

Damascus, From the Light of Paul to the Dark Future, Acts 9

Pastor Emeritus Joe Fuiten, January 19, 2022

The attacks of Saul against the church are representative of how the devil has hounded the church for the past 2,000 years. Nothing has changed in our world today. Christians are still the most persecuted group on the planet even though we are also the largest and fastest growing religion. We will hit some highlights of this persecution as it relates to the city of Damascus.

I spent a few days in and around Damascus a few years ago. I wanted to go there to visit it while it still existed. Even though it claims to be one of the oldest cities in the world it has never suffered the destruction prophesied in the Bible in Isaiah 17.

Verse one of chapter 17 begins like this: *“A prophecy against Damascus: “See, Damascus will no longer be a city but will become a heap of ruins.”* Later in the chapter the setting seems a lot like today’s new. *“Woe to the many nations that rage—they rage like the raging sea! Woe to the peoples who roar—they roar like the roaring of great waters!*

¹³ Although the peoples roar like the roar of surging waters, when he rebukes them they flee far away, driven before the wind like chaff on the hills, like tumbleweed before a gale ¹⁴ In the evening, sudden terror! Before the morning, they are gone! This is the portion of those who loot us, the lot of those who plunder us.”

As bad as things currently are in the civil war which reduced portions of Damascus to rubble it is not yet like what is described in Isaiah. In terms of Christianity Damascus has a long history as well.

Acts 2 and Acts 7 both illustrate the spreading of the Gospel to places like Damascus. With Saul’s quest to destroy Christians it was no surprise he headed for Damascus. Somewhere on that road near Damascus Saul had his dramatic encounter with God.

Acts 9:1-9 *“Meanwhile, Saul was still breathing out murderous threats against the Lord’s disciples. He went to the high priest and asked him for letters to the synagogues in Damascus, so that if he found any there who belonged to the Way, whether men or women, he might take them as prisoners to Jerusalem. 3 As he neared Damascus on his journey, suddenly a light from heaven flashed around him. 4 He fell to the ground and heard a voice say to him, “Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?” 5 “Who are you, Lord?” Saul asked. “I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting,” he replied. 6 “Now get up and go into the city, and you will be told what you must do.” 7 The men traveling with Saul stood there speechless; they heard the sound but did not see anyone. 8 Saul got up from the ground, but when he opened his eyes he could see nothing. So they led him by the hand into Damascus. 9 For three days he was blind, and did not eat or drink anything.”*

The story of how Saul, the devout Jew and zealous persecutor of the church, became Paul, a passionate preacher of the faith, begins along the road going northward from Jerusalem to Damascus. Since we are taking a place approach to our studies I want to mention the road. Jerusalem and Damascus are only 136 miles apart which was not that far in those days and is really close today. It is closer than from Bothell to Kelso.

It is very possible Paul took the road past Caesarea Philippi and Nimrod’s Fortress, up over Golan, and down into Damascus. These days we can look from the Golan and see the location of Damascus only some 20 miles away.

As Saul approached Damascus with plans to arrest those who “belonged to the Way,” he had a vision that totally changed the direction of his life. Luke describes the conversion three times in Acts (Acts 9:1-19, 22:3-16 and 26:4-18), and Paul alludes to it in his letters to the churches in Galatia and Corinth (Galatians 1:16-21; 2 Corinthians 11:22-23).

At the time of Saul of Tarsus, Damascus was briefly occupied by the Nabateans, an Arab merchant people based in Petra. Many Jews lived in the city, perhaps a legacy from the commercial community set up by Ahab, the infamous ruler of the Northern Kingdom of Israel in the 9th century BC. From this a community of Christian disciples had grown up.

Saul was one of many Jews who felt that the followers of Jesus posed a threat to the Jewish religion. He had stood by approvingly at the stoning of the first martyr, Stephen, one of the seven church deacons, for alleged blasphemy. Later, “*breathing out murderous threats*” against the Lord’s disciples, he went to the Jewish high priest for permission to arrest any followers of “the Way” in the synagogues of Damascus, where the Gospel was attracting converts. Acts 9 describes how Saul traveled to Damascus to hunt out believers among the city’s Jewish community.

