

Damascus

Location

Situated in the northwest of the Ghuta plain at an elevation of 2,300 feet, Damascus lies along the Abana River (modern Barada), which waters lush orchards and gardens. The main produce is grapes, melons and apricots. The city lies east of the Anti-Lebanon Mountains with Mount Hermon to its southwest. Arabs of the desert call Damascus “the pearl of the east.” It is a natural communication center linking caravan routes to the Mediterranean coast sixty-five miles to the west.

History

Occupied from prehistoric times, Damascus reputed to be the oldest continually occupied city on earth dating back to at least 2000 BC. In New Testament times, Damascus is an important center ruled by Arabia under Aretas IV (9 BC to 40 AD). Damascus becomes part of a bitter border dispute between Aretas and his son-in-law Herod Antipas. When Aretas defeats him, Antipas requests Rome to intervene. By Paul’s time, a strong Christian community has arisen, which brings him to the city to eradicate followers of the Way (Acts 9:2). The city had been under the control of Arabian princes but came again into the hands of Aretas by the time of Paul’s arrival. This places Paul’s conversion somewhere between 34 and 36 AD. (2 Corinthians 11:32-33; Acts 9:24).

On the Road to Damascus

Paul’s reversal from persecutor to persecuted stands not only as one of the great questions of history but also as an ample apologia for the truth-claim of Christ’s resurrection (Acts 9:1-30). His conversion does not result merely from a flash of light, falling off a horse or even a deep regret for harming innocents. At Damascus, he turns his back on all he holds dear: his education, his sect and his future as a leader of the Jews (cf. Philippians 3:4-8). On the Damascan trail, he encounters the inexplicable—a dead man calling him to stop his relentless pursuit of people committed to following the Nazarene. Time and distance cannot brush away what happens to him there for Christ calls Saul to follow him, and his appeal forever changes the life of this young Pharisee as he makes Jesus his Lord.

Cold Reception

Saul’s dire reputation makes it difficult for Ananias to accept that one so resolute could turn to the Lord, but he goes at Christ’s bidding, Saul must escape from the clutches of the Damascan Jews in the night to avoid persecution for his newfound faith. In Jerusalem, the apostles refuse to meet with him. However, Barnabas intervenes by taking Saul to the apostles and telling them how Saul met Jesus on the Damascan road and boldly preached in the name of Jesus. Saul enters the Hellenist synagogues (i.e., Greek speaking Jews) to argue that Jesus is the Christ. The Jews react with violent intention seeking to kill him. When the brothers hear of their plans, they send him away to Caesarea where he evidently catches a ship bound for Tarsus. His departure brings a time of peace for the church. The church grows as many walk in the fear of the Lord and the comfort of the Holy Spirit.

Defender of the Faith

If Paul was uneducated or a bit crazed in his writings, then critics easily can explain away this episode. However, his unswerving devotion makes his conversion difficult for non-believers to cast aside. If early Christianity’s most ardent critic and tormenter converts to the enemies camp, what evidence can we offer to disprove so shocking an about face? Turncoats change sides due to some advantage usually involving better pay or situation (such as Judas Iscariot or Benedict Arnold for instance). No band of worshippers surrounds him in the end—he stands alone. Even though he craves companions of kindred spirits, the spread of the gospel means more than being surrounded with admirers (2 Timothy 4:9-18).

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