

Examining the Election, Call and Conversion of Saul the Pharisee

When a biblical event is significant, the Holy Spirit will emphasize its importance by providing multiple accounts of it. What makes the conversion of Saul particularly notable is that Luke is inspired to record three different accounts in one single book (Acts 9:1-21; 22:3-21; 26:2-20). Luke devotes sixteen of twenty eight chapters of the book of Acts to the apostle Paul; the validation of the apostle Paul is vital, because he would author 13 epistles that would make up nearly one fourth of the New Testament.

1. Read Acts 9:1-21; 22:1-21; 26:2-20 and gain a general sense of what is happening. What is the context of Saul's conversion? Who is describing Saul's conversion? Who is the audience? Why is the conversion being mentioned?

Luke's Account (Acts 9:1-21): Luke's narrative of Saul's conversion begins with Saul "still breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord" (Acts 9:1), which indicates that Saul's persecution was not finished with the death of Stephen and the scattering of the apostles (Acts 8:1-3). This perspective would resonate with Christians, emphasizes Saul's antagonism and magnify the significance of his conversion.

Paul to the Jews (Acts 22:1-21): In contrast to Luke's account, Paul shares his conversion experience to defend himself against Jews who falsely accuse him of defiling the Temple (Acts 21:27-28) and seek to kill him. Speaking in Hebrew, Paul provides his qualifications and biographical history to Jews, to whom it matters, and to testify of the truth, because he's qualified to know. What the Jews considered apostasy in Paul's message came to him as a revelation from God.

Paul to Agrippa (Acts 26:4-20): Before the Jewish ruler king Agrippa, the Roman procurator Festus, and other Roman commanders and prominent men (Acts 25:23-24), Paul shares his conversion experience in his defense against the Jews who desire his death. Unlike the previous accounts, Paul presents more of what Jesus reveals and in the process presents the gospel with an evangelistic appeal to Agrippa! After Paul's presentation, Agrippa, who Rome views as outranking the Jews, publicly agrees with the verdict of innocence in the presence of Roman, Jewish and public leaders.

2. What do you observe about Saul as a persecuting Pharisee?

Luke's Account: Now Saul, still breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord, went to the high priest, and asked for letters from him to the synagogues at Damascus, so that if he found any belonging to the Way, both men and women, he might bring them bound to Jerusalem. (Acts 9:1-2)

Illustrating Saul's passion against perceived apostasy, Luke records Saul seeking the authority of the Damascus Sanhedrin for the capture and return of Jewish Christians who fled Jerusalem. Saul sought to contain the spread of Christianity.

Paul to the Jews: Brethren and fathers, hear my defense which I now offer to you. And when they heard that he was addressing them in the Hebrew dialect, they became even more quiet; and he said, I am a Jew, born in Tarsus of Cilicia, but brought up in this city, educated under Gamaliel, strictly according to the law of our fathers, being zealous for God just as you all are today. I persecuted this Way to the death, binding and putting both men and women into prisons, as also the high priest and all the Council of the elders can testify. From them I also received letters to the brethren, and started off for Damascus in order to bring even those who were there to Jerusalem as prisoners to be punished. (Acts 22:1-5)

Against the charge of being a Jewish apostate, Paul states his biography to authenticate that he was, not simply a Jew, but a Pharisee (Gal 1:14) who trained under Gamaliel (Acts 5:33-39) and persecuted Christians, not simply as a zealot for Judaism, but with the authority of the Sanhedrin. The implication of his qualifications: Saul, not only could discern apostasy, but could mete out its punishment according to the Law with imprisonment or death. Saul was a Jew just like his accusers but with a passion for Judaism that few could match.

Examining the Election, Call and Conversion of Saul the Pharisee (page 2)

Paul to Agrippa: In regard to all the things of which I am accused by the Jews, I consider myself fortunate, King Agrippa, that I am about to make my defense before you today; especially because you are an expert in all customs and questions among the Jews; therefore I beg you to listen to me patiently. So then, all Jews know my manner of life from my youth up, which from the beginning was spent among my own nation and at Jerusalem; since they have known about me for a long time, if they are willing to testify, that I lived as a Pharisee according to the strictest sect of our religion. And now I am standing trial for the hope of the promise made by God to our fathers; the promise to which our twelve tribes hope to attain, as they earnestly serve God night and day. And for this hope, O King, I am being accused by Jews. Why is it considered incredible among you people if God does raise the dead? So then, I thought to myself that I had to do many things hostile to the name of Jesus of Nazareth. And this is just what I did in Jerusalem; not only did I lock up many of the saints in prisons, having received authority from the chief priests, but also when they were being put to death I cast my vote against them. And as I punished them often in all the synagogues, I tried to force them to blaspheme; and being furiously enraged at them, I kept pursuing them even to foreign cities. (Acts 26:2-11)

Well known since his youth, Saul was recognized among the Jews “as a Pharisee according to the strictest sect.” He condemned the belief in the resurrection of Jesus and sought to pursue and punish all those who believed in Jesus of Nazareth. Now as Paul, he was standing trial for believing in the resurrection of Jesus, which was consistent with the Jewish hope of the resurrection of the dead!

