

A Game Changer

"But the Lord said to Ananias, 'Go! This man is My chosen instrument to carry My name before the Gentiles and their kings and before the people of Israel'" (v. 15).

Devotional

Saul of Tarsus was present at the execution of Stephen, and became inflamed with hatred for the followers of Jesus. He sought to destroy the church in Jerusalem (Acts 8:1-3), and then headed for Damascus to tear up the church there (Acts 9:1-2).

Along the way to Damascus, Jesus spoke to Saul. A great light from heaven, which Saul would have recognized as the glory of God, accompanied the words of Jesus. Jesus told Saul that in persecuting the church he was persecuting Jesus Himself, because the Lord is associated with His body. Jesus told Saul to go to Damascus and await instructions. When Saul got up, he found that he was blind. Saul now realized that the Christian claim was correct. The Lord who appeared to Israel in the shekinah glory in the Old Testament became incarnate and was now enthroned at the right hand of the Father.

God called to a disciple in Damascus named Ananias and told him to go to Saul, lay hands on him, and restore his sight. Ananias was fearful because he knew of Saul's reputation, but the Lord assured him that He had chosen Saul, and that in the future, Saul himself would "suffer for My name" (Acts 9:16). So Ananias went to Saul, laid hands on him and healed him, and then baptized him into the church.

One of the most alarming trends in modern Christianity, including even some conservative circles, is the trend to downplay and even despise Paul, formerly Saul of Tarsus. Paul is presented as harsh and mean, in contrast to Jesus who supposedly was nice and sweet. Some conservative evangelicals take it upon themselves to correct what Paul said in certain areas, particularly in the area of women's role in the church.

This is a very dangerous trend, because it is abundantly clear that Paul was chosen by God to be the author of most of the theologically weighty parts of the New Testament. Paul's stature in the New Testament church was like that of a new Moses. God said that Paul was His chosen instrument. Those who presume to correct the apostle Paul are presuming to correct God.

CORAM DEO

There have been few conversions as dramatic as Paul's. True conversion, however, need not be dramatic to be authentic. Think back on your conversion. Thank God for "invading" your life and calling you, and consider how or if you have suffered for Him in His service. If you haven't, should you have?¹

Open it

1. Describe a momentous time (either good or bad) in your life. What was it, and how did that moment impact your life?

Read it

Acts 9:1-43

Explore it

2. Why was Saul heading to Damascus?
3. Who did he encounter on the way?
4. What happened to Saul as a result of this encounter?
5. What task did God give Ananias through a vision?
6. How did the disciples respond to Saul's conversion?

¹ <https://www.ligonier.org/learn/devotionals/the-call-of-saul-of-tarsus/>

Apply it

To those with biblically trained ears, it is quickly evident that culture at large has (without even realizing it) embraced biblical terminology. For example the phrase “by the skin of my teeth” is frequently heard, but most don’t realize that it comes from Job 19:20. Sometimes we hear people described as being “the salt of the earth,” which is lifted from Matthew 5:13. Another often used phrase is, “I had a Damascus Road experience,” or, “I have not had a Damascus Road experience.” Of course, this comes from the story of Paul’s conversion, as recorded by Dr. Luke, in Acts 9.

What happened to this man named Saul, from Tarsus, is one of the most well-known events in the history of the world. It would be akin to Richard Dawkins being converted to Christ. And yet with all due respect, as wonderful as that would be, Dawkins’ conversion would not hold a candle to that of Saul’s, simply because with the conversion of Saul the gospel began to spread to the nations in an otherwise unimaginable way. In fact, if Mr. Dawkins is one day converted, he will have Saul (or Paul) and his Damascus Road experience to thank for it!²

7. What was it about Saul’s conversion that made it so remarkable?

Can you think of any famous people that have converted to Christianity? How did their conversion affect the world?

8. Who is the most outspoken opponent of Christianity that you personally know? What would it take for you to believe that they truly come to Christ?

HIS BACKGROUND

As a young man, he was known as “Saul,” even though he also had a Roman name, Paul. He was a Roman citizen (Acts 22:28), an uncommon distinction, suggesting that his family (his father or grandfather, perhaps) had been granted official citizenship in return for services rendered to the city of Tarsus. Saul had been captivated by the religion of his fathers rather than the paganism of the Greek pantheon.

