

# *Acts*

## *Lesson #7*

### *The Road to Damascus*

*(9: 1 – 31)*

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# Review

After the murder of Stephen, the believers in Jerusalem “*were scattered throughout the countryside of Judea and Samaria.*” All those who had been in Jerusalem for Pentecost and remained there after the birth of the Church fled home, taking the gospel message with them.

As the persecution raged on, Lesson #6 turned our attention to another of the original seven deacons, Philip, who encountered Simon the “magician” in Samaria and who met the Ethiopian eunuch on the road to Gaza.

As we learned, Luke inserts these two stories at this point in his narrative to emphasize: 1) that the Gospel message moves out geographically from Jerusalem to the north and the south, to Samaria and into Africa, and 2) that the Gospel message moves out theologically from a core of pious Jewish believers in Jerusalem to people outside of the Jewish mainstream, people on the fringe—the Samaritans (who were questionable Jews, at best) and to a black African Jew, a eunuch.

# Preview

No one ever hated Christ more than Saul of Tarsus.

We first met Saul at the stoning of Stephen, where he supervised Steven's murder. On that same day, Saul began *"trying to destroy the church; entering house after house and dragging out men and women, he handed them over for imprisonment"* (8: 3). As we enter Acts 9 we learn that *"Saul, still breathing out murderous threats against the disciples of the Lord, went to the high priest and asked him for letters to the synagogues in Damascus, that, if he should find any men or women who belonged to the Way, he might bring them back to Jerusalem in chains"* (9: 1-2).

Saul's dramatic conversion on the road to Damascus is the stuff of legend, transforming Saul from the greatest of sinners (1 Timothy 1: 15) to the greatest of saints.



**Our brief encounter with Saul of Tarsus at the stoning of Stephen (7: 54-60) and the intense persecution of the Church in Jerusalem that followed (8: 1-3) set off alarms, signaling that this man is BIG trouble!**

**And sure enough, as we enter Acts 9, the big trouble gets even bigger.**

**“Now Saul, still breathing murderous threats against the disciples of the Lord, went to the high priest and asked him for letters to the synagogues in Damascus, that, if he should find any men or women who belonged to the Way, he might bring them back to Jerusalem in chains.”**

**(9: 1-2)**

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- **When the believers in Jerusalem fled the persecution led by Saul of Tarsus, many would have headed north on either the Via Maris or the King's Highway, both of which converge at Damascus. If Saul wanted to stop the spread of the Gospel, he would set up the roadblock at Damascus.**
- **The intensity of Saul's persecution is captured in the Greek word φονεύω (fon-YOO-o), "murderous."**
- **That Saul had access to the high priest, and that the high priest delegated authority to Saul to arrest people in the synagogues of Damascus, suggests something of Saul's standing within the highest echelon of the religious leaders.**

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- Notice, as well, that “the Way” designates Jesus’ followers, an allusion to Isaiah 40: 3 — *“A voice proclaims: ‘In the wilderness prepare the way of the Lord! Make straight in the wasteland a highway for our God!’”*
- “The Way” is the same term used by the Essene community at Qumran to describe its mode of life, suggesting possible links (direct or indirect) between the Qumran community, John the Baptist, Jesus and the early Christians.





**The Damascus Gate, one of seven gates leading out of the Old City today. The road outside the gate leads to Nablus and from there to Damascus, 135 miles north. The current gate (above) was built by Suleiman the Magnificent in 1537.**

*Photography by Ana Maria Vargas*

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***The Romans built over 58,000 miles of roads throughout the Empire, many of which still exist today, 2000 years later. This is a Roman road in Syria near Tall 'Aqibrīn, between Ad Dānā and Kafr Karmīn. St. Paul would have traveled on one like it on his journey to Damascus.***

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“On his journey, as he was nearing Damascus, a light from the sky suddenly flashed around him. He fell to the ground and heard a voice saying to him, ‘Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?’ He said, ‘Who are you, sir?’ The reply came, ‘I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting. Now get up and go into the city and you will be told what you must do.’ The men who were traveling with him stood speechless, for they heard the voice but could see no one. Saul got up from the ground, but when he opened his eyes he could see nothing; so they led him by the hand and brought him to Damascus. For three days he was unable to see, and he neither ate nor drank.”

