

The Challenges of Change

Lesson for May 28, 2023

Unit III: The Birth of the Church

Scriptural Background: Acts 9:1-31

Printed Text: Acts 9:9-17

Key verse: *“Then Ananias went to the house and entered it. Placing his hands on Saul, he said, “Brother Saul, the Lord—Jesus, who appeared to you on the road as you were coming here—has sent me so that you may see again and be filled with the Holy Spirit.” (Acts 9:17, NIV)*

Some people will change when they see the light. Others change only when they feel the heat.

Author Unknown

In this week’s lesson, Saul, the persecutor of the church, was changed after seeing the light and encountering the risen Savior.

Key terms

1. **Authority** (verse 14) – The power to act; weight; influence.
2. **Behold** (verse 10) – Look; to perceive through sight or apprehension; to gaze upon; to observe.
3. **Disciple** (verse 10) – A learner; pupil. Disciple is the primary term used in the Gospels to refer to Jesus' followers and is a common referent for those known in the early church as believers, Christians, brothers/sisters, those of the Way, or saints.
4. **Praying** (verse 11) – A devout petition to God or an object of worship. A spiritual communion with God or an object of worship, as in supplication, thanksgiving, adoration, or confession.
5. **Straight** (verse 11) – Straight of direction, as opposed to crooked; upright.
6. **Three** (verse 9) – The number of God (as triune Godhead).
7. **Vision** (verse 10) – A spectacle; sight; the act or power of seeing.

Lesson Background

There is much we can learn from the life of the apostle Paul. Far from ordinary, Paul was given the opportunity to do extraordinary things for the kingdom of God. The story of Paul is a story of redemption in Jesus Christ and a testimony that no one is beyond the saving grace of the Lord. However, to gain the full measure of the man, we must examine his dark side and what he symbolized before becoming “the Apostle of Grace.” Paul’s early life was marked by religious zeal, brutal violence, and the relentless persecution of the early church. Fortunately, the later years of Paul’s life show a marked difference as he lived his life for Christ and for the advancement of His kingdom.

Paul was actually born as Saul. He was born in Tarsus in Cilicia around AD 1–5 in a province in the southeastern corner of modern-day Tarsus, Turkey. He was of Benjamite lineage and Hebrew ancestry (Philippians 3:5–6). His parents were Pharisees—fervent Jewish nationalists who adhered strictly to the Law of Moses—who sought to protect their children from “contamination” from the Gentiles. Anything Greek would have been despised in Saul’s household, yet he could speak Greek and passable Latin. His household would have spoken Aramaic, a derivative of Hebrew, which was the official language of Judea. Saul’s family were Roman citizens but viewed Jerusalem as a truly sacred and holy city (Acts 22:22-29).

At age thirteen Saul was sent to Judea to learn from a rabbi named Gamaliel, under whom Saul mastered Jewish history, the Psalms, and the works of the prophets. His education would continue for five or six years as Saul learned such things as dissecting Scripture (Acts 22:3). It was during this time that he developed a question-and-answer style of teaching known in ancient times as “diatribe.” This method of articulation helped rabbis debate the finer points of Jewish law to either defend or prosecute those who broke the law. Saul went on to become a lawyer, and all signs pointed to his becoming a member of the Sanhedrin, the Jewish Supreme Court of 71 men who ruled over Jewish life and religion. Saul was zealous for his faith, and this faith did not allow for compromise. It is this zeal that led Saul down the path of religious extremism.

In Acts 5:27–42, Peter delivered his defense of the gospel and of Jesus in front of the Sanhedrin, which Saul would have heard. Gamaliel was also present and delivered a message to calm the council and prevent them from stoning Peter. Saul might also have been present at the trial of Stephen. He was present for his stoning and death; he held the garments of those who did the stoning (Acts 7:58). After Stephen’s death, "a great persecution broke out against the church in Jerusalem" (Acts 8:1). Saul became determined to eradicate Christians, ruthless in his pursuit as he believed he was acting in the name of God. Arguably, there is no one more frightening or more vicious than a religious terrorist, especially when he believes he is doing the will of the Lord by killing innocent people. This is exactly what Saul of Tarsus was: a religious terrorist. Acts 8:3 states, “He began ravaging the church, entering house after house, and dragging off men and women, he would put them in prison.”

