

I. A Changed Man (Acts 9:1-31)

- Saul continues to oppress the early Church after Stephen's death. He requests the permission of the Jewish leaders to go to Damascus and arrest followers of Christ.
- En route to Damascus, Saul encounters Jesus in the form of a heavenly light and audible voice. Jesus asks why Saul is persecuting Him. Upon Saul's request, Jesus identifies Himself and tells Saul that his efforts at persecution are kicking against the will of God (in a sense). Saul asks for direction and is sent blinded into Damascus. His companions, seemingly scared stiff by the voice, go into Damascus with Saul.
- We see additional (and somewhat expansive) recounts of this story from Paul in Acts 22:6-21 & 26:12-18, which we will study in detail in later weeks.
- Saul goes three days without sight, having nothing to eat or drink.
- Ananias is sent by Christ out to find and convert Saul. Ananias, reluctant to obey because of Saul's reputation and knowing why Saul was coming to Damascus, does indeed go to Saul. Jesus comforts Ananias by informing him of Saul's future work for the Gospel.
- Ananias restores Saul's sight and baptizes him. Saul eats and spends some time with the disciples there in Damascus. Verse 20 tells us that Saul immediately began preaching the Good News about Jesus. Many are amazed at the change in Saul and the Lord increased his strength and influence.
- The time frame in which verses 23-30 takes place is enlightened by Galatians 1:15-24 and Acts 11:25. Saul apparently preaches in Damascus for some time, then goes into Arabia (perhaps between Acts 9:22 & 23). He then returns to Damascus to resume preaching. He is forced to escape clandestinely in a basket and goes to Jerusalem (3 years after conversion). Barnabus vouches for Saul and the changes in Saul's behavior. He remains with Peter for 15 days. Saul preaches boldly to the people in Jerusalem, enraging the opposition there, just as he did in Damascus.
- Paul is sent, for his own protection, to Caesarea and then to Tarsus. We will catch back up with him there in Acts 11.

II. The Ministry of Peter, Part II (Acts 9:32-10:48)

- We pick back up in 9:32 with the story of Peter's mission work. Peter heals a man named Aeneas who has been bedridden and paralyzed 8 years. As a result of this confirmation of Peter's authority from God, many in Lydda and Sharon turn to the Lord.
- A woman named Dorcas (also known by her Aramaic name, Tabitha-both names mean "gazelle") has become sick and died. She is described as a disciple that was full of good virtue and charitable deeds. Peter is summoned, as he is near Joppa, and raises her from the dead through the power of God. Again, we see that many in Joppa believe in the Lord. Peter stays on in Joppa at Simon's house.
- Acts 10:1-48 tells us the story of the conversion of Cornelius and his "household". Cornelius is a Roman centurion known as the Italian Regiment. He is described as devout, charitable, prayerful and a man who respects and honors God.
- Cornelius receives a vision one afternoon and is told to send men to Peter in Joppa. Cornelius sends two of his house servants and a trusted soldier.
- On the following day, Peter is on the rooftop of a dwelling preparing to pray. It is about mid-day and Peter is hungry. While the meal is being prepared, Peter falls into a trance and is shown a vision. An object like a sheet is full of various animals. A voice commands Peter to rise up, kill and eat from the selection. Peter refuses, stating that he has never eaten anything defined as unclean in the Torah. He is told by the voice to not call what God has cleansed unclean or common. This cycle occurs 3 times.
- While Peter is gathering his wits, he is notified that there are 3 men looking for him. These men explain why they are there and relate the divine instructions they were given. Peter agrees to go with them. They arrive the following day at Caesarea and when Peter enters, Cornelius bows before him in an act of worship (why?). Peter rebukes him, telling Cornelius that he is simply a man. The meaning of his vision is made clear to Peter and he asks why Cornelius has summoned him. Cornelius relates the experience that started all of this.
- In 10:34-43, Peter gives a short Gospel sermon, starting off with a truth: God does not show partiality. Do we?
- In 10:44-48, the Holy Spirit falls on the members of Cornelius' house and they begin speaking in tongues and magnifying God. Peter's 6 companions are amazed. Peter has Cornelius and his household be baptized.