Somewhere along the road to the city, “*a light from heaven flashed around him.*” Saul fell to the ground. When Saul fell to the ground, a voice that only he could hear said: ‘*Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?*’ ‘*Who are you, Lord?*’ Saul asked. ‘*I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting.*’

The brief exchange left Saul convinced that the risen Christ had spoken directly to him and that in persecuting his followers he had been persecuting Jesus himself. According to Acts the vision caused Saul to lose his sight so that he had to be led by the hand to Damascus. There his companions took him to the “*house of Judas on Straight Street.*”

With its long straight streets, intersecting at right angles, the layout of the Old City still follows the ancient plan. Bisecting it is the street historically known as “Straight Street” (from Latin “Via Recta”). Above is the East Gate, Bab ash-Sharqi. It is a restored Roman gate at the east end of that main east-west street. Nearly a mile long, it was the main east-west thoroughfare of the city in Roman and Byzantine times. In Saul’s day Straight Street was one hundred feet wide with colonnades on each side; the central passage was for pedestrians, the side passages were for carts and horsemen going in different directions. It was joined at right angles by streets leading to various gates. Today the western end is known as Sharia Medhat Pasha and it is lined with shops selling textiles and clothes; at the east end it is called Sharia Bab Sharqi. Part of the street is covered with a metal roof. Along every part of the street are tiny shops. With barely room for one car, and a sidewalk filled with hawkers, the street is narrow, loud, smelly, and fun.

Inside the old Roman gate is the Christian Quarter. About a hundred yards down the first side street is the Chapel of Ananias. About half way between the gate and the Chapel is the little shop where I bought the beautiful church fabric.

From the moment of his encounter with Jesus, Saul fasted. He passed the time in darkness and constant prayer. On the third day a disciple named Ananias was instructed to go to Saul. At first Ananias was fearful, having heard of all the harm Saul had done. But Jesus assured Ananias that Saul was his “chosen instrument” to spread the faith to the Gentiles and the “people of Israel.” Ananias went to Saul and laid his hands on him. “Immediately, something like scales fell from Saul’s eyes, and he could see again. He got up and was baptized.” I’m in Kineesat Hanaiya (Chapel of Ananias) in the Christian Quarter of the Old City which is reputedly the place where Ananias laid his hands on Saul to restore his eyesight.

After his conversion, Saul remained in Damascus for some time and began to preach his new found faith in the synagogues, but he soon attracted the attention of hostile Jews and government officials who plotted to kill him. Saul had to escape over the city wall in a basket (Acts 9:25; 2 Corinthians 11:32-33). Sometime later he returned to the city (Galatians 1:7).

Kanissat Bab Kisan is, in English, Chapel of St. Paul. It is a gate at the southeastern part of the Old City where, tradition says, Saul was lowered in a basket to escape the Nabatean governor. The reference in 2 Corinthians to Aretas, the Nabatean king, fixes the date of Saul's conversion between 34 and 37 AD. Inside the relatively small and simple church there are a couple of relief sculptures illustrating the two great moments in the life of Paul.

After his revelation of Jesus there was a long period in which Saul disappears from our gaze. Acts tells us very little about these years, only that immediately after his eyesight was restored "he began to preach in the synagogues that Jesus is the Son of God." For a good picture of what happened during this time, we need to merge two brief accounts from Galatians (1:16b-21) and 2 Corinthians (11:22-23), with those in Acts (9:18-30; 22:13-21 and 26:12-20). This is the result: After his conversion, Saul spent three mysterious years in "Arabia" (also called Nabatea). During that time he no doubt spent some time in reflection and meditation, while visiting such cities as Philadelphia (now Amman, Jordan), Petra (the Nabatean capital now most famous from Indiana Jones and the Last Crusade) and Jerash. It may be that he ran afoul of King Aretas IV of Nabatea and was forced to flee back to Damascus. Here we have two aspects of what happened next: In Acts (9:20-25), we are told that his teaching in the synagogues that Jesus was the long awaited "Anointed One" upset the Jews and they sought to kill him. The Jews set a watch on the city gates, but some of Saul's followers "lowered him in a basket through an opening in the wall" Acts emphasizes the role of the Jews. In 2 Corinthians (11:32-33), Paul emphasizes the political side. He said his preaching angered the governor under King Aretas, who was no doubt influenced by his Jewish detractors, and who "*had the city of the Damascenes guarded in order to arrest me. But I was lowered in a basket from a window in the wall and slipped through his hands.*"

In the span of the book of Acts, Paul went from persecutor of Christians in Damascus to the one being persecuted in Damascus. As such he set the tone for much of the modern history of the city.

