

Acts 9:1-25: Paul!

1. Jesus' building of his kingdom is predicated on choice;¹ a message is spread to which each must respond. Those who respond with obedience become part of the kingdom. Though God does not compel discipleship, but Paul will later write that Christ "laid hold of him" (Phil 3:12). God clearly chose Paul. Did Paul also choose Jesus?
2. Paul does not regard his experience as a vision, but as the final physical appearance of Jesus; in 1 Cor 15:8, he includes his Damascus-road experience in the list of post-resurrection appearances, including that to Peter and twelve, saying, "and last of all he appeared to me also as one abnormally born." For Paul, as for James (1 Cor 15:7, Gal 1:19), he felt this in-person commissioning qualified him to be "the last of the apostles" (1 Cor 15:9). Is this difference significant? Why would it be important for Paul to be commissioned in person by Jesus?
3. Once we recognize Paul's unique and traumatic introduction into service of Jesus, his theology of grace falls into place perfectly; if Paul, a murderer and persecutor of the faith by his own admission, can be received into God's love, no one can be excluded. Paul also makes his mark on the theology of the early church through his near-monomaniacal, driven approach to his faith, both before and after conversion (Acts 9:1-2; 1 Cor 9:24-27). Is this serve-at-all-costs discipleship paradigmatic for believers, or is it just a reflection of Paul's personality? Is there anything in Jesus' teaching to show that Jesus also taught his disciples to live this way?²
4. Of Paul's direct encounter with Jesus, Fernando writes,

We must never take it for granted that all to whom we minister have a personal relationship with God. My mother led me to such an encounter when I was a religious fourteen-year-old, who was already knowledgeable of the Scriptures and active in church. When I was in seminary, a fellow student who had been nurtured in an evangelical background testified that he had encountered Christ for the first time a few days before. The Emmanuel Methodist Church in Madras, India, was finding it difficult to maintain its property because it had a small congregation. They were preparing to sell some of the property when someone suggested to the pastor, an American missionary, to have some revival meetings in the church. He invited a Baptist preacher, very different to him in theology and outlook, to preach at these meetings. On the first night when that preacher invited those who wanted to be born again to come forward, the first one to go up was the pastor of the church! He met Christ personally, and his ministry was so transformed that the church became and still is, a few decades after his retirement, one of the great centers of Christian witness in India. [Fernando, *Acts*, 305]

What role does Jesus the person play in your faith? Have you heard of anyone with a similar experience? How does one not just teach about the gospel, but introduce another to Jesus?

5. *The obligatory parallel with Luke question:* A blindingly obvious parallel between Luke and Acts is that between Jesus and Paul, from start of ministry to conclusion. Even just at the beginning there are three clear parallels: both begin their ministries with synagogue messages (Lk 4:16-30; Acts 9:20-25); both astonish their audiences (Lk 4:22; Acts 9:21); they receive similar responses ("is this not the son of Joseph?" and "is this not the one who opposed Christians?"); and both escape a

¹ The kingdom grows via a message being spread (parable of the sower, Mt 13:1-23) and as the result of individuals taking hold of it (parables of pearl and hidden treasure, Mt 13:44-46).

² Spoiler: oh my goodness, Jesus was all about single-minded devotion; there are several passages teaching this.

violent response (Lk 4:28-30; Acts 9:22-25)—and both get in trouble down the road for reaching out to Gentiles, both face opposition from Jewish leaders, both are empowered by the Spirit, both sacrifice much for their ministry, etc.

This would lead us to belief that Paul is meant to be paradigmatic for believers, the example of how to be Jesus-like if you aren't actually divine. At the same time, Paul is exceptional in many ways, being an extreme persecutor of the church, a leader, a Bible expert even before his conversion, recipient of a divine appearance, etc. In this way we would be as likely to see him as paradigmatic as the Old Testament Israelite would be to see Moses as a template for Judaism.

Luke clearly wants you to see the parallel between Paul and Jesus. Is Paul paradigmatic, and if so, how? Or are we *not* meant to see Paul as the template for believers, and just an encouraging story of how, a long time ago, God turned an enemy into a friend?

6. This is not the first time God turned an opponent. Other famous 180° converts include: Allan Sandage, famous American astronomer and pioneer of cosmology; Anthony Flew, notorious philosopher and opponent of Christianity; journalist Lee Strobel; journalist Peter Hitchens (brother of Christopher); British author A. N. Wilson; and Irish Alister McGrath, now a prominent theologian, who prior to conversion believed that, “God was an infantile illusion, suitable for the elderly, the intellectually feeble, and the fraudulently religious.”³

If God has this tool in his toolbox, why does he not use it more often?

7. Paul's conversion story is similar to that of Moses, Isaiah and Ezekiel for being accompanied by a theophany (Exo 3:1-4:17; Isa 6:1-13; Ezek 1:1-3:15). How else are they—both the experiences and the people—similar and how are they different?
8. This account is so important it is recorded no fewer than three times in Acts. In a later account, Paul recalls Jesus' words, “it is hard for you to kick against the goads” (26:14). Does this refer to Paul battling his conscience or Paul being blinded by wrong convictions about the messiah?



Fun fact: Straight Street is still identifiable today [Fernando, 299].

Further fun fact: There were no street signs in the ancient world. “Visitors would ask locals, who knew the streets and, in neighborhoods, knew the residents” [Keener, smaller, 281].

Another fun fact: To Paul's “who are you?” Jesus replies, “**I** myself am Jesus, whom **you** yourself are persecuting” (9:5). “Because neither pronoun in the Greek version of Jesus' response is grammatically necessary, they function emphatically” [Keener, smaller *Acts*, 278].

³ See among other articles, *Christianity Today*, 13 Aug 2015, “Five atheists who lost faith in atheism.”

Background and Leader's Notes:

...