

Saul's Damascus-Road Experience

Acts 9:1-31; 22:3-21; 26:4-23; Gal 1:11-17; Phil 3:3-17; 1 Tim 1:12-16

1. For Paul, salvation comes solely through faith, and the prime example of faith is Abraham, who trusted in God's promise of progeny even when this seemed impossible. Like Abraham, Saul's faith was shown in his response to Jesus' call on the Damascus road, and this obedience later conferred to Saul "a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but one that comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God based on faith" (Phil 3:8-9).

How is Saul's faith similar to that of Abraham's? In what way is Saul's faith "credited to him as righteousness?"

2. Historically the Damascus road experience was seen as a conversion experience (e.g. Luther, Augustine), which fits well with Saul's being baptized in Jesus' name for the cleansing from his sins (22:16) and his subsequent filling with the Holy Spirit (9:17; 22:16). What is *not* typical of a conversion experience is that Saul is being called and commissioned for a new and unique mission to the Gentiles (22:14-15). In fact, Paul describes his call using the same language found in Jeremiah's call:

"God, who set me apart from my mother's womb and called me by his grace, was pleased to reveal his Son in me so that I might preach him among the Gentiles" (Gal 1:15)

"Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, before you were born I set you apart; I appointed you as a prophet to the nations" (Jer 1:5).

Was Saul called or converted? We are all converted, but only Saul was called as the apostle to the Gentiles. How does Saul's DRE serve as an example for other believers? (See Paul's answer in Phil 3:7-15.)

3. Romans teaches us this about the law:
 - It is good (7:16); it is a gift (2:17-3:2)
 - everyone—Jew and Gentile—fails to obey it (3:23)
 - it is powerless to make us righteous because it is weakened by our sinful nature (8:3)
 - in fact, "the very commandment that was intended to bring life actually brought death" (7:11); so the law brings wrath (4:15)
 - its requirements are met in us when we live "according to the Spirit" (8:4), since the "mind governed by the flesh" is incapable of submitting to the Law (8:7)
 - Christians have died in Christ and are freed from the law, which only applies to the living (7:1)

Now Saul knew that according to the law anyone hanging on a tree was cursed (Deut 21:23), and was dutifully bringing blaspheming Christians to justice. Paul described himself as "faultless" in obedience to the law (Phil 3:6; Acts 24:14), and later also recognizes Ananias as being "a devout observer of the law" (Acts 22:12). Yet Paul's zeal to follow the law and punish blasphemy among Christians *made* him "a blasphemer and a persecutor and a violent man" (1 Tim 1:13), carrying him in the opposite direction from his desired righteousness.

How does Saul's DRE lead to the view of the law in Romans?

4. A second-century Jew named Trypho nicely summarized central Jewish objections to Christianity:

This is what we are most at a loss about you, that you, professing to be pious, and supporting yourselves to be better than others, are not in any particular separated from them, and do not alter your mode of living from the nations, in that you observe no festivals, or sabbaths; you do not have the rite of circumcision; and further, resting your hopes on a man who was crucified, you expect to obtain some good thing from God while you do not obey his commandments. Have you not read that the soul shall be cut off from his people that is not circumcised on the eighth day? [*Dialogues*, 10]

Let's assume that Paul had similar objections. What in Paul's Damascus-road experience refutes these?

5. Saul's life was turned around not by arguments or apologetics but by his experience of the risen Lord. In Damascus, Saul is called to go among the pagans and testify "to what you have seen and heard" (Acts 22:15)—i.e., to share his testimony. So when Paul gets the opportunity to address a collection of hostile Jews in Jerusalem and later is given an audience with King Agrippa, he doesn't follow Stephen's or Peter's examples by reasoning from the scriptures; he tells his story.

When talking to an unbeliever, do you

- a) prefer to tell your story (Paul with Agrippa)
- b) find it easier to talk doctrine and apologetics (Stephen and Peter)
- c) like to answer questions (Philip and the eunuch)
- d) pray for a miracle (Peter and the lame man)
- e) prefer not to talk about it at all?

Is there a story you can tell about your experience of Jesus which would make it easier to reach out to others?

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Fun fact: Damascus has some weird eschatological associations: For Muslims, it's special: "Damascus, which plays a role in Muslim eschatological tradition as the place to which Jesus will descend to destroy antichrist, may well have figured in this way in a branch of Christian tradition from which the Muslims too over the expectation". And for the Jews too, or at least one sect of them: Some or all of the Qumran community moved there in the first century B.C., with the expectation that a great teacher of the law, and/or the Davidic king, would come out of Damascus. [*Paul, Apostle of the Heart Set Free*, F. F. Bruce, 77-78.]

Bonus fun fact: Even today you can visit the same street where Paul met Ananias. Straight St. (Acts 9:11) survives under the Arabic name *Darb al-Mustaqim*.

Leader's background

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