

Paul has been arrested as a result of the uproar made by Jews who have been misinformed about his travels among the Gentiles. He has been given the opportunity to speak to the crowd of Jews in his own defense and he proceeds to give them his testimony. He tells of his distinctly Jewish background and his zeal for the Mosaic law, and also how his life changed when he encountered Jesus Christ.

Paul has been arrested by the Roman authorities who arrived to stop the riot that had been created by Paul's accusers. When the chief captain wasn't able to determine what crime Paul was being accused of (the crowd was crying out various contradictory accusations), he commanded that Paul be brought inside the castle that served as headquarters for the Roman garrison. Paul stops the chief captain at the top of the stairs leading into the castle and asks if he could speak to the people, a request that was granted.

1 Men, brethren, and fathers, hear ye my defence *which I make* now unto you.

Having gained the attention of the crowd, Paul addresses them respectfully, not in derision for falsely accusing him and rebelling against the will of God. He addresses the men (primarily Jews, but could also include any Gentiles present), brethren (fellow Jews on equal footing with Paul), and fathers (the elders and leaders of the Jews). He asks that they listen to his defense against the false accusations that have been made against him.

2 (And when they heard that he spake in the Hebrew tongue to them, they kept the more silence: and he saith,)

Believing Paul to be a rogue Jew who had forsaken his Jewish heritage in order to embrace Gentiles, the crowd apparently expected him to speak to them in Greek. When they heard their native tongue being spoken, they listened more intently to what he said.

3 I am verily a man *which am* a Jew, born in Tarsus, a city in Cilicia, yet brought up in this city at the feet of Gamaliel, and taught according to the perfect manner of the law of the fathers, and was zealous toward God, as ye all are this day.

“I am verily a man *which am* a Jew, born in Tarsus, a city in Cilicia” – Paul begins his defense by declaring his Jewish heritage. His bloodline was Jewish and he was born in Tarsus, the chief city of Cilicia, a province on the southeastern edge of Asia Minor. Tarsus was known as a center of learning in that region.

“yet brought up in this city at the feet of Gamaliel” – Even though he could have gotten a good education in Tarsus, Paul instead was raised in “this city” (Jerusalem) as a student of Gamaliel, a well known and respected doctor of the Mosaic law.

“and taught according to the perfect manner [strict; exact] of the law of the fathers” – As a student of Gamaliel, Paul was instructed to keep the law of Moses in the strictest manner. He was likely also taught the rabbinic traditions that had been added to the law. These traditions, although criticized by Jesus, demonstrated how thoroughly Jewish Paul's upbringing had been.

“and was zealous toward God, as ye all are this day” – Paul did not grow up as a rebel against God and the Jewish faith. On the contrary, he was just as zealous toward God as the Jews in his audience currently were.

4 And I persecuted this way unto the death, binding and delivering into prisons both men and women.

“This way” refers to the way of faith in Jesus Christ, Who described Himself as “the way” (**John 14:6** “*Jesus saith unto him, I am the way, the truth, and the life: no man cometh unto the Father, but by me*”). Paul was a zealous persecutor of those who followed Jesus Christ and was responsible for the imprisonment and even death of many men and women who believed on Jesus Christ (Acts 8:3; 9:1). These actions further demonstrated how zealous toward God that Paul was (**Phil. 3:6a** “*Concerning zeal, persecuting the church...*”).

5 As also the high priest doth bear me witness, and all the estate of the elders: from whom also I received letters unto the brethren, and went to Damascus, to bring them which were there bound unto Jerusalem, for to be punished.

The Greek word translated “estate of the elders” is *presbytérion*, which means “the presbytery” or “the council of the elders” (i.e. the Sanhedrin). Paul is saying that the high priest and the whole Sanhedrin (the highest religious rulers of the Jews) know and can testify that he's telling the truth because he came to them for letters giving him the authority to travel to Damascus to arrest believers in Jesus and bring them back to Jerusalem for punishment (Acts 9:1-2). Paul is showing the crowd just how zealous he was for God and the Jewish religion until the event happened that forever changed his life.

6 And it came to pass, that, as I made my journey, and was come nigh unto Damascus about noon, suddenly there shone from heaven a great light round about me.

Luke described this incident back in Acts 9. Here Paul gives us a better idea of the time of day because he says he was approaching Damascus around noon. He was coming with letters in hand (v. 5) giving him the authority to arrest Christians in that city and bring them back to Jerusalem to be tried for their “crimes.” It was at this time that he was stopped dead in his tracks by a great light from heaven shining around him. This light was brighter than the noonday sun and shone on Paul and his traveling companions, as he later describes to King Agrippa (**Acts 26:13** “*At midday, O king, I saw in the way a light from heaven, above the brightness of the sun, shining round about me and them which journeyed with me*”). Paul, however, was the only one that was blinded by the light. God obviously had a sovereign purpose for blinding Paul, perhaps to give him time for serious introspection (Acts 9:8-9).

7 And I fell unto the ground, and heard a voice saying unto me, Saul, Saul, why persecutest thou me? 8 And I answered, Who art thou, Lord? And he said unto me, I am Jesus of Nazareth, whom thou persecutest.