(9: 3-9)

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**Caravaggio. *Conversion on the Way to Damascus* (oil on canvas), 1600-1601.  
Santa Maria del Popolo, Rome.**

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• Luke repeats St. Paul’s “Road to Damascus” story three times in Acts: 1) here (9: 3-9); 2) in Paul’s testimony before the Jews of Jerusalem (22: 1-21); and 3) in Paul’s testimony before Herod Agrippa I and his wife, Bernice, at Caesarea Maritima (26: 1-18). Each repetition adds a few more details to the story. The fact that Luke repeats the story three times, emphasizes its importance in the Luke/Acts narrative.

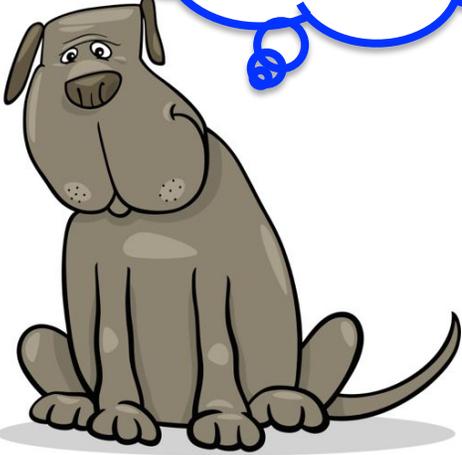
• In St. Paul’s testimony before Herod Agrippa, we learn that the light that flashed was “*brighter than the sun*” (26: 13), and that everyone with Paul fell to the ground, as well (26: 14).

• We also learn that Jesus spoke to St. Paul in Hebrew (26: 14), a language that Paul spoke fluently (21: 40), along with Aramaic, Greek and Latin.

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The light that flashed was so intense that it instantly blinded St. Paul, and he remains blind for three days. Metaphorically, Paul had been blind all along, and only after his “Road to Damascus” experience can he truly see.



The symbolism is really nice!

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Saul's blindness is both literal and figurative. True, he has been blind to the truth of the Gospel and to Christ himself, but he is also physically blinded by the intense flash of light, a flash that damages his eyes:

*“. . . so they led him by the hand and brought him to Damascus. For three days he was unable to see, and he neither ate nor drank.”*

(9: 9)

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**St. Paul's blindness may have been the result of a photomechanical injury, a burst of intense light lasting 1-5 nanoseconds that deposits light energy faster than the eye can mechanically relax. Such a burst of light can cause a thermoelastic pressure wave that damages retinal tissue by shear force or cavitations, leading to temporary or permanent blindness.**

**Malgorzata Rozanowska, Bartosz Rozanowski and Michael Boulton. "Light-induced Damage to the Retina," *Photochemistry and Photobiology*, vol. 88 (November/December 2012), 1303-1308.**

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“There was a disciple in Damascus named Ananias, and the Lord said to him in a vision, ‘Ananias.’ He answered, ‘Here I am, Lord.’ The Lord said to him, ‘Get up and go to the street called Straight and ask at the house of Judas for a man from Tarsus named Saul. He is there praying, and [in a vision] he has seen a man named Ananias come in and lay [his] hands on him that he may regain his sight.’ But Ananias replied, ‘Lord, I have heard from many sources about this man, what evil things he has done to your holy ones in Jerusalem. And here he has authority from the chief priests to imprison all who call upon your name.’ But the Lord said to him, ‘Go, for this man is a chosen instrument of mine to carry my name before the Gentiles, kings, and Israelites, and I will show him what he will have to suffer for my name.” (9: 10-16)



St. Ananias Chapel  
on "Straight Street"  
Damascus, Syria.



**St. Ananias Chapel in Damascus, Syria.**

*This underground structure, the remains of a 5<sup>th</sup> or 6<sup>th</sup>-century Byzantine church, is at the end of "Straight Street" near the Bab Sharqi [Eastern Gate], the traditional site of Ananias' house.*

“So Ananias went and entered the house; laying his hands on him, he said, ‘Saul, my brother, the Lord has sent me, Jesus who appeared to you on the way by which you came, that you may regain your sight and be filled with the holy Spirit.’ Immediately things like scales fell from his eyes and he regained his sight. He got up and was baptized, and when he had eaten, he recovered his strength.”

(9: 17-19)

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**Pietro de Cortona. *Ananias Restoring the Sight of St. Paul* (oil on canvas), 1631.  
Santa Maria della Concezione, Rome.**

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We read that . . .