3. What do you observe about the supernatural event that confronted and rocked Saul's world? Compare and contrast the three different accounts about a) the light, b) Jesus' message and c) Saul's physical disability.

Luke's Account: As he was traveling, it happened that he was approaching Damascus, and suddenly a light from heaven flashed around him; and he fell to the ground and heard a voice saying to him, “Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting Me?” And he said, “Who are You, Lord?” And He said, “I am Jesus whom you are persecuting, but get up and enter the city, and it will be told you what you must do.” The men who traveled with him stood speechless, hearing the voice but seeing no one. Saul got up from the ground, and though his eyes were open, he could see nothing; and leading him by the hand, they brought him into Damascus. And he was three days without sight, and neither ate nor drank. (Acts 9:3-9)

- a) Luke describes the light as coming from heaven in a flash around him and causing him to fall. The description appears to resemble lightening.
- b) Jesus' repetitive address of Saul's name is a first century custom of a formal greeting. For Saul, as a Pharisee, a voice from heaven is perceived as a message from God; thus, when Jesus confronts Saul, he is confused. Thinking that he was obedient to God in the persecution of Christians, Saul was being rebuked for disobeying God, and his confusion was demonstrated by the question, “who are you Lord?” When Jesus introduces Himself, it is the evidence that Jesus' resurrection really did happen against the Jewish belief that it didn't! Instructed to go to Damascus, Saul is informed that he will receive more instructions.
- c) Saul is blind for three days. In the first century, blindness was believed to be a consequence of sin (John 9:1-3), and this disability prevented one from being a priest (Lev 21:18). Luke is the only account that records Saul's fast, which was an absolute fast that included both food and water for three days (Est 4:16). It was an indication of confession (Ps 69:10) and a period of drawing nearer to God (Ezra 8:23). For persecuted Christians, the testimony of Saul's absolute fast adds to the genuineness of Paul's conversion.

Paul to the Jews: But it happened that as I was on my way, approaching Damascus about noontime, a very bright light suddenly flashed from heaven all around me, and I fell to the ground and heard a voice saying to me, “Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting Me?” And I answered, “Who are You, Lord?” And He said to me,... (continues)

Examining the Election, Call and Conversion of Saul the Pharisee (page 3)

... "I am Jesus the Nazarene, whom you are persecuting." And those who were with me saw the light, to be sure, but did not understand the voice of the One who was speaking to me. And I said, "What shall I do, Lord?" And the Lord said to me, "Get up and go on into Damascus, and there you will be told of all that has been appointed for you to do." But since I could not see because of the brightness of that light, I was led by the hand by those who were with me and came into Damascus. (Acts 22:6-11)

a) To the Jews, Paul describes the light appearing around noon as a very bright flash from heaven and causing him to fall. Paul makes the point to inform the Jews that others saw the light as well but that they did not understand the voice they all heard.

b) The name of Jesus was a common name during the first century. In naming the voice of God as "Jesus the Nazarene," Paul is clearly telling the Jews that the One speaking to him is none other than the Jesus who was crucified and now apparently resurrected. The conversion experience is the result of a heavenly vision, which others in his party partially experience, and not a subjective or contrived thought. And Paul submits to the voice of God, as a Jew would do, by obeying the instruction to go to Damascus.

c) Paul's blindness is confirmed by the fact that he had to be led by the hand to Damascus.