III. The Gentiles Too??? (Acts 11)

- News of the conversion of Cornelius and his household has reached Jerusalem before Peter arrives. Peter is not met with rejoicing brothers, but criticism stemming from old prejudice. Peter relates the entire story and we see in 11:17 & 18 that convincing and humble truth brings rejoicing.
- The persecution of Christians that started with Stephen drove many believers into lands to the north and west of Judea and Galilee. They wind up in Phoenicia (coastal area where Tyre and Sidon are located), Cyprus (island off the coast of Phoenicia/Syria) and Antioch (Syrian city north of Phoenicia). They are indeed spreading the Gospel, but just to the Jews.
- However, some were men from Cyprus and Cyrene (Greek colony on coast of North Africa-see Acts 2:10) and spoke the Word to the Hellenists. A Hellenist could be two things: a Jew born in a foreign land who spoke Greek or simply a Greek. The words "Hellas" means Greece in Greek. The Hellenistic Period began when Alexander the Great of Macedonia conquered the Near and Middle East, Egypt, much of south-central Asia and Northern India. Many who heard this message were converted as the Lord blessed the work.
- News of this success reaches Jerusalem, causing the leaders there to dispatch Bar-nabas ("son of rest") to Antioch. Barnabas is described as a good man, full of the Holy Spirit and faith in the Lord. He provided encouragement and urged them to continue the good work. More and more are added to the Church.
- Barnabus then departs to retrieve Saul from Tarsus. The pair returns to Antioch and work there for a year, teaching many about the Gospel. The name "Christians" is first used of the believers there.
- Prophets arrive in Antioch from Jerusalem. One of the, Agabus (Heb. "locust"), brings a dire prophecy of famine. This takes place, we are told, in the reign of the Roman ruler Claudius (in Latin-TIBERIVS CLAUDIVS CAESAR AVGVSTVS GERMANICVS) who reigned from 41-54 A.D. It is thought this famine occurred early in his reign. Relief is sent from the elders in Antioch to Jerusalem in the hands of Paul and Barnabus.

IV. Eaten By Worms (Acts 12)

- Herod (Agrippa I, 41-44 A.D.) begins to oppress the believers in Judea. He kills James (brother of John, son of Zebedee) and has Peter put in prison. Peter does not remain in prison long, as he is freed from his chains by an angel of the Lord.
- Peter goes to the house of John Mark's mother, Mary. A lady named Rhoda answers Peter's plea to gain admittance, but does not let him in the gate. She runs back to tell the others, but is met with disbelief. It is even supposed that Peter is dead and the guest is Peter's angel.
- They occupants are astonished to see Peter and he relates how he obtained freedom from Agrippa's prison. They are instructed by Peter to go and tell James (Jesus brother or son of Alphaeus?) what they have seen and heard from Peter. Peter himself departs from there to an unnamed location.
- Agrippa is very upset that Peter has escaped and issues an execution order for the guards. He departs from Judea to go handle business in Caesarea. He is at odds with the people from Tyre and Sidon, but they have become pals with Agrippa's aide, Blastus. They are suing for peace in the dispute because Agrippa supplies them with food.
- Agrippa, all dressed up in his royal attire, delivers what must have been an inspiring and moving speech to them from his throne. His voice is described as that of a god, not a man. Because he does not refute this flattery as false, Herod Agrippa I is immediately struck dead by an angel of the Lord. He is "eaten by worms" (perhaps a phrase describing gangrene) and dies.
- Juxtaposed with the disease and death of Agrippa is the growth and multiplication of God's Word.
- When Barnabas and Saul return to Antioch from their mission to Jerusalem, they bring along John Mark with them.

The Herodian Dynasty:

Herod the Great (37-4 B.C.): King of Judea when Jesus was born; vastly improved temple; ruled under Octavian

Herod Antipas (4 B.C.-39 A.D.): Ruled Galilee and Perea; executed John the Baptist; exiled by Caligula

Herod Philip I (4 B.C.-34 A.D.): Ruled northeast part of Herod the Great's kingdom

Herod Archelaus (4 B.C.-6 A.D.): Ruled central Judea, Samaria and Edom

Herod Agrippa I (34-44 A.D.): Took over Philip I (34) and Antipas (39) land and rest of Judea in 41. Executed James.

Herod Agrippa II (44-92 A.D.): Ruler Paul speaks in front of in Acts 26.

Roman Rulers during Gospels and Acts:

Augustus (27 B.C.-14 A.D.)

Tiberius (14-37 A.D.)

Caligula (37-41 A.D.)

Claudius (41-54 A.D.)

Nero (54-68 A.D.)