

Paul's Conversion in Three Tellings

Acts 9 · Acts 22 · Acts 26 — Side by Side

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The three accounts in Acts of Paul's conversion are not three independent witnesses; they are the same event narrated for three different audiences. This document lays them side by side feature-by-feature, with commentary on the apparent contradictions.

Why three tellings?

Luke records Paul's conversion three times in Acts, and Paul mentions it briefly in his own letters. The three accounts in Acts are not three independent witnesses; they are the same event narrated for three different audiences:

Acts 9:1–19 — Luke's third-person narrative for Theophilus. Comprehensive, with full detail about Ananias and the recovery from blindness.

Acts 22:1–21 — Paul's own defense to the Jerusalem temple-mob from the Antonia stairs. Hebrew language, Jewish bonafides emphasized.

Acts 26:1–23 — Paul's defense to King Herod Agrippa II, Festus, and the leading men of Caesarea. The commission Christ delivered directly is emphasized; the Ananias episode is omitted as irrelevant to the kingly audience.

The Time of Day

Acts 9

Not specified.

Acts 22

Acts 22:6

"About noon."

Acts 26

Acts 26:13

"At midday, O King."

Two of the three accounts specify noon. Paul's defense speeches (the two later retellings) name the time; Luke's narrative does not. The detail establishes that the light could not have been mistaken for sunrise or sunset glare — it was bright enough to overwhelm the midday sun.

The Light

Acts 9 Acts 9:3

“A light from heaven flashed around him.”

Acts 22 Acts 22:6

“A very bright light suddenly flashed from heaven all around me.”

Acts 26 Acts 26:13

“Brighter than the sun, shining all around me and those who were journeying with me.”

The descriptions intensify across the three tellings. Acts 9 simply says “a light.” Acts 22 adds “very bright” and “suddenly.” Acts 26 — the most formal speech, before a king — adds the comparison to the sun and notes the light reached Paul’s companions as well.

Falling to the Ground

Acts 9 Acts 9:4

“He fell to the ground.” Saul falls.

Acts 22 Acts 22:7

“I fell to the ground.” Paul falls.

Acts 26 Acts 26:14

“We all fell to the ground.” All of them fall.

The first two accounts focus on Saul alone; Acts 26 widens to include his entire traveling party. There is no contradiction: Saul falls in all three accounts. Acts 26 simply adds information about the companions that Acts 9 did not mention and Acts 22 did not specify either way.

The Voice's First Words

Acts 9 Acts 9:4

"Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting Me?"

Acts 22 Acts 22:7

"Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting Me?"

Acts 26 Acts 26:14

"Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting Me?" Acts 26 adds that the voice spoke *"in the Hebrew dialect"*

The first words are identical in all three accounts. Only Acts 26 — the speech before Agrippa, where Paul is emphasizing his Jewish bona fides — notes the language as Hebrew (Aramaic). For the Jerusalem mob in Acts 22, the language was already self-evident: Paul was speaking to them in Hebrew (Acts 21:40).

"Hard to Kick Against the Goads"

Acts 9 Acts 9:5 (TR/KJV)

Not in the original Greek. The phrase appears in some late manuscripts and the KJV, but the earliest manuscripts (P74, Sinaiticus, Vaticanus, Alexandrinus) do not contain it at Acts 9:5.

Acts 22

Not present.

Acts 26 Acts 26:14

"It is hard for you to kick against the goads."

Textual note: Readers using the KJV will find this phrase in Acts 9:5; readers using modern translations (NASB, ESV, NIV) will find it only at Acts 26:14. The phrase is genuinely Paul's — Acts 26 preserves it — but it was added later by scribes to Acts 9:5 to harmonize the two accounts. The honest reading is the one Acts 26 gives: Christ said this to Paul, and Paul preserved it in the most formal of his three retellings. A goad was a sharp stick used to drive oxen; an animal that kicked back only injured itself. Christ was telling Paul his resistance was self-destructive.

Saul's Question and Christ's Answer

Acts 9 Acts 9:5

"Who are You, Lord?" ... "I am Jesus whom you are persecuting."

Acts 22 Acts 22:8

"Who are You, Lord?" ... "I am Jesus the Nazarene, whom you are persecuting."

Acts 26 Acts 26:15

"Who are You, Lord?" ... "I am Jesus whom you are persecuting."

Only Acts 22 adds "the Nazarene" to Christ's self-identification. Paul is speaking to a Jerusalem audience that knew exactly who "Jesus the Nazarene" was — the same man they had handed over to Pilate twenty-five years earlier. The added word forces the question: the One you condemned as a heretical Nazarene is the One who appeared from heaven and identified Himself with the church you are persecuting.