*“Immediately things like scales fell from [Saul’s] eyes and he regained his sight.”*

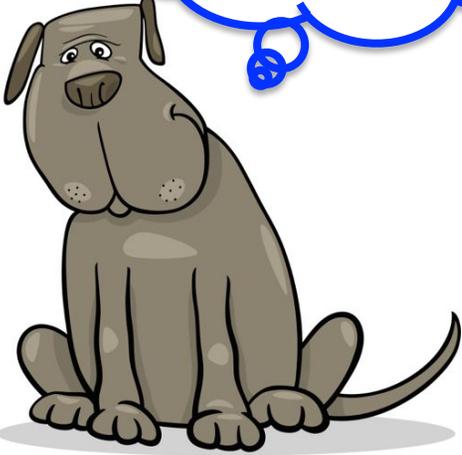
(9: 18)

- The Greek word for “scales” is λεπίς [lep-IS]. In classical Greek it refers to metal plates covering an object, and collectively, to the scales of a fish. In the New Testament the word only occurs once—in this scene; although in the Septuagint translation of the Book of Tobit the term refers to the “white film” that covers Tobit’s eyes, making him blind, which his son, Tobias, peels away, restoring his father’s sight.
- In Saul’s story, the “scales” are a direct result of the damage to his eyes.

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After three days of blindness, Saul's eyes are opened—both literally and figuratively. Saul's entire life had been turned upside down, and he spent those three days in sheer agony, traumatized physically, spiritually and emotionally.



I'm glad Saul can see again now!

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- Saul “regained his sight” (9: 18), but not his previous good vision.

- In A.D. 55, St. Paul writes:

*“To keep me from becoming conceited because of these surpassingly great revelations, there was given me a thorn in my flesh, a messenger of Satan, to torment me. Three times I pleaded with the Lord to take it away from me. But he said to me, ‘My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.’”*

(2 Corinthians 12: 7-9)

**What is St. Paul’s “thorn in the flesh”?**

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On his second missionary journey in A.D. 50-52, Paul and Silas leave Syrian Antioch, retracing the first missionary journey of A.D. 46-48, in reverse order. When they get to Pisidian Antioch in the interior of Asia Minor, the plan is to head south to Perga. But we read in Acts 16: 6-8 that *“Paul and his companions travel north throughout the region of Phrygia and Galatia, having been kept by the Holy Spirit from preaching the word in the province of Asia,”* eventually ending up on the far west coast of Asia Minor at Troas—hundreds of miles from their planned destination.

So why the change in plans?

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Once Paul arrives in Corinth in late A.D. 50, he writes an epistle to the churches in Galatia:

*“As you know, it was because of an illness that I first preached the gospel to you. Even though my illness was a trial to you, you did not treat me with contempt or scorn. Instead, you welcomed me as if I were an angel of God, as if I were Christ Jesus himself. What has happened to your joy? I can testify that, if you could have done so, you would have torn out your eyes and given them to me.”*

**(4: 13-15)**

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**That's correct!**

**Apparently, the people in the church at Pisidian Antioch refer Paul for medical care to Galatia. But either the care is not available or it is inadequate, and Paul and company push westward, on to Troas—where they meet Luke, the physician. From that point on, Luke travels with Paul as his personal physician, biographer and friend until Paul's death in A.D. 68.**