After the biblical period, Damascus continued to see an increase in Christians. By the 4th century it was virtually all Christian. It remained largely Christian until the time of the Muslim invasion when the Christians again entered a long period of oppression right up to the present day.

With the Muslim conquest Damascus remained a Christian city with a Muslim-dominated government. However, in order to keep the city and the region functioning the Muslims had to rely upon the Christian business people and the many functionaries of the government. One of the most notable was St. John of Damascus.

In spite of his Christian background, his family held an important hereditary public office in the court of the Muslim rulers of Damascus, the Umayyads. John of Damascus succeeded his father in his position upon his death being appointed *protosymbullus*, or Chief Councilor of Damascus. The fact that John of Damascus took over from his father who held a similar role may be important. His father worked for Abd al-Malik ibn Marwan (646-705) who was the 5th Umayyad Caliph. In 695, Justinian II put a full-face image of Christ on the obverse of his gold coins. This caused Caliph Abd al-Malik to break permanently with his previous adoption of Byzantine coin types to start a purely Islamic coinage with lettering only. The Christian Byzantines issued coins that showed the emperor holding a staff with a cross on top. Many of the coins had Christian symbols on them. This would not do for the Muslims. To this day many Muslim coins have writing on them with quotations from the Koran. The first coins issued at Damascus for the empire that governed from there showed the Caliph standing with a sword.

The Standing Caliph coin also had a modification of the Christian coins. The other ironic thing is that Islam forbids images so for the Caliph to issue a coin with his image on it would have been a violation of the religion. The head of the religion was violating the rules on images. (This material on coins I shared with a group that reaches out to Islamic clerics and scholars to show them inconsistencies in the Koran and Muslim practice. They said they wanted to include it in one of their books. I don't know if they did because I have not seen the book.)

I am guessing that John of Damascus' father did not agree with Malik and may have influenced John to the same opinion. John became a strong opponent of the iconoclasts and could do so safely from his position in the Muslim court.

Prior to Malik, the Caliphs apparently did not have a problem with images. That would explain why Caliph Mu'awiyah I, whose Jerusalem coin I have, was willing to put his image on the coin.

One of the great curiosities was the early coinage during the Muslim era.

In the Syrian Civil War, there have been many reports of the rebels attacking Christian villages and bringing harm to Christians generally. Some are saying radical Islamists have used this civil war as a pretext to attack Christians. This is especially true west of Homs where there is a strong historic Christian presence and where many Christians serve in influential positions particularly in business. Aleppo may have the largest group of Christians in the country although Damascus has a sizeable Christian community with churches in the city. Christian civil servants often get Sunday morning off even though Sunday is a work day and the Christian schools have Saturday and Sunday as the weekend. Fighting was very intense around Homs and Aleppo where Christian numbers are strong. International Christian Concern has reported that many Christians have actually supported the Assad regime although like civil wars generally, it is a much divided situation. In Syria Christians make up 10% of the population. They tend to be concentrated in the west and around where the Assad tribe lives. Although the constitution requires the President of Syria to be Muslim, Islam is not a state religion and officially the government does not favor one religion over another. However, in this Civil War the Christians have suffered as much or more than any other group.

When considering current events it is helpful to consider ultimate outcomes particularly ones where the Bible says what will ultimately happen. The case of Syria and Damascus may be such a case. The Bible does give a negative outlook for Damascus. Isaiah 17:1 "An oracle concerning Damascus: *"See, Damascus will no longer be a city but will become a heap of ruins."* Isaiah 18:3 makes a reference that is a bit mystical but still interesting. *"All you people of the world, you who live on the earth, when a banner is raised on the mountains, you will see it, and when a trumpet sounds, you will hear it."* This kind of language, particularly about the trumpet, linked to the destruction of Damascus makes me think of the Second Coming of Jesus. That would make Damascus some kind of indicator of the prophetic timeline of the coming of the Lord.

