



**Adult Sunday School Lesson Summary for October 19, 2008
Released on Wednesday, October 15, 2008**

"A New Beginning for Saul"

Printed Text: Acts 9:1-11; 16-19a

Background Scripture: Acts 9:1-31

Devotional Reading: Galatians 1:11-24

Acts 9:1-11, 16-19a

1 And Saul, yet breathing out threatenings and slaughter against the disciples of the Lord, went unto the high priest,

2 And desired of him letters to Damascus to the synagogues, that if he found any of this way, whether they were men or women, he might bring them bound unto Jerusalem.

3 And as he journeyed, he came near Damascus: and suddenly there shined round about him a light from heaven:

4 And he fell to the earth, and heard a voice saying unto him, Saul, Saul, why persecutest thou me?

5 And he said, Who art thou, Lord? And the Lord said, I am Jesus whom thou persecutest: it is hard for thee to kick against the pricks.

6 And he trembling and astonished said, Lord, what wilt thou have me to do? And the Lord said unto him, Arise, and go into the city, and it shall be told thee what thou must do.

7 And the men which journeyed with him stood speechless, hearing a voice, but seeing no man.

8 And Saul arose from the earth; and when his eyes were opened, he saw no man: but they led him by the hand, and brought him into Damascus.

9 And he was three days without sight, and neither did eat nor drink.

10 And there was a certain disciple at Damascus, named Ananias; and to him said the Lord in a vision, Ananias. And he said, Behold, I am here, Lord.

11 And the Lord said unto him, Arise, and go into the street which is called Straight, and inquire in the house of Judas for one called Saul, of Tarsus: for, behold, he prayeth.

.....
16 For I will show him how great things he must suffer for my name's sake.

17 And Ananias went his way, and entered into the house; and putting his hands on him said, Brother Saul, the Lord, even Jesus, that appeared unto thee in the way as thou camest, hath sent me, that thou mightest receive thy sight, and be filled with the Holy Ghost.

18 And immediately there fell from his eyes as it had been scales: and he received sight forthwith, and arose, and was baptized.

19a And when he had received meat, he was strengthened.

Lesson Aims

After participating in this lesson, each student will be able to:

1. Describe Saul's conversion experience.
2. Compare and contrast Saul's conversion experience with his or her own.
3. Identify one individual who needs Christ and suggest a way to facilitate his or her conversion.

Introduction

Personal testimony is a popular and useful way to share the gospel with others. The general pattern is simple. First, you relate the "where I was" part; that is, what your life was like before you became a believer. Second, you tell about the "what happened" element, or what the circumstances were that brought you to faith. Third, you share the "where I am now" part: what life is like as a Christian and how you have been transformed.

There is incredible power in such a personal testimony, and every believer should be ready to "give an answer ... [for] the hope that is in you" (1 Peter 3:15). On Christian radio and television, one may hear many stories of dramatic spiritual encounters that brought unbelievers to faith in a decisive and rapid fashion. The pages of church history are full of testimonials about the conversion experiences of famous figures. These stories serve as both an inspiration to us and as helps in appreciating that God is living and active in the world today.

But for every celebrity testimony of faith's rescue from a wasted life, there are many believers who have never lived lives of debauchery. For every story of a homeless street person instantly freed from destructive addictions and hopelessness, there are droves of Christians who have never experienced such rapid transformations. There are those studying this lesson who surely have no real sense of ever not having been a Christian.

The recognition of the existence of "lifelong" believers is but one reason to treat the Damascus road experience of Saul with great care. While all believers will have moments of new, direction-changing insight, very few will have an experience comparable to the experience of Saul. Even so, Saul's experience has much to teach us.

Lesson Background

The man who comes to be known as the apostle Paul is introduced in Acts as Saul, a primary instigator of the mob action that led to the stoning of Stephen (Acts 7:54–8:1; 22:20). He is described as a young man in Acts 7:58, probably in his late teens or early twenties. We usually date this incident about ad 34, so we can surmise that Saul was born around ad 15. He was sent to Jerusalem to study under the famous rabbi Gamaliel (Acts 22:3). It is unlikely that Saul ever had any direct contact with Jesus before the crucifixion, for he never mentions anything like this in his many letters.

