

ACTS: THE STORY CONTINUES

Week 15 Bible Study: Reconstructing Paul's Early Ministry

Introduction:

Last week we watched Saul meet the risen Christ on the road to Damascus.

Then Luke seems to move very quickly through the next part of Saul's life.

Today I'd like us to slow down and ask:

- **How much time actually passed between Saul's conversion and Barnabas bringing him to Antioch?**

Let's see if we can reconstruct the timeline together.

1. Where Does Luke Leave Us?

Read:

Acts 9:20-25 - "For some days he was with the disciples at Damascus. And immediately he proclaimed Jesus in the synagogues, saying, "He is the Son of God." And all who heard him were amazed and said, "Is not this the man who made havoc in Jerusalem of those who called upon this name? And has he not come here for this purpose, to bring them bound before the chief priests?" But Saul increased all the more in strength, and confounded the Jews who lived in Damascus by proving that Jesus was the Christ. When many days had passed, the Jews plotted to kill him, but their plot became known to Saul. They were watching the gates day and night in order to kill him, but his disciples took him by night and let him down through an opening in the wall, lowering him in a basket."

Discussion

- After Saul's conversion, what does Luke tell us happened next?
- What phrase in verse 23 suggests more time has passed than Luke describes?

("When many days had passed...")

Luke doesn't tell us how many.

So where can we look?

2. Paul Fills in the Missing Years

Read:

Galatians 1:15-24 - "But when he who had set me apart before I was born, and who called me by his grace, was pleased to reveal his Son to me, in order that I might preach him among the Gentiles, I did not immediately consult with anyone; nor did I go up to Jerusalem to those who were apostles before me, but I went away into Arabia, and returned again to Damascus. Then after three years I went up to Jerusalem to visit Cephas and remained with him fifteen days. (In what I am writing to you, before God, I do not lie!) Then I went into the regions of Syria and Cilicia. And I was still unknown in person to the churches of Judea that are in Christ. They only were hearing it said, "He who used to persecute us is now preaching the faith he once tried to destroy." And they glorified God because of me."

Let's reconstruct the timeline together.

What happened after Saul's conversion?

- **Damascus (*Days to weeks*)**
 - Baptized
 - Begins preaching immediately

Question: According to Galatians, where did Saul go next?

- **Arabia (*Part of the first 3 years after his conversion*)**
 - A season of preparation, reflection, and likely ministry.

Question: Where did he return after Arabia?

- **Damascus**
(*Completing approximately 3 years after conversion*)
 - Continued preaching.
 - Opposition increased.
 - Escaped through the city wall in a basket.

Question: When did Saul finally go to Jerusalem?

- **Jerusalem**
(*About 3 years after conversion*)
 - Stayed about 15 days.
 - Met Peter and James.
 - Barnabas introduced him to the church.

3. The Years Luke Compresses

Read:

Acts 9:26-31 - "And when he had come to Jerusalem, he attempted to join the disciples. And they were all afraid of him, for they did not believe that he was a disciple. But Barnabas took him and brought him to the apostles and declared to them how on the road he had seen the Lord, who spoke to him, and how at Damascus he had preached boldly in the name of Jesus. So he went in and out among them at Jerusalem, preaching boldly in the name of the Lord. And he spoke and disputed against the Hellenists. But they were seeking to kill him. And when the brothers learned this, they brought him down to Caesarea and sent him off to

Tarsus. So the church throughout all Judea and Galilee and Samaria had peace and was being built up. And walking in the fear of the Lord and in the comfort of the Holy Spirit, it multiplied."

Luke tells us Saul was sent away to Tarsus.

But Paul adds another detail.

He ministered throughout **Syria and Cilicia** before Barnabas eventually found him.

Approximate Timeline

- **Syria & Cilicia - including Tarsus** (*Approximately 5-8 years, possibly longer*)
 - Hidden ministry.
 - Continued preaching.
 - Quiet preparation.
- **Antioch** (*Roughly 8-11 years after the Damascus Road*)
 - Barnabas brings Saul from Tarsus.
 - They teach together for one year.
 - The disciples are first called Christians.

Discussion:

- If all we had was Acts 9, how much time would you have guessed had passed?
- Why do you think Luke chose to summarize nearly a decade in just a few verses?

4. Why Does Luke Leave Saul?

Luke now turns away from Saul and begins following Peter again.

Discussion:

Why?

Is Saul no longer important?

Or is something bigger happening?

Observation:

Luke isn't writing the biography of Paul.

He's telling the story of Jesus continuing His ministry through His Church.

While Saul was being prepared...

- Peter was ministering.
- Philip was serving.
- Churches were growing.
- Disciples were making disciples.

God wasn't working through only one person.

He was working through His whole Body simultaneously.

5. Peter and Aeneas

Read:

Acts 9:32-35 - "Now as Peter went here and there among them all, he came down also to the saints who lived at Lydda. There he found a man named Aeneas, bedridden for eight years, who was paralyzed. And Peter said to him, "Aeneas, Jesus Christ heals you; rise and make your bed." And immediately he rose. And all the residents of Lydda and Sharon saw him, and they turned to the Lord."

- Notice Peter's words.
 - *"Jesus Christ heals you."*

Discussion:

- Why doesn't Peter simply say, "*I heal you*"?
- What does this teach us about who is really at work throughout the book of Acts?

Closing Thoughts:

Notice how God is ALWAYS working in and through the lives of ALL of His people to accomplish His purposes and plans for His people.

- **He doesn't accomplish His redemptive purposes through only a special few.**
 - Sometimes He is preparing a future missionary in obscurity.
 - Sometimes He is healing through Peter.
 - Sometimes He is strengthening ordinary churches.
 - Sometimes He is adding new believers.
- **All at the same time.**

Final Questions:

- What encourages you most about Paul's "hidden years"?
- How does this timeline change the way you think about God's work in your own life?
- **For Personal Reflection: How might the Lord be quietly preparing you while He continues His work through others?**