² Sermon by Doug Van Meter found @ <http://brackenhurstbaptist.co.za/on-the-damascus-road/>

He was a “Pharisee” (Acts 23:6; cf. Philippians 3:5). This was unusual for a man living in Tarsus. Pharisaism involved strict obedience to the law and scrupulous observance of ceremonial ritual, and therefore thrived in Judea rather than in the Diaspora. Perhaps Saul began to call himself a Pharisee only when he reached Jerusalem and began studying under Rabbi Gamaliel, one of its leading exponents (Acts 22:3). Gamaliel was the grandson of the famous Rabbi Hillel, the founding father of Pharisaism. Such was Saul’s commitment as a student that he boasted of his zeal exceeding those of his peers (Gal. 1: 14). As far as the law was concerned, he testified that he was “blameless” (Philippians 3:6). That was Saul’s verdict rather than Paul’s: the converted apostle would view his moral standing very differently.³

9. Saul was a Pharisee who prided himself on being a master student of the Old Testament. How then is it that he failed to recognize Jesus as the Messiah? What things may have blinded him from the truth?

10. Saul was a deeply religious man and yet his religion seemed to push him farther from God not closer. In what ways is religion helpful to our walks with God and in what ways can it hinder us?

HIS BULLYING

Saul, the hunter, was a brutal, implacable, bloody man. His goal was nothing short of the complete extermination of the Way! Verse 1 (“breathing out murderous threats against the Lord’s disciples”) literally reads, “breathing in threats and murder.” “Threatening and slaughter had come to be the very breath that Saul breathed, like a warhorse who sniffed the smell of battle.” He was a frightening, violent enemy.

Paul later described his behavior to Agrippa by saying: “I too was convinced that I ought to do all that was possible to oppose the name of Jesus of Nazareth. And that is just what I did in Jerusalem. On the authority of the chief priests I put many of the saints in prison, and when they were put to death, I cast my vote against them. Many a time I went from one synagogue to another to have them punished, and I tried to force them to blaspheme. In my obsession against them, I even went to foreign cities to persecute them” (26:9–11).

He was a callous, self-righteous, bigoted murderer set on a full-scale inquisition. Soon Jerusalem could not hold him. He sought and received extradition papers from the Sanhedrin so he could go to Damascus and ravage the growing Christian community there as well. It was 150 miles to Damascus (about a week’s travel), but he would have traveled a month for the privilege. Saul the hunter! Saul the man of blood! Yet this persecutor, by the grace of God, became an apostle of Jesus Christ.⁴

³ Thomas, Derek W. H.. Acts (Reformed Expository Commentaries) (pp. 249-250). P&R Publishing. Kindle Edition.

⁴ Hughes, R. Kent. Acts: The Church Afire (Preaching the Word) (Kindle Locations 2264-2267). Crossway. Kindle Edition.

11. Saul had a misguided theology that led him to destroy lives and tear apart families all in God's name. What misguided understandings of God cause believers today to hinder the gospel and hurt others?
12. Saul's upbringing and makeup caused him to be a staunch protector of Judaism no matter the cost. How would God use these qualities after Saul became a Christ follower?

What about your upbringing and personality make you uniquely positioned to serve God in the world you live in?

HIS BURDEN

First, Saul's conversion was not at all the "sudden conversion" it is often said to have been. To be sure, the final intervention of Christ was sudden: "Suddenly a light from heaven flashed around him" (3), and a voice addressed him. But this was by no means the first time Jesus Christ had spoken to him.

According to Paul's own later narrative, Jesus said to him: "It is hard for you to kick against the goads" (26:14). By this proverb (which seems to have been fairly common in both Greek and Latin literature) Jesus likened Saul to a lively and recalcitrant young bullock, and himself to a farmer using goads to break him in. The implication is that Jesus was pursuing Saul, prodding and pricking him, which it was "hard" (painful, even futile) for him to resist. What were these goads, with which Jesus had been pricking him, and against which Saul had been kicking? We are not specifically told what they were, but the New Testament gives us a number of hints.⁵

I would concur with the view of William Barclay who wrote, "In this passage we have the most famous conversion story in all history. . . . **We will see that this is not a sudden conversion; but it is surrender.** Something about Stephen lingered in Paul's mind and would not be banished. How could a bad man die like that? In order to still this insistent doubt Paul plunged into the most violent action possible. . . . He redoubles his efforts and drives himself all the harder to convince himself that he is right and to silence the doubts."

In other words, Saul, having been deeply troubled by the conviction and confession made by Stephen at his death, seems to have been trying to assuage his doubts. "Certainly it is not true that Jesus of Nazareth was the Messiah—or is it? Certainly Jesus of Nazareth, the one that we all saw crucified, could not have risen and ascended to the place reserved for the Son of Man—could He? Certainly I am doing the right thing by securing

⁵ Stott, John. The Message of Acts (The Bible Speaks Today Series) (Kindle Locations 3007-3036). InterVarsity Press. Kindle Edition.

the extradition of these followers of a false Messiah—or am I? Surely I must be honouring God by silencing these blasphemers who claim that Jesus Christ is Lord?”⁶

13. Just as He was in Saul's life God is active in bringing people to himself.

For those who came to Christ as a child—in what ways did God prepare you to receive His gospel at such a young age?

For those who came to Jesus as an adult—What “goads” (see above) did God use in your life to bring you to salvation?

