



Sunday School Lesson for November 2, 2005.
Released on November 6, 2005.

"Saul Became a Follower"

Printed Text: **Acts 9:3-18.**
Devotional Reading: **Acts 9:23-31.**
Background Scripture: **Acts 9:1-31.**

Time: A.D. 32
Place: on a road between Jerusalem and Damascus

Acts 9:3-18

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,

12 And hath seen in a vision a man named Ananias coming in, and putting his hand on him, that he might receive his sight.

13 Then Ananias answered, Lord, I have heard by many of this man, how much evil he hath done to thy saints at Jerusalem:

14 And here he hath authority from the chief priests to bind all that call on thy name.

15 But the Lord said unto him, Go thy way: for he is a chosen vessel unto me, to bear my name before the Gentiles, and kings, and the children of Israel:

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.

TODAY'S AIM

Facts: to review the biblical account of the conversion of the man who would be known as the Apostle Paul.

Principle: to teach that faith in Christ effects a profound change in a person's life.

Application: to refresh students' zeal for evangelism by reminding them of what a difference Jesus can make in the life of a sinner.

How to Say It

ANANIAS. An-uh-nye-us.

Introduction

Zero Tolerance

College basketball fans know the name of Bobby Knight, the former coach of the Indiana University basketball team. His reputation was built not only on winning, but also on a manner of handling the press that was direct and sometimes tactless. At times he also exhibited a red hot temper during games that he coached. When the university officials grew tired of repairing damage caused by Knight's outbursts, they

established a zero-tolerance policy with him. He was not permitted one infraction that involved control of his temper or abuse of a student, a player, or a member of the media.

After the policy was announced, Knight soon violated it, and he was fired. Someone said afterward that it is good that God does not establish a zero-tolerance policy toward us, or who would be able to stand in the judgment?

Today's lesson about the conversion of Saul of Tarsus challenges us to remember that the gospel is more powerful than our sin. God's policy toward us does not rule us out after one slip. Instead, God confronts us with the gospel of grace.

Lesson Background

The book of Acts specializes in unlikely conversions. Philip preaches to a Samaritan sorcerer named Simon and converts him to Christ (Acts 8:4-13). Peter preaches the gospel in the home of the Gentile Cornelius and converts him to Christ (Acts 10:25-48). Paul preaches the gospel to some skeptical intellectuals in Athens and converts some of them to Christ (Acts 17:16-34).

What an impact the powerful gospel of Christ can have! A main theme of Acts is witnessing "unto the uttermost part of the earth" (Acts 1:8), and these preachers carried out that mission. Saul of Tarsus (later called Paul, beginning in Acts 13:9) is a vital part of this story. He began to persecute the church fiercely after the martyrdom of Stephen (Acts 8:1-3). We may say that the church was under a terrorist attack, and that the attack came from a tormentor who created a climate of fear (Acts 9:1).

Saul's conversion was also a landmark event in the life of the church. Acts highlights the event by presenting the full account three times—in Acts 9:1-19; 22:1-21; and 26:1-18—with some variation in details. Today's lesson explores the first of these accounts in Acts and examines the effects of the powerful gospel of God grace on a sinful life.

Heavenly Voice (Acts 9:3-9)

1. Why was Saul going to Damascus(Acts 9:3a)?

Saul was given authority by the Jewish Sanhedrin (9:1-2) to track down followers of Christ and bring them back to Jerusalem to be tried for blasphemy. Apparently, Stephen was one of many believers put to death with the approval of Saul (26:9:11).

With the scattering of believers to other areas (8:1), word filtered back to Jerusalem that a number of them were residing in Damascus, Syria. Not content that they were no longer in Jerusalem, Saul volunteered to go to Syria and hunt them down.

Saul probably walks the 150 miles from Jerusalem to *Damascus*. This is a city of great historical significance, mentioned more than 40 times in the Old Testament. The journey takes about a week to complete, so there can be no doubt about Saul's

commitment to arresting Christians. Before arriving in Damascus, though, Saul would undergo a life-changing experience.

2. What happened to him just before he entered the city (vs. 3b,4)?

Just before he entered the city, a bright, heavenly light surrounded this archenemy of the church (9:3). Since Luke related Saul's conversion in three different places (9:1-19; 22:1-16; 26:9-18), comparison of the accounts gives details that would not be found if we had but one of them.

After falling to the ground, Saul heard a voice speaking to him. Those traveling with Saul also saw the light and heard a voice (9:7), but these did not understand what was being said (22:9).

When the voice spoke, a very pointed question was asked of the young man from Tarsus: "Saul, Saul, why persecutest thou me?" (9:4).