The Companions' Experience

Acts 9 Acts 9:7

"The men who traveled with him stood speechless, hearing the voice but seeing no one."

Acts 22 Acts 22:9

"Those who were with me saw the light, to be sure, but did not understand the voice of the One who was speaking to me."

Acts 26

Not specified for the companions individually; Acts 26 only says all fell to the ground.

The apparent contradiction. Acts 9 says the companions heard the voice; Acts 22 says they did not hear the voice. The Greek resolves this. Acts 9:7 uses the verb *akouō* with the genitive case (*tēs phōnēs*) — "perceiving sound." Acts 22:9 uses the same verb with the accusative (*tēn phōnēn*) — "understanding what was said." The companions perceived a sound but did not understand the words. This is not harmonization-by-strain; it is a known and standard Greek distinction. The NASB renders Acts 22:9 as "did not understand the voice" to reflect this.

The Blindness

Acts 9 Acts 9:8–9

“His eyes were open, he could see nothing... for three days he was without sight, and neither ate nor drank.”

Acts 22 Acts 22:11

“Since I could not see because of the brightness of that light, being led by the hand by those who were with me, I came into Damascus.”

Acts 26

Not mentioned. Paul’s speech moves directly from the voice to the commission.

Acts 26 omits the blindness because Paul is compressing the narrative for a king who is interested in the commission, not in the medical details. The omission is not a contradiction; it is selection.

Ananias

Acts 9 Acts 9:10–19

Full account: the Lord’s vision to Ananias, his objection, the assurance that Saul is a chosen instrument, the laying on of hands, sight restored, baptism.

Acts 22 Acts 22:12–16

Shortened, but with key emphasis: Ananias is *“a devout man by the standard of the Law, and well spoken of by all the Jews who lived there.”*

Acts 26

Not mentioned at all.

The Acts 22 emphasis is striking: to a Jerusalem mob accusing Paul of teaching against the Law, Paul names his baptizer as a Law-keeping Jew with a good reputation among Jews. Acts 26 omits Ananias entirely because the commission in that telling comes directly from Christ on the road — which is the point Agrippa needed to hear. Paul did not invent a competing version; he selected what each audience needed.

The Commission's Source

Acts 9 Acts 9:15

Christ tells Ananias: *"He is a chosen instrument of Mine, to bear My name before the Gentiles and kings and the sons of Israel."* Then Ananias relays the substance to Paul.

Acts 22 Acts 22:14–15

Ananias delivers the commission to Paul: *"The God of our fathers has appointed you to know His will, and to see the Righteous One and to bear an utterance from His mouth. For you will be a witness for Him to all men of what you have seen and heard."*

Acts 26 Acts 26:16–18

Christ delivers the commission directly to Paul on the road: *"For this purpose I have appeared to you, to appoint you a minister and a witness... delivering you from the Jewish people and from the Gentiles, to whom I am sending you..."*

Acts 9 keeps the commission inside Ananias's vision; Acts 22 has Ananias delivering it; Acts 26 collapses all of this and presents the commission as direct words of Christ to Paul on the road. The substance is the same — Paul is sent to the Gentiles. The form differs by how much intermediation each audience needed. For Agrippa, what matters is that Christ Himself commissioned Paul; the Ananias episode is irrelevant to that point.

The Commission's Content

Acts 9 Acts 9:15–16

"To bear My name before the Gentiles and kings and the sons of Israel; for I will show him how much he must suffer for My name's sake."

Acts 22 Acts 22:15, 21

"You will be a witness for Him to all men of what you have seen and heard." ... "Go! For I will send you far away to the Gentiles."

Acts 26 Acts 26:18

"To open their eyes so that they may turn from darkness to light and from the dominion of Satan to God, that they may receive forgiveness of sins and an inheritance among those who have been sanctified by faith in Me."

Acts 26 — the most theologically dense — is also the most evangelistically pointed. Paul is standing before a king with the power to imprison or release him; he uses the words of his commission as the substance of his appeal. Agrippa's response, two verses later: "In a short time you will persuade me to become a Christian" (Acts 26:28).

Baptism

Acts 9 Acts 9:18

“He got up and was baptized.” Ananias’s words at baptism are not quoted.

Acts 22 Acts 22:16

The words at baptism are preserved: *“Now why do you delay? Get up and be baptized, and wash away your sins, calling on His name.”*

Acts 26

Not mentioned.