The pivotal passage in Paul’s story is found in this week’s lesson.

Lesson In Depth

I. A Test of Faith and Forgiveness (Acts 9:9-14)

After Saul is knocked from his beast and encounters Jesus, verse 8 states; “*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.*”

And he was three days without sight, and neither ate nor drank: It seems that Saul was so shaken by the experience that he was unable to eat or drink for three days. All Saul could do was simply sit in a blind silence. This was a humbling experience, and a time when Saul must have challenged all his previous ideas about who God was and what pleased God.

The men with Paul recover their composure and escort him to a house in Damascus. For the next three days the blind Paul fasts, no doubt meditating on the meaning of his encounter with Jesus.

In Luke's account in chapter 9, there is no indication that Paul is told anything else about his future commission by the risen Christ on the Damascus Road. The later account in Acts 22:10 supports this. There, Paul says he is told to get up and go into Damascus. "There you will be told all that you have been assigned to do," said Jesus. That's where a man named Ananias enters the stage.

Now there was a certain disciple at Damascus named Ananias: We don't know anything about Ananias from either before or after this meeting with Saul. We don't know how he came to Damascus, or what happened to him afterward. From what we do know we can think of him as an average follower of Jesus – a certain disciple.

Ananias was an ordinary man – not an apostle, a prophet, a pastor, an evangelist, an elder, or a deacon. Ananias is a Jewish believer in Jesus who lives in Damascus. Paul calls him "a devout observer of the law and highly respected by all the Jews living there" (22:12). Ananias has a vision from God in which he is told to go to the house of a man named Judas who lives on Straight Street in Damascus (9:11). God used him because he was an ordinary man. If an apostle or a prominent person had ministered to Saul, people might say Paul received his gospel from a man instead of Jesus. In the same way, God *needs* to use the certain disciple – there is a special work for them to do.

In theory, it wasn't absolutely necessary that God use a man like Ananias for this work in Saul's life. Being simply a certain disciple, we can say that God simply used Ananias because God loves to use people, and Ananias was a willing servant. Ananias asked Saul's question, "*Lord, what do You want me to do?*" (Acts 9:6) by the way he lived his life.

To him the Lord said in a vision: God spoke to Ananias in a completely different way than He spoke to Saul. Saul had a bold, almost violent confrontation from God, but Ananias heard the voice of God sweetly in a vision, where God called and Ananias obediently responded. To say, "**Here I am, Lord**" is a perfect response to God.

Arise and go: God's instructions to Ananias were clear, but curiously, God told Ananias about Saul's vision in Ananias' own vision.

Behold, he is praying: This indicated a true change of heart in this man famous for persecuting the disciples of Jesus. One might say that Saul had never *really* prayed before; he merely repeated formal prayers.

We shouldn't be surprised if people like Saul receive God's Word with initial resistance and questioning. Yet we should expect disciples of Jesus to receive God's Word like Ananias did.

In the case of Ananias, the vision from God was specific. God told him about:

- A specific street (**the street called Straight**).
- A specific house (**the house of Judas**).
- A specific man (**one called Saul of Tarsus**).
- A specific thing the man was doing (**he is praying**).
- A specific vision the man had (**in a vision he has seen a man named Ananias**).

This specificity was necessary and important, because God asked Ananias to do something bold and dangerous in meeting Saul, the great persecutor. He needed confirmation along the way that God was guiding him, and God gave him ways to confirm this.

I have heard by many of this man, how much evil he hath done to thy saints at Jerusalem: Ananias' objections were perfectly logical and well founded. However, they presumed that God needed instruction, or at best, counsel. Ananias almost asked, "God, do you know what kind of guy this Saul is?"

In fact, Ananias knew a great deal about the mission of Saul (how much harm he has done to Your saints in Jerusalem...here he has authority from the chief priests to bind all who call on Your name). It was apparently widely known. What Ananias does not realize is that Saul has had an encounter with God.