When Saul persecutes Christians, he is persecuting Jesus. Jesus makes the same point in His parable about the sheep and the goats when He says that God will announce at the judgment that what was done or not done for the brothers was, in fact, done or not done to Jesus himself (Matthew 25:31-46). Saul is about to learn that hurting Christians means hurting Jesus.

3. How can we be guilty of persecuting Christ today? How do we avoid this?

In subtle and overt ways, we persecute Him by our attitude toward those who are part of the body of Christ. As Saul persecuted the people of God and thus persecuted Christ, so we do the same when we dishonor our fellow believers (compare Romans 14:4). We also may be guilty of persecuting Christ when we show a lack of respect with regard to the things of God, such as His Word, His church, and even His creation.

4. Did Saul know Who was speaking to him (v. 5)?

Saul's first reaction is to call very respectfully for the identity of the voice. The use of the word *Lord* in his question does not necessarily mean that he is confessing Jesus as Lord just yet. The term can also be translated *sir*.

The phrase "it is hard for thee to kick against the pricks" does not occur in the earliest Greek manuscripts of this particular verse. However, this phrase is also found in Acts 26:14, so we know for sure that this is what Saul heard. Jesus' figure of speech about animal prods (*pricks*) makes the point about Saul's tactics against the believers. Saul's persecution of Christians amounts to resisting God, much like an animal resists being moved, even though a sharp stick is being used to jab it in the side or hind quarters.

Jesus thus reveals how contrary to the will of God is Saul's campaign against the believers. Later in life the apostle will acknowledge this when he admits that he did not deserve to be called an apostle because he persecuted the church (1 Corinthians 15:9). Yet he will maintain that he persecuted believers because of ignorance and that he found forgiveness through the grace of the Lord (1 Timothy 1:12-14).

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

Saul's reaction to Jesus' revelation resembles that of others who saw an appearance of God's glory. Isaiah saw the glory of the Lord in the temple and was humbled by his sin (Isaiah 6:1-7). Peter realized he was face to face with the Lord in the boat and reacted with similar humility (Luke 5:1-11).

Saul's question reveals a heart ready to do God's will. The Lord's instructions are to *go into the city* of Damascus, where Saul is headed anyway. The parallel account in Acts 26:16-18 includes instructions that describe the ministry that Saul will be called to fulfill (also in vs. 14,15 of today's lesson).

6. How did the men with Saul react to these events (v. 7)?

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 appearance of a man. Acts 22:9 offers us a similar description. Saul, however, had actually seen the risen Lord (22:16).

7. What was the immediate consequence to Saul after seeing the bright light on the road to Damascus (vs. 8,9)?

Upon opening his eyes after receiving this "heavenly vision" (Acts 26:19), Saul found himself blind. Even though his spiritual eyes had been opened, he was now physically blind.

Unable to see, the once proud persecutor was led by the hand into the city. Saul's blindness reduces him to helplessness. But his refusal to *eat* or *drink* is an indication of his humiliation at hearing the words of Jesus on the road. He is humbled at the judgment pronounced by Jesus, because he now realizes that he has been persecuting the people of God. Fasting in the Bible is connected frequently with sorrow. David fasted after his sin with Bathsheba and the sickness of his son (2 Samuel 12:13-23). Nehemiah fasted because of his sorrow over the disgraceful condition of Jerusalem (Nehemiah 1:4). Saul's fasting probably indicates his sorrow for his own sin and his repentance before God.

Thus the book of Acts shows us the image of the fierce persecutor of the church brought to his knees before the Lord whom he persecuted. The powerful gospel reaches into Saul's heart. The knowledge that Jesus is really the Messiah will capture Saul completely. His transformation is about to begin.

Modern believers should not be surprised about the powerful impact of Christ on wayward sinners. We can all think of examples of people who came face to face with Christ, and the change was dramatic. The truth of Jesus Christ still operates with this power today. No wonder we are called to be witnesses of this truth (Acts 1:8)!

Faithful Messenger (Acts 9:10-16)

8. Who was Ananias, and what was he told to do (vs. 10-12)?

Acts 22:12 describes Ananias as a Jew devoted to following the Law of Moses and highly respected among other Jews in the city. 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. Saul may have been recounting the many crimes he had committed against God's people, as well as praying for pardon and direction concerning his life from this point forward. That Saul received a vision concerning the healing of his blinded eyes indicates that this was also a concern of his prayers.

9. God does not always use the high-powered evangelist or gifted communicator to reach the lost. He wants to use all His people for this purpose. Who is God calling you to reach with the gospel right now? How will you do it?

This question can lead into a time of prayer for specific people. Within each of our circles of influence are those who need the Lord. It may be a family member, coworker, or neighbor. Remember: you have contact with that person when the "gifted" evangelist does not. God uses natural relationships to reach others. New Testament examples of this are found in John 1:40-42, 44-46; 4:28-30.