Jesus spoke to Saul from heaven addressing him by his Jewish name and in the language of the Jews. After riveting his attention, Jesus asked Saul why he was persecuting Him—not His followers, but Him. Saul would have understood the voice as God's since in rabbinism a voice from heaven always connoted a rebuke or instruction from God.

Therefore, when the voice went on to ask the question "Why do you persecute me?" Saul was without doubt thoroughly confused. He was not persecuting God! Rather, he was defending God and his laws! Jesus' question made Saul begin to appreciate the intimate union that Christians enjoy with Jesus, the Head of the body, the church. **He was in His disciples, not just with them or ruling over them, by His Spirit. What they suffered He suffered.**

14. What is the first question Jesus asks Saul? Why does Jesus ask His question in this way? How can this serve as an encouragement for believers as we live in a world of opposition?

William Barclay says:

There is all of Christianity in what the Risen Christ said to Paul, “Go into the city, and you will be told what to do.” Up to this moment Paul had been doing what he liked, what he thought best, what his will dictated. From this time forward he would be told what to do. The Christian is a man who has ceased to do what he wants to do and who has begun to do what Christ wants him to do.⁷

⁶ Sermon by Doug Van Meter found @ <http://brackenhurstbaptist.co.za/on-the-damascus-road/>

⁷ Girard, Robert C.. The Book of Acts (The Smart Guide to the Bible Series) (Kindle Locations 2114-2117). Thomas Nelson. Kindle Edition.

15. The first commands Jesus gives Saul are simple and direct. What are some of Christ's commands to new believers? Why is it so crucial for believers to follow these commands?

HIS BROTHER IN CHRIST

This surely must be one of the tenderest scenes in all of Scripture. It is also a very instructive one for us.

Ananias had every human reason to be fearful of encountering infamous Saul. Like David being pursued by King Saul, Ananias probably feared that he, too, would receive a spear in the chest if he encountered Pharisee Saul! After all, Saul's purpose for coming to Damascus was to arrest and extradite Jewish followers of the Way back to a certain execution in Jerusalem. Ananias, therefore, was justified in questioning this command. Except, of course, that the command came from his sovereign and saving Lord! And so Ananias submitted. When he found Saul, he warmly laid hands on him and greeted him with tender words: "Brother Saul."

Imagine how Saul must have felt. He was certainly in a vulnerable position. He was in the home of a stranger, blind, and now one of those whom he had come to arrest had laid hands on him! But with the laying on of hands and the warm words of greeting, Saul was embraced into the family of God as signified by the word of this fellow believer and the work of the Holy Spirit (v. 17).⁸

16. What would you think if God wanted you to meet Saul whom you knew had killed other Christians? Would you do it? What things caused Ananias to be obedient to such a difficult task?

Saul was at the bottom of Ananias' list of people he was dying to meet. In his imagination, he could hear dungeon doors clanging shut behind him! "Hold the phone, Lord! Me, 'reach out and touch' the Christian-hater of all time? That's like sending Chicken Little to lay hands on the Big Bad Wolf!" (Acts 9: 13-14).⁹

17. What lesson do we learn about Christian love from the way Ananias greets Saul in verse 17? How would this type of love impact the lives of new believers?

⁸ Sermon by Doug Van Meter found @ <http://brackenhurstbaptist.co.za/on-the-damascus-road/>

⁹ Girard, Robert C.. *The Book of Acts (The Smart Guide to the Bible Series)* (Kindle Locations 2123-2129). Thomas Nelson. Kindle Edition.

18. Saul would experience multiple trials soon after his conversion. Why does God sometimes allow spiritual infants to experience difficulties? In what ways would these trials grow Saul?

In Jerusalem the Christians who'd received reports about Saul's conversion were full of suspicion. When he tried to join the disciples, they were afraid of him and did not even believe that he was a Christ follower (v. 26). Enter Barnabas. Thankfully, the "Son of Encouragement" gave Saul a hearing and trusted his story. Barnabas then advocated for Saul, describing all of the previous transforming events in Saul's life to the apostles (v. 27) and vouching for him. Because of Barnabas' intervention, the disciples received Saul as a brother.¹⁰

19. Saul's previous life caused the disciples to be leery of accepting the veracity of his conversion. God would use Barnabas to be an advocate for Saul. Why are people like Barnabas needed in the world?

Who has served as a spiritual advocate/cheerleader for you?

20. In what ways was Saul's conversion unique? How is it similar to all other conversion stories?

¹⁰ Merida, Tony. *Exalting Jesus in Acts (Christ-Centered Exposition Commentary)* (Kindle Locations 3262-3266). Holman Reference. Kindle Edition.
Note: This study was compiled and questions written by Pastor Tim Badal, Village Bible Church. www.villagebible.org/smallgroups.