Saul was his given name, in honor of the first king of Israel. Like King Saul, he was from the tribe of Benjamin (Philippians 3:5). He was a "Diaspora" Jew, having been born outside Palestine, in Tarsus of Cilicia (Acts 21:39). This was a large Greek city some 400 miles north of Jerusalem.

Saul's love for Judaism and its traditions drew him to Jerusalem, the center for all things Jewish. Once there, however, this ambitious young man found it necessary to prove himself. He found a way to do this by pleasing the Jewish elite in the holy city through vicious persecution of their greatest threat: Christ's church (see Galatians 1:13, 14). Such violent behavior was not characteristic of first-century Judaism. It

was brought forth by fervent devotion and unrestrained ambition coupled with the devious conduct of Saul's Jewish masters.

By the time of Saul's conversion, the Jerusalem church had progressed through several stages. It was begun in a spectacular fashion (Acts 2), but met with immediate opposition from the Jewish leaders (Acts 4). It had reorganized to minister more effectively to its growing membership (Acts 6). A dynamic young preacher, Stephen, was killed after he infuriated the Jewish leaders (Acts 7). Further threats of death had caused some church leaders to exit Jerusalem. Then the church had spread to nearby Samaria (Acts 8). At this point, Saul comes on the scene.

Cruel Persecutor Named Saul (Acts 9:1-2)

What is it about some people's faith that makes them believe that killing religious opponents is a righteous act? For Christians serving under the lordship of the Prince of Peace, religious murder is almost beyond comprehension. Yet we see it with alarming frequency in our world today. We should not be surprised to learn that religious murder occurred in the ancient world too, even within Judaism.

1. Why was Saul going to Damascus? (vs. 1-2)

Saul was a devout Jew who persecuted Christians by order of the Sanhedrin council. Saul is first introduced in the book of Acts at the stoning of Stephen (7:58), where he was a party to that stoning.

Saul was given authority by the Sanhedrin to track down Christians and bring them back to Jerusalem to be tried for blasphemy. The Sanhedrin claim religious authority over all the Jews, no matter where they were living. Apparently, Stephen was one of many Christians put to death with the approval of Saul (cf. Acts 26:9-11).

As believers scattered to other areas, word filtered back to Jerusalem that a number of them were residing in Damascus. Thus, Saul was given orders to hunt down Christians in Damascus and bring them to Jerusalem for trial and execution. However, God had other plans for Saul.

2. What is the "way?"

The Christian movement is referred to here as the "way", a common designation in Acts. This is *way* in the sense of "road" or "path." For believers, it is "the way of salvation" (Acts 16:17) or "the way of the Lord" (Acts 18:25). It is the prophesied "way of life" (Jeremiah 21:8).

The desperation of Saul's mission is shown by the fact that he intends to bring back both *men* and *women*. In the ancient world, women would not usually be considered important enough for such measures. This shows that Saul knows that women are an important part of the church.

Destination Called Damascus (Acts 9:3-9)

3. What happened to Saul just before he entered the city? (vs. 3-4)

Since Saul and the traveling party are *near Damascus*, it has been on the road for several days by this point. The party is stopped by a powerful, supernatural *light* as it approaches the destination. Since Luke relates Saul's conversion in three different places (Acts 9:1-19; 22:1-16; 26:9-18), a comparison of the accounts give details that are not found if we only had only one of them.

This is at midday, about noon (see Acts 22:6). The brilliant, heavenly light is seen by Saul and all of his companions (Acts 22:9). Some think that Saul's "falling" is from a horse. Whether walking or riding, the proud young fire-breather now finds himself flat on the ground.

The *voice* speaks to Saul in the Hebrew (or Aramaic) tongue (Acts 26:14). The risen Christ is not limited to any particular language, but He uses Saul's mother tongue for a purpose. The obviously supernatural encounter is not with a pagan god or demon. It is with the Jewish God, and He is making an accusation against the self-assured Saul: you are working against me! The Son of God already knows Saul's motive, so that is not the purpose of the question. He asks the confrontational question to force Saul into a reckoning for his murderous actions.