Acts 22:16 preserves the words Ananias spoke at the baptism — words that have anchored the doctrine of baptism’s connection to the washing away of sins ever since. Acts 9 narrates the fact (he was baptized); Acts 22 quotes the command; Acts 26 omits it because the commission, not the baptism, is what matters before Agrippa.

Three Days of Fasting

Acts 9 Acts 9:9

“For three days he was without sight, and neither ate nor drank.”

Acts 22

Not mentioned.

Acts 26

Not mentioned.

Only Luke’s narrative gives the three-day fast. The other two retellings compress the narrative.

First Preaching at Damascus

Acts 9 Acts 9:20

“Immediately he began to proclaim Jesus in the synagogues, saying, ‘He is the Son of God.’”

Acts 22

Not mentioned in this retelling. Paul moves directly from the baptism to the later return to Jerusalem and the temple-trance vision (Acts 22:17).

Acts 26 Acts 26:20

“I declared first to those in Damascus, and then in Jerusalem, and then throughout all the country of Judea, and even to the Gentiles, that they should repent and turn to God.”

Acts 9 reports the immediate Damascus synagogue ministry. Acts 26 generalizes it into the broader sweep of Paul’s preaching from Damascus outward.

Commentary

Are the three accounts contradictory?

No, and the question itself is worth examining honestly. The two most-cited differences are:

1. The companions hearing the voice (Acts 9:7) vs. not hearing it (Acts 22:9). The Greek verb *akouō* takes different cases for different meanings — genitive for perceiving sound, accusative for understanding words. Acts 9 uses the genitive (perceiving sound); Acts 22 uses the accusative (understanding speech). The companions heard the noise but did not understand the words. This is not a stretched harmonization — it is a known feature of Greek that the NASB renders explicitly: “did not understand the voice.”

2. The companions standing (Acts 9:7) vs. falling (Acts 26:14). Acts 9 says they “stood speechless” — describing their state when Paul rose and could not see. Acts 26 says they all fell to the ground at the moment of the light. These are descriptions of different moments in the same event. Anyone who has been knocked down by an explosion can be both “fallen” at the instant of the blast and “standing” when consciousness returns.

The other variations — the time of day, the brightness of the light, the presence or absence of Ananias, the language of the voice, the content of the commission — are not contradictions at all. They are selections shaped by audience. Paul does not contradict himself; he summarizes differently for different hearers.

What the variations actually teach us

Three things, all worth holding:

The conversion was a real, public, witnessed event. Three accounts agree on the substance — the road to Damascus, the light from heaven, the voice of Jesus, the commission to the Gentiles. The accounts were written for hostile audiences (the Jerusalem mob, a Roman client king) who could in principle have disputed the facts. None of them did. The basic facts were already widely known.

Paul’s preaching adapted to its audience. The same gospel, the same conversion, the same Christ — but the way Paul drew the substance out depended on who was listening. To Jews he emphasized continuity with the Law and the prophets and the Jewish standing of his baptizer. To a Roman-trained king he emphasized the commission directly from Christ’s own mouth and the sweep of his preaching to the Gentiles. This is the same pattern Paul described in 1 Corinthians 9:19–23: “to the Jews I became as a Jew... to those who are without law, as without law... I have become all things to all men, so that I may by all means save some.”

Scripture itself models how to tell one story three ways without falsifying it. Each retelling is selective; none is false. The Berean reader learns from Acts itself that compression and selection are not deception — they are how careful speakers tailor what is true for an audience that needs to hear it.

How Paul referenced his conversion in his letters

Three Pauline references give us Paul's own first-person framing, all brief:

"It pleased God, who set me apart from my mother's womb and called me through His grace, to reveal His Son in me, that I might preach Him among the Gentiles" (Galatians 1:15–16).

"Last of all, as it were to one untimely born, He appeared to me also" (1 Corinthians 15:8).

"Circumcised the eighth day, of the nation of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews; as to the Law, a Pharisee; as to zeal, a persecutor of the church; as to the righteousness which is in the Law, found blameless. But whatever things were gain to me, those things I have counted as loss for the sake of Christ" (Philippians 3:5–8).

Paul's letters never give a fourth narrative account of the road to Damascus. He references the appearance of Christ as the ground of his apostleship (1 Cor 9:1; 15:8; Gal 1:15–16) and the persecutor-past as the ground of his testimony (1 Cor 15:9; Gal 1:13; 1 Tim 1:12–16), but he does not retell the story in his letters. The story was, by then, already widely known.

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