Paul to Agrippa: While so engaged as I was journeying to Damascus with the authority and commission of the chief priests, at midday, O King, I saw on the way a light from heaven, brighter than the sun, shining all around me and those who were journeying with me. And when we had all fallen to the ground, I heard a voice saying to me in the Hebrew dialect, "Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting Me? It is hard for you to kick against the goads." And I said, "Who are You, Lord?" And the Lord said, "I am Jesus whom you are persecuting. But get up and stand on your feet; for this purpose I have appeared to you, to appoint you a minister and a witness not only to the things which you have seen, but also to the things in which I will appear to you; rescuing you from the Jewish people and from the Gentiles, to whom I am sending you, to open their eyes so that they may turn from darkness to light and from the dominion of Satan to God, that they may receive forgiveness of sins and an inheritance among those who have been sanctified by faith in Me." (Acts 26:12-18)

a) In this account, Paul provides the most details about the light. It appears at midday from heaven, brighter than the sun, shining all around him and his companions, and causing them all to fall. While the speechless group heard a voice, only Saul understood the Hebrew (or Aramaic). It appears that to Agrippa, Paul places an emphasis on the supernatural event.

b) Of the three accounts, this is the most elaborate of Jesus' message. The divine voice from heaven addresses Saul formally and rebukes him with a Greek proverb ("kick against the goads"), which was about the futility of fighting a god. Perhaps significant to the ruling class present, Paul's use of the proverb as well as the words of the resurrected Jesus portrays Jesus as God, and he has been appointed to be a witness to the Gentiles "to open their eyes so that they may turn from darkness to light and from the dominion of Satan to God, that they may receive forgiveness of sins and an inheritance among those who have been sanctified by faith in Me." The gospel that Paul shares with Agrippa was received directly from Jesus Himself through a revelation and not through the original apostles (Gal 1:11-12)!

c) Paul omits any mention of the physical disability he received from the light.

4. Observe carefully what happened in Damascus. Compare the accounts for a) who was Ananias, b) what God said to Ananias, and c) what God instructed Saul through Ananias.

Examining the Election, Call and Conversion of Saul the Pharisee (page 4)

Luke's Account: Now there was a disciple at Damascus named Ananias; and the Lord said to him in a vision, "Ananias." And he said, "Here I am, Lord." And the Lord said to him, "Get up and go to the street called Straight, and inquire at the house of Judas for a man from Tarsus named Saul, for he is praying, and he has seen in a vision a man named Ananias come in and lay his hands on him, so that he might regain his sight." But Ananias answered, "Lord, I have heard from many about this man, how much harm he did to Your saints at Jerusalem; and here he has authority from the chief priests to bind all who call on Your name." But the Lord said to him, "Go, for he is a chosen instrument of Mine, to bear My name before the Gentiles and kings and the sons of Israel; for I will show him how much he must suffer for My name's sake." So Ananias departed and entered the house, and after laying his hands on him said, "Brother Saul, the Lord Jesus, who appeared to you on the road by which you were coming, has sent me so that you may regain your sight and be filled with the Holy Spirit." And immediately there fell from his eyes something like scales, and he regained his sight, and he got up and was baptized; and he took food and was strengthened. Now for several days he was with the disciples who were at Damascus, and immediately he began to proclaim Jesus in the synagogues, saying, "He is the Son of God." (Acts 9:10-20)

a) Luke presents Ananias as a Christian disciple who, aware of Saul's persecution of Christians, was fearful of him. In this context, the greeting "Brother Saul" is understood as a brother in Christ.

b) Luke's account of Ananias and his role in Saul's conversion is the most extensive of all of the accounts. Ananias receives a divine vision from God which instructs him to a specific location and home in Damascus where, Saul in a separate divine vision from Jesus, is anticipating Ananias to come and heal his blindness. In response to Ananias' concerns, God informs him that Saul is His chosen instrument to witness to Gentiles and Jews, which will involve suffering.

c) At the house of Judas in Damascus, Saul's divine vision from Jesus is confirmed with the visit by Ananias. With the laying of Ananias' hands, Saul is healed of his blindness and receives the Holy Spirit.

Paul to the Jews: A certain Ananias, a man who was devout by the standard of the Law, and well spoken of by all the Jews who lived there, came to me, and standing near said to me, 'Brother Saul, receive your sight!' And at that very time I looked up at him. And he said, 'The God of our fathers has appointed you to know His will and to see the Righteous One and to hear an utterance from His mouth. For you will be a witness for Him to all men of what you have seen and heard. Now why do you delay? Get up and be baptized, and wash away your sins, calling on His name.' (Acts 22:12-16)

a) Ananias is portrayed as a devout Jew of Damascus and well thought of by fellow Jews. Here "Brother Saul" is understood in the context of a devout Jew of Damascus recognizing a devout Jew from Jerusalem.

b) Paul omits any mention of God speaking to Ananias.

c) When Saul becomes blind after being rebuked by Jesus, it plays into the Jewish belief that blindness was a consequence of sin (John 9:1-2), and it implies that Jesus is God. The implication is reinforced when Saul's blindness is supernaturally healed as a consequence of his sins being forgiven! Paul recounts Ananias, "well spoken of by all the Jews," used of the phrase "the God of our fathers" to affirm that the God of the Jews divinely appointed Saul for a mission ("be a witness for Jesus to all men") and to see and hear Jesus Christ ("the Righteous One"). For Jewish Christians in the audience, seeing the resurrected Jesus was one qualification for apostleship. The conversion is complete with the instruction to be baptized and start evangelizing.