4. In what ways was Jesus being persecuted by Saul? (vs. 4-5 cf. Matt. 25:41-45)

Saul's worst fears must be realized here. In a flash he understands, "I'm on the wrong side!" Although Saul had done nothing personally to Jesus of Nazareth, the persecution of His followers was considered injurious to their Lord (cf. Matthew 25:41-45).

Jesus uses a striking expression to describe Saul's behavior. He is like the stubborn ox that kicks whenever its driver attempts to guide it by using a poker in its rear haunch. The obstinate animal resists being guided and wants to proceed on its own path, no matter how wrong or dangerous.

This indicates that Saul has had previous opportunities to accept the truth of the church's message about Jesus. Saul had listened to Stephen's speech that revealed the guilt of Jerusalem's Jewish elite. Saul surely had been one of those in the angry mob who put his hands over his ears as a sign of disrespect and defiance to Stephen's message (Acts 7:57). This time, however, rejecting Jesus will not be so easy.

5. What was Saul's reaction to Jesus? (v. 6)

Whenever anyone tries to go against God's will, that person is only hurting himself. No one should think that he or she can stand against God and stand. God is going to have His way no matter what, so those who try to defy God are only making things harder for themselves. The Israelites in the Old Testament are a great example of this particular lesson.

When Jesus confronted Saul of his sin, Saul didn't try to fight Jesus. Instead, Saul humbly asked what the Lord would have him do. Rather than give the now penitent persecutor specific instructions concerning his mission, the Lord directed Saul to the city, where further guidance would be given.

6. How did the men react to these events? (vs. 7-8)

The men with Saul knew that something momentous had occurred. Hence, they "stood speechless." A light had been seen and a voice heard, but they saw no visage of a man. Saul, however, is blinded. Any horses present may have run off in fear, thus the proud, self-reliant young man is required literally to "walk by faith," for he is *led by the hand* to nearby *Damascus*.

Disciple Named Ananias (Acts 9:10-11)

7. Who was Ananias, and what was he told to do? (vs. 10-11)

We know little about Ananias other than he was a Christian. As the Lord had appeared to Saul for the purpose of bringing him to repentance and calling him to apostleship, so now the Lord appeared to Ananias. In this case, Christ had a special mission for this man of God in Damascus.

Very specific instructions were given by the Lord so that Ananias would have no difficulty locating Saul of Tarsus. Ananias was further informed that Saul was praying.

That Saul had a vision concerning the healing of his blinded eyes indicates that his too was a concern of his prayers.

It was common knowledge among the scattered believers that their greatest enemy was a man named Saul. Like Peter, who protested eating unclean food (Acts 10:14), Ananias was not sure he wanted to obey the Lord's command to visit this man.

"The objections of Ananias, and the removal of them by the Lord, display in a very touching manner the childlike relation of the believing soul to the Redeemer. The Saviour speaks with Ananias as a man does with his friend" (Olshalfsen in Jamieson, Fausset, and Brown's Commentary on the Whole Bible, Zondervan).

8. How do you respond when God asks you to do something uncomfortable? How have such situations caused you to grow spiritually?

We do not like to be bound by anything; we like to be free. As a result, Christians may find themselves avoiding the path to which Christ calls us. We can be guilty of having the same attitude as that of the rich young ruler (Mark 10:17-23).

Sometimes we may try to negotiate with God. Or instead of committing ourselves to get involved in the lives of other people, we want to pay someone else to do the work of ministry. When God calls us to go to others with His message or to offer kindness, we may think that we have more important things to do, implying that those people are not worthy (Luke 10:25-37). Our attitude can become much like that of the Pharisees!