II. The Evidence of Change (Acts 9:15-17)

He is a chosen vessel of Mine to bear My name: God had a call upon the life of Saul. At this time, God had not yet revealed that calling to Saul. He seems to have told Ananias first. God considered Saul His **chosen vessel** long before there appeared anything worthy in Saul to choose. God knew what *He* could make of Saul, even when Saul or Ananias didn't know.

To bear My name before Gentiles, kings, and the children of Israel: This describes in broad outline the calling and future work of the broken, blind, afflicted man Ananias would soon meet. God called him to bring who He is and what He has done (**My name**) to **Gentiles**, to **kings**, and to **the children of Israel**.

For I will show him how many things he must suffer for My name's sake: This was a sobering addition to the great call God put upon the life of Saul. Saul would leave a life of privilege to embrace a higher call, but a call with much suffering.

Ananias went his way and entered the house: This took great courage. In the centuries since, Christians have had to deal with those who make pretended conversions to infiltrate the followers of Jesus. Ananias had to overcome this fear or suspicion.

Laying his hands on him he said, "Brother Saul": The act of **laying his hands** and the words "**Brother Saul**" powerfully communicated the love of God. Blind Saul could not see the love on Ananias' face, so he communicated it through his touch and his voice.

Be filled with the Holy Spirit: It seems that this is when Saul was actually born again. Here is where he received the Holy Spirit and was healed from his blindness, which was spiritual blindness as much as physical blindness.

Be filled: God did an effective job of breaking Saul, but it wasn't His intention to leave him broken. God wanted to break Saul so He could fill him and leave him filled.

Lesson Summary

The conversion of Saul/Paul is one of the most dramatic stories in the Bible. Also, one of the most famous and the most misunderstood. What is its meaning, and how does that apply to our lives?

Paul himself tells us what we are meant to learn from his conversion. In 1 Timothy 1:15, Paul says:

“The saying is trustworthy and deserving of full acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, of whom I am the foremost.”

In other words, his own conversion stands as a model to teach us that anyone can come to Christ. That there is no sin too bad, no evil too wicked, that can prevent us from receiving the grace of Christ—if, like Paul, we repent. The story is rightly used as a paradigm of conversion. Certainly not all conversions are as dramatic as Paul's, but all conversions to Christ are the regeneration of a sinful person, receiving God's Spirit, and being declared righteous by faith in Jesus. Like Paul, **if we are to be truly converted, we must be humbled. We must repent. We must start a new life.** If we do that, we will be accepted, however bad our sins may be.

God can save anyone, no matter how sinful or hostile they are. Saul was the worst enemy of the church, but God chose him to be his instrument of grace. God's mercy and power are greater than any human resistance or rebellion. No one in this life is beyond saving in principle. It is possible to reject Jesus. Many people do. But in principle, no one is beyond saving. This should encourage us when we think of family members or friends who do not yet know Jesus. And also motivate us to continue to pray for them and witness to them.

God can use our past experiences and skills for his glory. Saul was well-educated in Jewish law and culture, fluent in Greek and Hebrew, and familiar with different regions and people groups. God used these assets to equip Saul for his mission to spread the gospel across the Roman world.

God can transform our lives completely when we encounter Him. Saul's conversion was not just a change of opinion, but a radical change of heart and direction. He went from being a persecutor to a persecuted, from being a legalist to a grace-giver, from being proud to being humble. He also changed his name to Paul, signifying his new identity in Christ.

God can use other people to help us grow in faith. Saul did not become a Christian by himself. He needed Ananias, a faithful disciple in Damascus, to pray for him, heal him, baptize him, and teach him. He also needed Barnabas, a generous and encouraging leader in Antioch, to vouch for him, partner with him, and mentor him. God works through his people to nurture and support each other. What would have happened if Ananias had not been obedient to his task? God would have found someone else no doubt. And yet Ananias' obedience matters. Would we obey God to serve someone converted from a background like Paul's? Sometimes God asks us to do things that are difficult, hard, even risky. Would we obey? Would we put Christ first and risk our job or our livelihood? It is worth asking such questions when we are not being put to the test, so that when we are put to the test, we will have the necessary backbone to be able to stand up and do what is right in God's eyes. God's light is identifying a person in our minds that is our Saul. God is asking us right now to forgive them to go to them and to minister to them. Who is that Saul in your life our Lord is asking us to visit?