

What Actually Happened On The Road To Damascus?

A Look at Acts Chapters 9, 22 and 26

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Recently in our Bible class the question was raised about what Paul's traveling companions heard and saw on the road to Damascus. It would appear that there is a contradiction between the accounts in Acts chapters 9, 22 and 26. Understanding what happened is important in order to answer those who would point to these verses as Bible contradictions in order to prove that the Bible has errors and cannot be trusted as the word of God.

The actual event happened in Acts 9:1-9. Paul recounts this event in Acts 22:6-11 when he addressed the mob in Jerusalem who were seeking to kill him, and finally before King Agrippa in Acts 26:12-18. In each of these accounts we see what appears to be some conflicting statements.

What did Paul's companion see?

When Paul encounters Jesus on the road to Damascus, the first thing he sees is a bright light, brighter than the sun and it shown about all around him and his companions.

In Acts 9:3 it does not indicate whether Paul's companions saw the light. Yet in Acts 22:9 they saw the light that Paul had seen. Then in Acts 26:13-14 it does not say that these men saw the light, but by their reaction it is implied that they did.

While seeing the light is not recorded in all three of these accounts, I think we can safely conclude that all the men actually saw it. When Paul tells his different audiences of his conversion, he does not include all of the information of the event. He just tells what is important at the time when he told of his encounter with Jesus. Simply because a fact is not stated every time does not mean it did not happen. Paul just chose not to say anything about it.

What did these men hear?

In Acts 9:7, these men heard a voice, but saw no one speaking, yet in Acts 22:9, the men did not hear the voice of Jesus, who spoke to Paul. In Acts 26, there is no mention of the men hearing anything.

This experience of Paul's companions is somewhat puzzling. The most plausible explanation is that they heard the voice (9:7), but failed to comprehend the words spoken (22:9). They could sense the presence of a conversation, but the words themselves were not distinct. Imagine hearing a conversation outside a room where the walls muffled the sound. The words are obscured, making it impossible to understand the conversation. In essence, Paul's companions experienced the same thing. They were not privileged participants in the conversation between Jesus and Paul; they merely witnessed the event.

We have a similar instance in John 12:28-30 that is comparable to what Paul and his companions experienced.

In John 12:28-30 we read:

“Father, glorify your name. There came therefore a voice out of heaven, saying, ‘I have both glorified it, and will glorify it again.’ The multitude therefore, that stood by, and heard it, said that it had thundered: others said, An angel had spoken to him. Jesus answered and said, This voice has not come for my sake, but for your sakes.”

The voice from heaven spoke to Jesus, but those present heard thunder, while others said it was an angel’s voice. They did not know the words spoken to Jesus, but they were certain of the miraculous nature of the sound.

In a similar way, Jesus intended to speak directly to Paul so that he could be a witness to His resurrection and his companions could marvel at the experience. Just as Jesus had said to the crowd in John 12, so it was with Paul’s companions: what they experienced was for their sake, and they had witnessed something extraordinary.

We can also look at Daniel 10:7 for a parallel event. Daniel saw a vision of a man. Those that were with him did not see the vision. What they did see was enough to frighten them into hiding.

How did these men react?

Acts 9:7, says that they stood speechless. Acts 22:9 just says they were afraid, but Acts 26:14 says that they all fell to the ground. While all three accounts imply that the men were afraid, the posture is often questioned. Did they fall to the ground or did they just stand there? Did they fall to the ground and then stand back up?

We should view the phrase “stand speechless” as a figure of speech. We can stand in doubt, stand firm, stand in fear, or stand in awe. It is totally possible to stand speechless having fallen to the earth as they did.

In Conclusion

These three accounts of Paul’s conversion do not indicate Biblical error, nor do they show inconsistency of events. As Paul recalls his encounter with Christ, it does not need to be repeated exactly the same way each time. It is told in a way that we can understand what did happen. The important thing to remember is that the conversation was for Paul only, and that those that were with him were eye witnesses of the event.

As we think about this today, we cannot but wonder about how many people have heard the words of Christ spoken yet cannot hear the words of life.