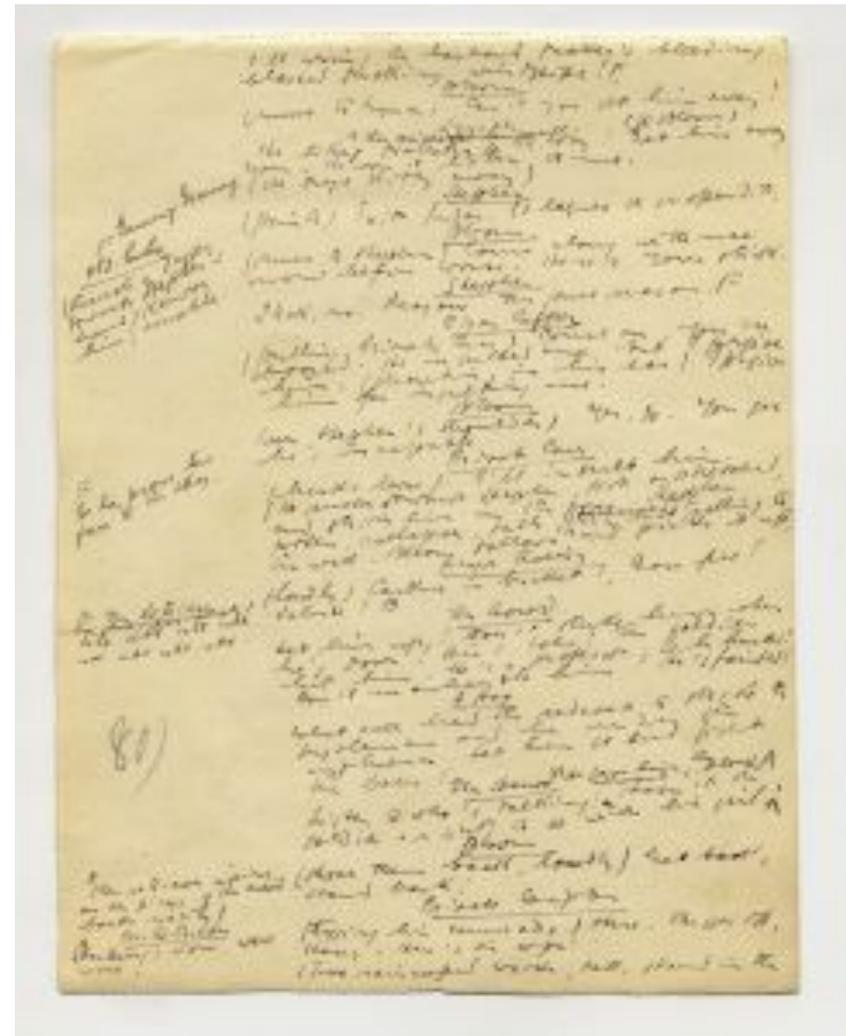
To add to our evidence, we might also observe that St. Paul typically dictates his epistles and letters, as we learn in Romans 16: 22, when Tertius, Paul’s secretary, says: *“I Tertius, who wrote down this letter, greet you in the Lord, too!”*

Yet on at least two occasions—in Galatians and 2 Thessalonians—Paul writes an epistle in his own hand, saying in Galatians 6: 11—*“See what large letters I use as I write to you with my own hand”*—suggesting that he had problems seeing.

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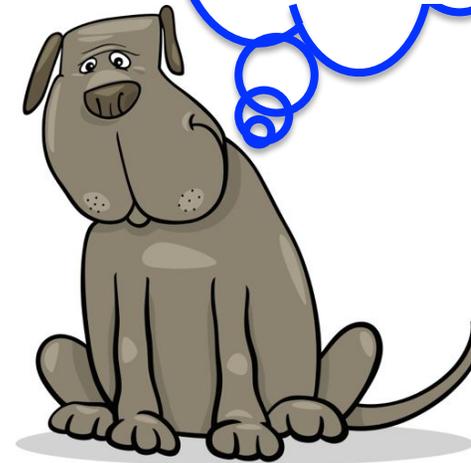


**James Joyce (1882-1941), the Irish novelist and author of *Ulysses* (1922), had notoriously poor eyesight, which made it difficult for him to write and to travel.**



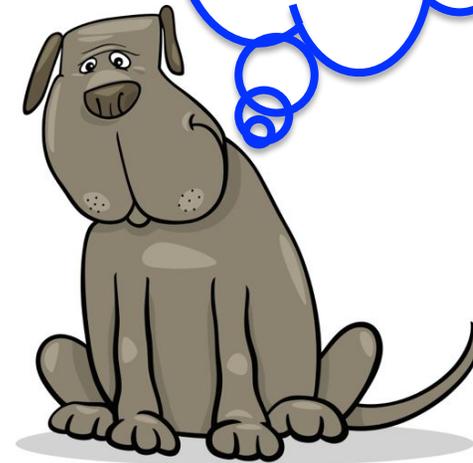
**Manuscript page from *Ulysses*, the crabbed handwriting reflecting Joyce's eye troubles.**

So, St. Paul traveled throughout the Roman Empire for 18 years like Mr. Magoo!



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That would be a significant “thorn in the flesh” for a scholar, public debater and world traveler like St. Paul.