Chosen Vessel (Acts 9:16-19a)

9. From what the Lord told Ananias, what do we know of the mission God was calling Saul to? (v. 16)

Furthermore, the protest of Ananias was met with the Lord's explanation that Saul was a "chosen vessel" (v. 15). "In the Scriptures [vessel] is used to denote the instrument or agent which God employs to convey his favours to mankind; and is thus employed to represent the ministers of the gospel" (Barnes, Barnes' Notes on the New Testament, Kregel).

Saul did not choose Christ; Christ chose him! Later he realized that God's call to preach occurred long before he responded (Gal. 1:15).

Ananias was also told that Saul would proclaim Christ to kings (Acts 9:15). On several occasions in Acts, Paul had the opportunity to preach to those in governmental authority (13:7; 17:19; 24:22-27; 26:1-7). In all likelihood he also had the opportunity to present the gospel message to the Roman emperor, since he had made an appeal to him (25:11).

Not all of the news is pleasant (9:16). Saul is being called to *suffer* some great things (see 2 Corinthians 11:23-28). He will no longer lead against Christians those well-funded police actions that have the blessing of the high priest.

10. What happened when Ananias laid his hands on Saul? (vs. 17-18a)

Ananias understands his visit with Saul to have three purposes. First, he announces that he has come to represent *the Lord, even Jesus*. This is a fulfillment of Saul's earlier directions, that if he goes to Damascus and waits, Jesus will tell him what to do. Saul is not abandoned.

Second, Ananias is to be the instrument by which Saul's *sight* is restored. Third, Saul will begin to taste of the precious gift of Christianity: the presence of *the Holy Ghost*. Despite all of his piety and devotion as a Pharisee, Saul has never experienced this spiritual blessing. His exhaustive study of Scripture and his loyal obedience to the great Jewish leaders of his day have not given him this gift.

The laying on of hands is seen throughout the Scriptures and had a number of purposes, usually indicating a blessing imparted. In this case, it was probably related both to Saul's healing and to the reception of the Holy Spirit, as seen elsewhere in Acts (5:12; 6:6; 8:17-18; 13:3; 19:6; 28:8). That Paul had apostolic credentials, including the ability to perform miracles (2 Cor. 12:12), indicates that the Spirit's infilling was similar to what happened to the others on Pentecost (Acts 2:1-4).

As Ananias laid his hands on Saul, something like scales fell from Saul's eyes, and he was able to see once again.

11. What were some of the things Saul did soon after he was healed? (vs. 18b-19)

As in other conversions in Acts, the first act of obedience for the new believer was baptism (2:41; 8:12; 18:8). When Paul spoke of his conversion before the Sanhedrin, he related Ananias's charge: "And now why tarriest thou? arise, and be baptized..." (22:16).

Ending his three-day fast, Saul steadily regained his physical strength and remained with the believers in Damascus for some time (Acts 9:19). He also began to preach Christ in the synagogues (v. 20). He was seen as a turncoat by his Jewish brethren, and a murder plot was soon hatched against him (vs. 23-25).

Of course, this is just the beginning of what the New Testament has of the Apostle Paul, the name Luke used for Saul from Acts 13:9 onward.

Conclusion

There are various salvation experiences among individuals. In some cases the approach to the moment of decision is so gradual it may hardly be noticed. In other cases the changeover is so sudden and dramatic it is shocking. In Saul's case he was jolted by the heavenly light and the voice of Jesus out on the road, but then he spent three days thinking about it before Ananias came to help him.

We need to recognize the different circumstances that may accompany conversion and be ready to deal with them. Remember that the Holy Spirit who calls sinners to Christ also guides believers to minister to them as they seek salvation.

Prayer

O Lord, please continue to be patient with us. May we use our experiences to strengthen our trust in You. May our faith grow each day as we learn to trust You more. And may our unbelieving friends and relatives see a faith in us that would draw them to You. We pray this in the name of Jesus, amen.

Thought to Remember

God still transforms people.

Anticipating Next Week's Lesson

God used various means to motivate His people to spread the gospel from Jerusalem to Judea, Samaria, and to the uttermost parts of the earth (Acts 1:8). He used persecution by Saul (8:1). He used missionary journeys by Paul (13:1-12). As you read the next lesson, think about how God works today.

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