I get a similar kind of impression from reading Zechariah 9:1-6. *"An Oracle. The word of the Lord is against the land of Hadrach and will rest upon Damascus — for the eyes of men and all the tribes of Israel are on the Lord— 2 and upon Hamath too, which borders on it, and upon Tyre and Sidon, though they are very skillful. 3 Tyre has built herself a stronghold; she has heaped up silver like dust, and gold like the dirt of the streets. 4 But the Lord will take away her possessions and destroy her power on the sea, and she will be consumed by fire. 5 Ashkelon will see it and fear; Gaza will writhe in agony, and Ekron too, for her hope will wither. Gaza will*

lose her king and Ashkelon will be deserted. 6 Foreigners will occupy Ashdod, and I will cut off the pride of the Philistines.”

If Damascus is going to be turned into a heap of ruins then I wonder how that will happen. I used to think that obviously Syria would attack Israel with chemical or nuclear weapons and Israel would respond by wiping out Damascus. I still think that has obvious possibilities. We know there was an Israeli airstrike on a nuclear reactor in the Deir ez-Zor region of Syria carried out on September 6, 2007. It turned out that 10 North Koreans were killed in that attack. North Korea was bolstering their economy by supplying nuclear technology to Syria. This is one reason North Korea must be addressed.

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I want to begin with the very dark future of Damascus and consider how that might come about given the present difficult circumstances in Damascus. First, Syria has been in a civil war for almost 11 years. The country has largely devolved into the Wild West with a number of foreign powers battling for military control of the land. The civil war wrested control away from the Syrian government. At one point they controlled about 20% of the land but with the help of various Shiite or Iranian groups as well as the Russians they now again say they have about 75% of the land under government control.

Iran, Turkey, Russia, Iraq and the Kurds as well as the United States have the most power on the ground with Israel asserting itself as well. With such an array of forces the many cross purposes seems obvious.

In the Syrian Civil War, there have been many reports of the rebels attacking Christian villages and bringing harm to Christians generally. Some are saying radical Islamists have used this civil war as a pretext to attack Christians. This is especially true west of Homs, just across from Lebanon, where there is a strong historic Christian presence and where many Christians serve in influential positions particularly in business. Aleppo may have had the largest group of Christians in the country although Damascus has a sizeable Christian community with churches in the city. Christian civil servants often get Sunday morning off even though Sunday is a work day and the Christian schools have Saturday and Sunday as the weekend. Fighting was very intense around Homs and Aleppo where Christian numbers are strong. International Christian Concern has reported that many Christians have actually supported the Assad regime although like civil wars generally, it is a much divided situation. In Syria Christians make up 10% of the population. They tend to be concentrated in the west and around where the Assad tribe lives. Although the constitution requires the President of Syria to be Muslim, Islam is not a state religion and officially the government does not favor one religion over another. However, in this Civil War the Christians have suffered as much or more than any other group.

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If Damascus is going to be turned into a heap of ruins then I wonder how that will happen. The most reasonable first idea is that Syria would attack Israel with chemical or nuclear weapons and Israel would respond by wiping out Damascus. I still think that has obvious possibilities. We know there was an Israeli airstrike on a nuclear reactor in the Deir ez-Zor (Deir al-Zour) region of Syria carried out on September 6, 2007. It turned out that 10 North Koreans were killed in that attack. North Korea was bolstering their economy by supplying nuclear technology to Syria. This is one reason North Korea must be contained and why their return to belligerent rocket tests is alarming. They almost certainly are a proxy for Iran in developing nuclear weapons and missile technology. The area where the nuclear reactor was destroyed was held by ISIS for a time. It is presently within the US airpower corridor and is watched over by US forces from their base at al-Tanf, Russian forces who are brokering relations, as well as friendly Kurdish-led forces known as Syrian Democratic Front.

