

The Global Gospel

Key Text:	Acts 9 & 10
Key Verse(s):	“And as he journeyed, he came near Damascus: and suddenly there shined round about him a light from heaven: and he fell to the earth, and heard a voice saying unto him, Saul, Saul, why persecutest thou me?” (Acts 9:3-4)

Background to the Study

This text describes the conversion of Saul, later known as Paul. His testimony is recorded in Acts 26:12-18, and referred to in 1 Corinthians 9:1 and 15:8. This emphasis is reasonable, as over half of the Book of Acts is a description of Paul’s activities, he authored thirteen of the New Testament books (not including Hebrews, which many scholars attribute to him). Acts 8:3 states that in Jerusalem, Saul “made havock of the church, entering into every house, and haling [violently pulling] men and women committed them to prison.” In today’s passage, he purposed to expand his efforts to the Syrian city of Damascus. It is likely Saul and his companions travelled on foot. Damascus was 130 miles from Jerusalem, a journey of at least six days. Saul’s eagerness to make that trek shows how committed he was to his cause. Jesus addressed Saul by name in verse 4. The statement, “It is hard for thee to kick against the pricks” (vs. 5), alluded to the use of a goad—a long, extremely sharp stick used to move an ox in a certain direction. The inference was that Saul was only harming himself in his efforts because he was fighting against God. Ananias, whose name means “the Lord is gracious,” was not an Apostle, evangelist, elder of the church or deacon—he was simply identified as “a certain disciple.” Though the command he received was startling and he initially protested, he ultimately obeyed and went to the humbled persecutor of believers.

Chapter 10 records a vital lesson for the Early Church. The events caused the Apostles to realize that the Gospel was for the Gentiles as well as the Jews. God used two men in two cities and a series of precisely timed events to reveal that all people are called to serve Him. The chapter begins with Cornelius in Caesarea. Cornelius was a centurion, which means he was an officer over one hundred men in the Roman army. Verse 2 gives five characteristics of Cornelius. He was “devout” which means godly. That he “feared God” tells us he was among a group of people who were familiar with the Jewish religion, attended synagogue, and observed the Sabbath and part of the ceremonial law. They believed in only one God, but they were not actual converts to Judaism. “With all his house” indicates that Cornelius had led his family to serve God. That “he gave much alms to the people” shows he was charitable, and “prayed to God alway” reinforces that he regularly worshipped God. When Cornelius was praying at 3:00 p.m. (the ninth hour) an angel appeared to him with a commendation and instructions. Cornelius immediately dispatched three men who had been affected by his godliness and could be

trusted. They were to go to Joppa, which was about thirty miles south of Caesarea, and get Peter. At noon, when the messengers were near to Joppa (vs. 9), Peter was praying. The rooftops of houses of those times were quiet places that were ideal for prayer. Peter became hungry, and while lunch was being prepared, he saw in a vision a big sheet full of animals that Jewish people were prohibited from eating, and he was commanded to kill and eat them. When he protested, he was told, “What God hath cleansed, that call not thou common” (vs. 15). It would later be explained that this meant Peter was not to regard the Gentiles as inferior people whom God would not redeem. As he considered it, the men from Cornelius arrived, and the Spirit gave Peter specific instructions, which he followed.

Cornelius called together his family and close friends who believed as he did. When Peter arrived, he told them God had shown him that he “should not call any man common or unclean” (vs. 28). Peter had undergone a drastic change in thinking. He had housed the Gentile messengers in Joppa and had eaten with them. He had travelled with them and now was in a Gentile home. Peter began to preach (vs. 34-43), giving a message that summarized the Gospel. Before he was done, the Holy Ghost fell, with the evidence of people speaking in languages not known to them.

Testimony from Our Day

Mosab Yousef was a young Palestinian who wanted to be a fighter. He was first arrested when he was ten years old. Before reaching his teen years, violence and terror had become so commonplace in his life that he was bored during the rare times when their town was quiet. Mosab wanted to be just like his father, a devout Muslim who was a founding leader of Hamas, a terrorist organization responsible for countless deadly attacks against Israel. As he grew older, Mosab began helping his father, and before he turned twenty-one, he had seen abject poverty, suffering, torture, and death. While still in his early twenties, Mosab became an integral part of the Hamas organization and was even imprisoned several times by the Israelis. However, doubts about Islam and Hamas began surfacing in his mind when he observed how Hamas used the lives of innocent civilians and children to achieve its goals. One day as Mosab was walking past the Damascus Gate, a main entrance to the Old City of Jerusalem, he had an encounter that put him on a new path. After some casual conversation with a tourist from the UK, he was invited to a Bible study at the YMCA in West Jerusalem. Being a bit bored at the time, and somewhat curious about Christianity, he agreed to go. Mosab was given a New Testament at that meeting. Because gifts are respected in the Arab culture, he decided to read it. He recounted, “I began at the beginning, and when I got to the Sermon on the Mount, I thought, Wow, this guy Jesus is really impressive! Everything he says is beautiful. I couldn’t put the Book down. Every verse seemed to touch a deep wound in my life. It was a very simple message, but somehow it had the power to heal my soul and give me hope.” Thunderstruck by what he read, Mosab realized that this was what he had been searching for all his life. Jesus’ words made sense to him and overwhelmed, he began to weep. He continued to read about Jesus and to pray and eventually was secretly baptized in Tel Aviv by an unidentified Christian tourist. Mosab’s story brings to mind another encounter that took place near the same location. The conversion of Saul of Tarsus is one of the most significant events in the history of the Church. The transformations of Saul and Mosab stand as potent testimonies to the love of God. No belief system, no past history, and no political regime can block the hand of God from drawing seeking souls to Himself.

A Closer Look

Question 1	From the perspective of the early disciples, Saul of Tarsus was an unlikely candidate for the Gospel. Based on Acts 9:1-2, 13-14, how would you describe Saul prior to the events that occurred as he travelled to Damascus? What happened that changed him?
Question 2	In what ways was Saul's conversion similar to that of all Christians, and in what ways was it unique? What conclusions can we draw from these similarities and differences?
Question 3	Based on the example of Ananias, how should we treat those who oppose our religious beliefs? Acts 9:10-17
Question 4	In chapter 10, verses 1-8 describe a vision of the devout centurion, Cornelius, in which he was instructed by God to send to Joppa for Peter – a man he had never met. He obeyed, sending two of his household servants and a devout soldier to the location God designated. Shortly before their arrival, Peter was praying on the rooftop, and God sent him a vision as well. What did Peter see in his vision, and what was the lesson he was to learn? Acts 10:11-16
Question 5	What did the angel say to Cornelius about his prayers? Acts 10:1-4. Why do you think the people at Cornelius' home so quickly experienced the outpouring of the Holy Ghost? Acts 10:44-45
Question 6	Why is Acts 10 especially important to us today?

Take Home

God is still reaching out to seek and save those who will open their hearts to His truth, no matter what their upbringing, beliefs, or past history. The events at Cornelius' house teach us that we must keep praying! There will be many days when it may seem that our prayers are not monumental. There will be many prayer meetings that do not appear to be life-changing. However, that does not mean those times are unimportant! Rather, those daily prayers are vital. God sees and hears our petitions. He will answer by giving guidance and strength and by fulfilling His promises in our lives. The end result will be eternal benefits.