told Saul that the Lord had chosen him for this very purpose, to be His witness to all men of what he has seen and heard. With that, Ananias told him to arise and be baptized, washing away his sins, calling on the name of the Lord. Saul also received the Holy Spirit. Saul finally took some nourishment and stayed with the disciples in Damascus a number of days.

The above is a summary of the three accounts of Saul's encounter with Jesus Christ on the road to Damascus and the events following in the city. One question often asked is at what point was Saul saved. It seems obvious that it would have been sometime between Jesus speaking to him on the road to Damascus, and the prophet Ananias speaking to him at the home of Judas, before being baptized.

Saved on the road

If Saul were saved while traveling into Damascus, then that would have been the point when he realized who Jesus Christ was and when he put his trust in Him for his salvation. It would have been Jesus Christ who personally preached to him the gospel of salvation and Saul would have believed at that moment.

We know that Jesus did speak to him directly, but that no other person in that group knew what the voice was saying. Jesus would have then been giving a “salvation message” directed exclusively for Saul and no one else. Those who believe Saul was saved at this time believe that when he heard the voice, that he knew then that Jesus was God. Saul does address the voice as Lord a second time when he asked about what he should now do (Acts 22:10), an indication that he knew that Jesus was God and a sign that he had believed by faith. Since he believed Jesus, he followed His instructions to go into the city and waited there. Supporting this idea is Galatians 1:11—12, which says that Saul received the gospel only from God, not from any man.

However, to believe this, we must assume he was given the gospel of salvation, not just told that he would become a future minister unto the Gentiles. Saul was actually chosen for this task from his mother’s womb (Galatians 1:15), but obviously this does not indicate when he would be saved, only that he would be saved at some point. Also, when Saul said that he received the gospel by direct revelation from God, I believe he was speaking in broad terms concerning the revelation of the Mystery, not a specific message for salvation. He certainly could have been saved into the Body of Christ by hearing and believing the Gospel of the Kingdom, if God chose to do so, like what happened with Cornelius. All those saved subsequent to Saul became members of the Body of Christ (1 Timothy 1:16).

Saved in Damascus

The other option is that Saul was saved through the testimony of Ananias the prophet. Again, like on the road, there is no specific gospel of salvation preached. However, the Lord told Saul to go into the city and it would be told to him there what he should do. This would have been when Ananias preached the gospel to Saul, he would have believed, received the Holy Spirit and then baptized, all in accordance with the Gospel of the Kingdom. However, God began the Body of Christ with Saul at that time, regardless of the gospel preached. Salvation is about faith in Jesus Christ and it could have been at that time when Saul believed in Jesus Christ. Notice that Saul was doing what any devout Jew would have done, praying and fasting (Acts 9:9, 11). This does not indicate he was saved at this time (see Acts 10:2; Cornelius before he was saved). The physical act of receiving his sight appears to coincide with receiving spiritual sight, in the presence of Ananias (Acts 9:18). It was right after receiving his sight that he was baptized.

After reading about the events surrounding Saul’s conversion, it is noteworthy that it is never clearly stated exactly when Saul became saved. If this passage were really about his conversion, it would have been stated when and how he became saved. But, there is no mentioned gospel message preached and no specific acknowledgement of Saul believing. Those facts seem to make this passage more about the change God is instituting in His dealing with mankind than about the actual conversion of Saul. In other words, at this point, it is not as important to understand how or when Saul was saved, rather that Saul was commissioned at this point to do a brand new work apart from the nation of Israel. Acts is not a doctrinal book and so it was not necessary to include the doctrine of salvation here. While it is interesting to speculate about exactly how and when Saul was saved, it’s easy to get bogged down by inferring details that many think were implied in the passage. The details were omitted for a reason, in that they were not critical for our understanding of what is happening, and those kinds of details can actually detract from the real intent of Saul’s encounter with Jesus Christ, the beginning of the Body.

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