“And I fell unto the ground” – Either in surprise, fear or as a result of being blinded. Quite likely it was a response of fear because when Paul describes this incident to King Agrippa, he says that everyone in his group had fallen to the earth (**Acts 26:14** “*And when we were all fallen to the earth, I heard a voice speaking unto me, and saying in the Hebrew tongue, Saul, Saul, why persecutest thou me? it is hard for thee to kick against the pricks*”). His traveling companions also witnessed the sudden appearance of the light (v. 9) and fear likely compelled them to fall to the ground. They may even have suspected that the light came from God.

“and heard a voice saying unto me, Saul, Saul, why persecutest thou me?” – Paul (going by his Hebrew name Saul) hears a voice asking for the reason for the Paul’s persecution. Notice that the Lord considers the persecution of believers as being a persecution of Him.

“And I answered, Who art thou, Lord?” – At this point Paul likely is realizing that the voice is that of God, but he apparently wants confirmation if this is the voice of Jesus, since Paul has been persecuting the followers of Jesus.

“And he said unto me, I am Jesus of Nazareth, whom thou persecutest” – Jesus identifies Himself, both as the One speaking and as the One against Whom Paul’s persecutions have been directed. Jesus truly identifies Himself with His children and will act in their behalf.

9 And they that were with me saw indeed the light, and were afraid; but they heard not the voice of him that spake to me.

“And they that were with me saw indeed the light, and were afraid” – The entire group apparently recognized the supernatural nature of the light and had fallen down in fear, not knowing what was going to happen next.

“but they heard not the voice of him that spake to me” – Luke’s record of this incident says that the men heard a voice (**Acts 9:7** “*And the men which journeyed with him stood speechless, hearing a voice, but seeing no man*”). This seeming contradiction is easily explained. They heard a sound but either did not recognize it as voice or could not understand what was being said. For comparison, when Jesus asked His Father to glorify Himself, the Father answered but some of those standing around thought they heard thunder (**John 12:28-29** “*Father, glorify thy name. Then came there a voice from heaven, saying, I have both glorified it, and will glorify it again. The people therefore, that stood by, and heard it, said that it thundered: others said, An angel spake to him*”).

10 And I said, What shall I do, Lord? And the Lord said unto me, Arise, and go into Damascus; and there it shall be told thee of all things which are appointed for thee to do.

In the original account, Paul is “trembling and astonished” when he asks what he should do, indicating his fear and surprise in the face of this event. The last thing he ever anticipated was that Jesus was God and that He would be speaking directly to him. Jesus responds by sending Paul into the city to “await further orders.” The Greek word for “appointed” means “ordained” or “assigned.” God had plans for Paul that would be revealed as needed.

11 And when I could not see for the glory of that light, being led by the hand of them that were with me, I came into Damascus.

“And when I could not see for the glory of that light” – Paul had suffered temporary blindness after being exposed to the “glory of that light.” Commentators suggest that this light was the glory of Jesus Christ personally appearing to Paul there on the road to Damascus.

They cite several passages to support this idea:

Acts 22:14 (Ananias speaking to Paul) “*And he said, The God of our fathers hath chosen thee, that thou shouldest know his will, and see that Just One, and shouldest hear the voice of his mouth.*”

Acts 9:17 “*And Ananias went his way, and entered into the house; and putting his hands on him said, Brother Saul, the Lord, even Jesus, that appeared unto thee in the way as thou camest, hath sent me, that thou mightest receive thy sight, and be filled with the Holy Ghost.*”

Acts 9:27 “*But Barnabas took him, and brought him to the apostles, and declared unto them how he had seen the Lord in the way, and that he had spoken to him, and how he had preached boldly at Damascus in the name of Jesus.*”

Acts 26:16 (Paul giving his testimony to King Agrippa) “*But rise, and stand upon thy feet: for I have appeared unto thee for this purpose, to make thee a minister and a witness both of these things which thou hast seen, and of those things in the which I will appear unto thee;”*

1 Cor. 9:1 “*Am I not an apostle? am I not free? have I not seen Jesus Christ our Lord? are not ye my work in the Lord?”*

1 Cor. 15:8 “*And last of all he was seen of me also, as of one born out of due time.*”

“being led by the hand of them that were with me, I came into Damascus” – Being blinded, Paul was helpless and needed to be led by the hand into the city. Paul’s blindness no doubt humbled him and forced him into serious introspection and prayer as he waited for what would come next.

Verses 12-30: Paul continues his testimony, describing being visited by Ananias, who laid hands on him so that he could receive his sight. Ananias had told Paul that God had chosen him to be a witness of the risen Christ. Later, Paul returned to Jerusalem where Jesus spoke to him in a vision while he was praying in the temple. Jesus warned him to leave Jerusalem because the Jews would not accept his testimony of Jesus and that He would send Paul to the Gentiles. The Jews hearing Paul’s testimony had been willing to listen until he spoke of being sent to the Gentiles. The thought that God would show favor to the Gentiles and that they, as Jews, were rejecting the message of God, was offensive to the Jews listening. They immediately declared that Paul was not fit to live and began rioting once again. The chief captain then decided to scourge Paul as a means to discover the truth of his guilt but had to change course when he discovered that Paul was a Roman citizen. Instead, he called the Jews to a meeting with himself and Paul to discuss their accusations.