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“He stayed some days with the disciples in Damascus, and he began at once to proclaim Jesus in the synagogues, that he is the Son of God. All who heard him were astounded and said, ‘Is not this the man who in Jerusalem ravaged those who call upon this name, and came here expressly to take them back in chains to the chief priests?’ But Saul grew all the stronger and confounded [the] Jews who lived in Damascus, proving that this is the Messiah.”

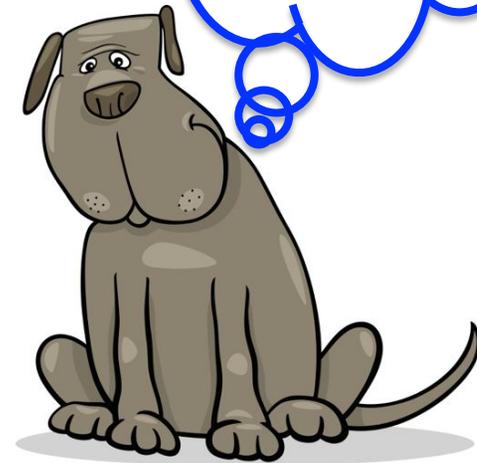
(9: 20-22)

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**It seems that Saul can  
argue for or against  
Christ with equal  
rhetorical skill.  
But can he be  
trusted?**



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“After a long time had passed, the Jews conspired to kill him, but their plot became known to Saul. Now they were keeping watch on the gates day and night so as to kill him, but his disciples let him down through an opening in the wall, lowering him in a basket.”

(9: 23-25)

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**Bab Sharqi ("The Eastern Gate"), one of eight ancient city gates of Damascus. This is the only original Roman gate, reconstructed in the 1960s. The 85 ft. wide gate stands over the main entrance to "The Street Called Straight."**

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**Unknown. *St. Paul Let Down in a Basket from the Walls of Damascus*  
(plaque, copper gilt with champlévé), c. 1170.  
Victoria and Albert Museum, London.**

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“When he arrived in Jerusalem he tried to join the disciples, but they were all afraid of him, not believing that he was a disciple. Then Barnabas took charge of him and brought him to the apostles, and he reported to them how on the way he had seen the Lord and that he had spoken to him, and how in Damascus he had spoken out boldly in the name of Jesus. He moved about freely with them in Jerusalem, and spoke out boldly in the name of the Lord. He also spoke and debated with the Hellenists, but they tried to kill him. And when the brothers learned of this, they took him down to Caesarea and sent him on his way to Tarsus. The church throughout all Judea, Galilee, and Samaria was at peace. It was being built up and walked in the fear of the Lord, and with the consolation of the holy Spirit it grew in numbers.”

(9: 26-31)

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Saul of Tarsus?  
I don't think so!

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- Of course the Apostles don't trust Saul; this has GOT to be a ruse!
- But someone has to determine if Saul's conversion is genuine. After all, the Holy Spirit has been doing incredible things—and maybe Saul's conversion is one of them.
- So Barnabas set up a meeting with Saul; they talk; and Barnabas determines that Saul is genuine, so he brings Saul to meet the Apostles.
- After Saul tells his story, the Apostles *cautiously* allow him to move about freely in the Jerusalem synagogues, proclaiming the Gospel . . .

**—BUT—**

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**Once a fanatic,  
always a  
fanatic!**

**I'm going to  
keep an eye  
on him!**

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**That's a very good idea!**

**Saul . . .**

- *“spoke out boldly in the name of the Lord” (9: 28); and*
- *he “debated with the Hellenists [the same ones who hauled Stephen before the Sanhedrin?], but they tried to kill him” (9: 29).*

**The Apostles then make an executive decision:**

***“They took [Saul] down to Caesarea and sent him on his way to Tarsus” (9: 30).***





***“The church throughout all  
Judea, Galilee and Samaria  
was [finally] at peace!”***

**(9: 31)**

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# Questions for discussion and thought

- 1. Why was Saul of Tarsus so intent on persecuting the Church?**
- 2. What evidence do you find that Saul was highly regarded by the Jewish leadership?**
- 3. Why did Saul go to Damascus to arrest the believers?**
- 4. Saul's eyes were physically damaged by the brilliant flash of light, but how might we understand Saul's experience metaphorically?**
- 5. What evidence do you find that Saul still has a lot to learn, even after his dramatic conversion?**

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