In all this, Israel is concerned about being attacked in the future. Iran became involved ostensibly to support their fellow Shi'ite, Assad, against his Sunni rebels. Iran called upon their proxy, Hezbollah from Lebanon, to supply weapons and troops to also assist Assad. Iranian support has been essential to Assad surviving. As a result, Syria has become beholden to Iran and is now reluctantly but well within their orbit.

Before I go farther with why Iran supports Assad let me give a bit of the Muslim religious background. The subtext of Syria is the basic split between Sunni and Shite. That ancient battle of succession for leadership in Islam from the late 600's is being replayed in Syria at least as a subtext. Sunnis are rooted in the majority group who followed Abu Bakr, an effective leader, as Muhammad's successor, instead of his cousin and son-in-law Ali. The Sunnis are so named because they believe themselves to follow the sunnah or "custom" of the Prophet. Shi'ites are those Muslims who followed Ali, the closest relative of Muhammad, as Muhammad's successor. It's hard to believe that a battle for succession 1500 years ago still impacts Islam today but it is a serious grudge-bearing religion.

President Bashar al-Assad, whose family has held the presidency in Syria since 1971, is a member of the Shia Alawites who side with the Shi'ites in the matter of rightful succession. A majority of Syrians are not Shia but Sunni. The other factor is that Damascus was the capital of

the Umayyad Empire after control of Islam was wrested from Muhammad's family. Islam's Caliph was a Sunni governing from Damascus while the Shi'ites languished in obscurity. For a Shi'ite, it is important that Assad is not Sunni. That is one important reason why Iran and Hezbollah have moved to support Assad and have helped him turn the tide against the mostly Sunni rebels.

The conflict gradually took a more sectarian nature between Sunnis and Shia Alawites when the Syrian government began establishing Alawite militias to substitute defected soldiers. A 2012 UN report described the conflict as "overtly sectarian in nature".

It now seems unlikely, but if Assad were to lose the civil war and the majority Sunni's took over it would feel to the Shia like the return of the Umayyad to Damascus, something totally repugnant to them. Rather than accept such a setback, the Shia themselves might destroy Damascus. "If the Shia can't have it then nobody can." They could make Damascus so radioactive or hot with chemicals that it would fulfill Isaiah 17 and become "a heap of ruins." When you see pictures of what they did to Aleppo you can imagine what a heap of ruins looks like.

If the Assad regime falls, such a scenario could begin to play out. I am not predicting the Shia will be the ones to destroy Damascus or that this is how it will all happen. I am only saying that I can now see a second way in which the Bible's prophecy will be fulfilled. Like so much of prophecy, we cannot know the how but we can be certain that what God says will be, will be.

The main point however is that Iran has been increasingly using their involvement in support of Assad as a pretext to infiltrate troops and weapons in a greater encirclement of Israel. Already their proxies are Hamas in Gaza and Hezbollah in Lebanon. Hamas regularly attacks Israel. Hezbollah seems to be holding back their massive rocket force waiting for the signal from Iran to strike. All the while Iran continues to move forces and equipment into Syria and Lebanon. The US base at al-Tanf guards the main east-west road from Baghdad to Damascus. Along with Israel, we want to prevent more power and influence coming into the region by land from Iran. (We may have as many as 900 Special Forces in the area.) Israel has been keeping a sharp eye on Syrian ports such as Latakia, and Lebanese ports, striking containers full of rockets and offensive weapons when they get loaded into warehouses at the harbor. It seems these regular bombings have prevented Iran from building up too much by sea. Now Iran seems to be landing more cargo planes into Syria to accomplish the same goal. Increasingly drones and rockets are being used by Iran. (In another front, the attacks on the UAE—Abu Dhabi this week, as well as attacks on Saudi installations and oil fields seems to be more Shi'ite attacks on Sunni Moslems who also have friendly relations with Israel.)

We haven't even mentioned the Turkish and Russian troops and equipment that are now in Syria. My reading of Ezekiel 38 and 39 would suggest they are part of the attack on Israel that comes in the last days. So the end times forces are assembling. Just where the destruction of Damascus fits into the end times calendar we cannot determine but we do think it is part of the overall scenario. All this makes me think Damascus has a very dark future.