10. What were Ananias' concerns about coming in concert with Saul? How did God answer him (vs. 13-16)?

This fearful reaction from *Ananias* (vs. 13,14) certainly is easy to understand, given the reputation of Saul for locking up Christians as prisoners (9:2). Ananias does not speak these words out of disrespect for the Lord's command, but as a natural reaction of fear.

"The Lord" speaks in order to ease the anxiety of Ananias (v. 15). God's purposes for Saul are revealed so that Ananias can understand that there is a divine use for this life that had created such havoc for the church.

Saul was a "chosen vessel." Saul did not choose Christ; Christ chose him. Ananias was also told that Saul would proclaim Christ to kings. On several occasions recorded in Acts, Saul 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, for he had made an appeal to him (25:11).

Of course, Saul would also preach the Word of God to his own people, "the children of Israel" (9:15). As was his custom, upon entering a city Saul would first share the gospel in the synagogue with his fellow Jews (13:14; 14:1; 17:1; 18:1-4). Only after they rejected the message did Saul turn to the Gentile populace.

11. The "fear factor" is a major reason Christians fail to reach out to others with the gospel of Christ. How can this fear be overcome?

We may be summoned by our Lord, either through the promptings of his own Spirit or through the instrumentality of his Church, to do work which at first seems surprising, undesirable, useless. We may be invited to appeal to those we deem unlikely to welcome us, to cultivate ground which looks sterile to our eye; but it may be that we are really called of Christ to do a most needed and useful work. -*The Pulpit Commentary*: (H. D. M. Spence-Jones, Ed.).

Each person must develop his or her own godly technique. But generally speaking, fear is overcome by faith. Trusting in our own power leads to fear because we know that we are not sufficient to do the work of God on our own. We must always remember God has put His Spirit within us. This Spirit produces in us a power to overcome fear (2 Timothy 1:7).

Converted Tormentor (Acts 9:17, 18)

12. What happened when Ananias laid his hands on Saul?

The laying on of hands is important in Acts (see Acts 8:17; 13:3; 19:6). The identification of *Jesus* as *Lord* here corresponds to a major truth in Acts: Jesus is both Lord and Christ (Messiah, or "anointed one"; Acts 2:36; 10:36; 11:17; 28:31). *Ananias* presents a truth to *Saul* that Saul already has come to accept because of his experience on the road to Damascus (notice Ananias called Saul "Brother").

Ananias stated that his reasons for coming were twofold. First, he came to Saul so that he could receive his *sight* back; this happens when something like *scales*, or a flaky layer of substance, falls from Saul's eyes. The second objective for Ananias is that Saul might receive the Holy Spirit.

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). As in other conversions in Acts, the first act of obedience for the new convert was baptism (2:41; 8:12; 18:8).

13. What were some things Saul did soon after he was healed?

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

Of course, this is just the beginning of the story of Paul, the name Luke used for Saul from Acts 13:9 onward. While there are a number of suggestions concerning this name change, the most likely is that it was adopted by the apostle himself as he began traveling throughout the Roman world.

14. God used Saul, the "chief" of sinners, to do great things. Why may it seem that those who are saved from grievous sin such as Saul's become such tremendous instruments in God's hands?

People who grow up in the church and have lived lives fairly consistent with the principles of God's Word can become complacent with their faith. Faith can be taken for granted. Someone who has been saved from seeming hopelessness may have a deeper appreciation for the magnitude of God's grace. The one who has been forgiven much realizes the depths from which he or she has been saved and therefore seeks to serve God out of a deep appreciation (compare Luke 7:47).

Conclusion

Transforming Power

Think of the believers you know of who could have been described as *the worst of sinners*. What differences do you now see? How do you explain these differences? Those who knew Saul of Tarsus were amazed at the difference after he met the Lord. When he began preaching in the synagogues after his baptism, those who heard about it could not believe the change (see Acts 9:21).

The gospel of Christ still has power to transform lives. That power has never dimmed. Our obligation is to reach out with this gospel to the worst of sinners. Who knows what surprises we will see!

Prayer

Lord of grace and mercy, we ask today that You remind us of the potential within each sinner we know. Help us to think of him or her as ready for the truth of Jesus Christ. Let us look upon each as a potential "Paul," and not as a "Saul." As we do, may we see ourselves the same way. We pray in Christ, amen.

Thought to Remember

The worst sinner is capable of becoming the best Christian.

Anticipating Next Week's Lesson

Our lesson from Acts 16:6-15 introduces us to Lydia, a woman deep! committed to the Lord.

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