Paul to Agrippa:

a) Paul omits any detail involving Ananias.

Examining the Election, Call and Conversion of Saul the Pharisee (page 5)

b) The omission includes any mention of the house of Judas and the events within it.

c) Paul speaks only of the divine message from Jesus who appoints him to a mission to the Gentiles for the purpose of sharing the gospel. In Luke's account, God tells Ananias that Saul was a chosen instrument "to bear My name before the Gentiles and kings and the sons of Israel" (Acts 9:15). Now, after speaking to Governor Felix (Acts 24:1-23), Paul is speaking to an audience that includes: Governor Porcius Festus (Acts 24:27-25:12) and King Herod Agrippa II (Acts 25:13-26:32).

5. How is the divine action of election seen Paul's conversion experience?

Luke's Account: But the Lord said to him, "Go, for he is a chosen instrument of Mine, to bear My name before the Gentiles and kings and the sons of Israel; for I will show him how much he must suffer for My name's sake." (Acts 9:15-16)

God tells Ananias Paul is a chosen instrument.

Paul to the Jews: And he said, 'The God of our fathers has appointed you to know His will and to see the Righteous One and to hear an utterance from His mouth. For you will be a witness for Him to all men of what you have seen and heard. (Acts 22:14-15).

God tells Ananias that Paul is appointed.

Paul to Agrippa: But get up and stand on your feet; for this purpose I have appeared to you, to appoint you a minister and a witness not only to the things which you have seen, but also to the things in which I will appear to you; rescuing you from the Jewish people and from the Gentiles, to whom I am sending you, to open their eyes so that they may turn from darkness to light and from the dominion of Satan to God, that they may receive forgiveness of sins and an inheritance among those who have been sanctified by faith in Me.' (Acts 26:16-18)

Jesus tells Paul that he has an appointed purpose.

6. How is the divine action of calling seen in Paul's conversion experience?

Luke's Account: As he was traveling, it happened that he was approaching Damascus, and suddenly a light from heaven flashed around him; and he fell to the ground and heard a voice saying to him, "Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting Me?" And he said, "Who are You, Lord?" And He said, "I am Jesus whom you are persecuting, but get up and enter the city, and it will be told you what you must do." The men who traveled with him stood speechless, hearing the voice but seeing no one. (Acts 9:3-7)

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Examining the Election, Call and Conversion of Saul the Pharisee (page 6)

In all three accounts, Saul's call was a supernatural event that confronted his sin of disbelief in Jesus as Messiah, resurrection, and persecution of Believers. Was he going to serve the god of Judaism or the God of his fathers?

The call (privileged invitation / summon) was an appeal to his logic. Saul experiences two real events: the bright flash of light and blindness. Among his party, only he understands the voice from heaven claiming to be Jesus. Does he believe that this voice is real and is from the Messiah? Is Saul really serving God by persecuting Christians?

7. Was Paul's conversion a choice?

Luke's Account: Saul got up from the ground, and though his eyes were open, he could see nothing; and leading him by the hand, they brought him into Damascus. And he was three days without sight, and neither ate nor drank. (Acts 9:8-9)

Paul to the Jews: And I said, "What shall I do, Lord?" And the Lord said to me, "Get up and go on into Damascus, and there you will be told of all that has been appointed for you to do." But since I could not see because of the brightness of that light, I was led by the hand by those who were with me and came into Damascus. (Acts 22:10-11)

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Taking all three accounts together, Saul did have a choice. If he chose to believe that the voice from heaven that he alone understood was not real, he would have remained blind and unable to fulfill his role as an apostle to the Gentiles. Deeply committed to his belief in Judaism, only a radical supernatural event could cause him to change his mind. Saul demonstrated a genuine faith by a) believing that Jesus' resurrection was real which validated Him as Messiah and b) trusted His word and obeyed the divine message to go to Damascus.

Saul recognizes that faith is an act of obedience. Just as demonstrated in the Parable of the Wedding Banquet (see the article: [The Parable of the Wedding Banquet at www.Helpmewithbiblestudy.org/2JesusChrist/ParableKOGrejectWeddingBanquet.aspx](http://www.Helpmewithbiblestudy.org/2JesusChrist/ParableKOGrejectWeddingBanquet.aspx)), God's call is a privileged invitation / summon, because there is a consequence for refusal. For his faith, Saul was indwelt with the Holy Spirit.

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Paul to Agrippa (Acts 26:4-20):

2. What do you observe about Saul as a persecuting Pharisee?

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Observations:

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Examining the Election, Call and Conversion of Saul the Pharisee (page 2)

Paul to Agrippa: In regard to all the things of which I am accused by the Jews, I consider myself fortunate, King Agrippa, that I am about to make my defense before you today; especially because you are an expert in all customs and questions among the Jews; therefore I beg you to listen to me patiently. So then, all Jews know my manner of life from my youth up, which from the beginning was spent among my own nation and at Jerusalem; since they have known about me for a long time, if they are willing to testify, that I lived as a Pharisee according to the strictest sect of our religion. And now I am standing trial for the hope of the promise made by God to our fathers; the promise to which our twelve tribes hope to attain, as they earnestly serve God night and day. And for this hope, O King, I am being accused by Jews. Why is it considered incredible among you people if God does raise the dead? So then, I thought to myself that I had to do many things hostile to the name of Jesus of Nazareth. And this is just what I did in Jerusalem; not only did I lock up many of the saints in prisons, having received authority from the chief priests, but also when they were being put to death I cast my vote against them. And as I punished them often in all the synagogues, I tried to force them to blaspheme; and being furiously enraged at them, I kept pursuing them even to foreign cities. (Acts 26:2-11)

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a)

b)

c)

Examining the Election, Call and Conversion of Saul the Pharisee (page 3)

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Paul to Agrippa: While so engaged as I was journeying to Damascus with the authority and commission of the chief priests, at midday, O King, I saw on the way a light from heaven, brighter than the sun, shining all around me and those who were journeying with me. And when we had all fallen to the ground, I heard a voice saying to me in the Hebrew dialect, "Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting Me? It is hard for you to kick against the goads." And I said, "Who are You, Lord?" And the Lord said, "I am Jesus whom you are persecuting. But get up and stand on your feet; for this purpose I have appeared to you, to appoint you a minister and a witness not only to the things which you have seen, but also to the things in which I will appear to you; rescuing you from the Jewish people and from the Gentiles, to whom I am sending you, to open their eyes so that they may turn from darkness to light and from the dominion of Satan to God, that they may receive forgiveness of sins and an inheritance among those who have been sanctified by faith in Me." (Acts 26:12-18)

a)

b)

c)

Examining the Election, Call and Conversion of Saul the Pharisee (page 4)

4. Observe carefully what happened in Damascus. Compare the accounts for a) who was Ananias, b) what God said to Ananias, and c) what God instructed Saul through Ananias.

Luke's Account: Now there was a disciple at Damascus named Ananias; and the Lord said to him in a vision, "Ananias." And he said, "Here I am, Lord." And the Lord said to him, "Get up and go to the street called Straight, and inquire at the house of Judas for a man from Tarsus named Saul, for he is praying, and he has seen in a vision a man named Ananias come in and lay his hands on him, so that he might regain his sight." But Ananias answered, "Lord, I have heard from many about this man, how much harm he did to Your saints at Jerusalem; and here he has authority from the chief priests to bind all who call on Your name." But the Lord said to him, "Go, for he is a chosen instrument of Mine, to bear My name before the Gentiles and kings and the sons of Israel; for I will show him how much he must suffer for My name's sake." So Ananias departed and entered the house, and after laying his hands on him said, "Brother Saul, the Lord Jesus, who appeared to you on the road by which you were coming, has sent me so that you may regain your sight and be filled with the Holy Spirit." And immediately there fell from his eyes something like scales, and he regained his sight, and he got up and was baptized; and he took food and was strengthened. Now for several days he was with the disciples who were at Damascus, and immediately he began to proclaim Jesus in the synagogues, saying, "He is the Son of God." (Acts 9:10-20)

a)

b)

c)

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a)

b)

c)

Paul to Agrippa:

a)

b)

c)

5. How is the divine action of election seen Paul's conversion experience?

Luke's Account:

Paul to the Jews:

Paul to Agrippa:

6. How is the divine action of calling seen in Paul's conversion experience?

Luke's Account:

Paul to the Jews:

Paul to Agrippa:

7. Was Paul's conversion a choice?