

The Book of Acts, Teacher's Guide

Lesson 14: The Conversion of Saul

Acts 9:1-31

Teaching Aim (Teacher Orientation)

Acts 9:1-31 records the conversion of Saul, the church's fiercest enemy turned its greatest missionary, and it is one of the most important conversion accounts in Scripture. What is doctrinally at stake includes the reality of the resurrection and the deity of Christ (the risen Jesus appears and speaks), the union of Christ with His church, the transforming power of grace, God's sovereign call to mission, and, crucially, the necessity of baptism even for one who already believed and prayed. Saul, though he believed and prayed for three days, was still told to rise and be baptized and wash away his sins (Acts 22:16).

The heaviest doctrinal weight falls on that necessity of baptism. Use Saul's conversion, read alongside his own account in Acts 22, to refute salvation by faith only and the sinner's prayer. A believing, praying Saul was still not yet cleansed of his sins until he was baptized, calling on the name of the Lord.

Yet aim at the heart. Saul's story is the supreme proof that no one is beyond grace, that Christ identifies with His people, and that a life truly met by Christ is radically changed. Help students treat the body of Christ as Christ Himself, abandon the idea that anyone is too far gone, welcome the transformed, and rejoice that grace reached even the chief of sinners, and can reach them.

Question 1

Student Question:

When Saul was struck down, the risen Jesus spoke to him directly, saying, I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting (vv. 3-5). What does this encounter reveal about the reality of the resurrection and the identity of Jesus, and what does it mean that Christ identifies Himself with His persecuted people?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Saul's encounter is first of all a meeting with the risen, living Christ. Jesus is not dead; He appears from heaven in glory and speaks. This is no vision of a memory but an encounter with a living Lord. Paul would later list this appearance among the resurrection appearances as evidence that Christ truly rose (1 Corinthians 15:8).

The encounter also testifies to the deity and exaltation of Jesus. He speaks from heaven in blinding glory, commands the situation, and identifies Himself simply as Jesus, the Lord. The crucified Nazarene is the exalted Lord of glory, and Saul, a strict monotheist, falls before Him.

Most strikingly, Jesus says, why are you persecuting me? Saul had not touched Jesus; he had been arresting Christians. Yet Jesus takes it as persecution of Himself. This reveals the profound union between Christ and His church. Believers are His body (1 Corinthians 12:27); He is so joined to them that what is done to them is done to Him.

Help students grasp both truths. Jesus is the living, exalted Lord, and He is so united to His people that He feels and shares what they suffer. To wound a believer is to wound Christ; to love a believer is to love Christ. This union is the foundation of how we are to regard one another.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The reality of the resurrection seen in the living Christ (1 Corinthians 15:8)
- The deity and exaltation of Jesus, the Lord of glory
- Christ's union with His church, His body (1 Corinthians 12:27)
- Christ taking the treatment of His people personally
- Persecution of believers as persecution of Christ

Discussion Prompts

- What does this encounter show about the resurrection and identity of Jesus?
- What does it mean that Jesus calls the persecution of Christians persecution of Himself?
- How does Christ's union with His people change how you view them?

Question 2

Student Question:

Jesus took Saul's treatment of believers as treatment of Himself (v. 5). How does it change things to realize that the way you treat fellow Christians, in your words, attitudes, and actions, is the way you are treating Christ? Where do you need to change how you regard or treat someone in the body?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

If Christ identifies so closely with His people that persecuting them is persecuting Him, then the principle works in every direction. How we treat fellow believers is, in a real sense, how we treat Christ. This is a searching and weighty truth.

Jesus taught the same thing directly: as you did it to one of the least of these my brothers, you did it to me (Matthew 25:40). Our words, attitudes, and actions toward other Christians are registered by the Lord as done to Him.

Invite honest reflection. How am I treating my brothers and sisters in Christ? Do I speak critically or unkindly about them? Do I harbor resentment, neglect, or contempt toward some? Would I treat Christ the way I treat them? This reframes every relationship in the body.

Encourage one specific change. Is there someone in the church I need to forgive, reconcile with, speak better of, or serve more lovingly? To honor Christ is to honor His people. When we see Christ in our brothers and sisters, our words soften, our patience grows, and our love deepens.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Treatment of fellow believers registered as treatment of Christ (Matthew 25:40)
- Words, attitudes, and actions toward the body as done to the Lord
- Self-examination about how we regard fellow Christians
- Love for the body as love for Christ

Discussion Prompts

- How does it change things to treat fellow Christians as you would treat Christ?
- Is there someone in the body you have regarded or treated wrongly?
- What is one way you could honor Christ by how you treat His people this week?

Question 3

Student Question:

Saul, the church's most violent enemy, was transformed by grace into Christ's chosen instrument (vv. 1, 15). What does Saul's conversion teach about the reach and power of God's grace, and about whether anyone is ever truly beyond saving?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Saul was not a borderline case; he was the church's chief persecutor, breathing threats and murder, complicit in Stephen's death, ravaging the church. If anyone seemed beyond the reach of grace, it was Saul. And yet grace reached him and made him the apostle to the nations.

This teaches the staggering reach and power of God's grace. Paul himself never got over it. He called himself the foremost of sinners and said he received mercy precisely so that Christ might display His perfect patience as an example to those who would believe (1 Timothy 1:15-16). Saul's conversion is meant to be exhibit A of how far grace can reach.

It means no one is beyond saving. The person we are sure would never come to Christ, the hardened, the hostile, the morally far gone, is not beyond the grace that reached Saul. God specializes in saving those everyone else has written off.

Help students take this to heart in two ways. First, never give up on anyone, including those who seem most resistant or unlikely; the God who saved Saul is still saving. Second, never believe the

lie that your own past puts you beyond grace; if grace reached the chief persecutor, it can reach you. The reach of grace is as wide as the worst sinner's need.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The far reach and power of God's grace
- Saul as the supreme example of mercy (1 Timothy 1:15-16)
- No one beyond the reach of saving grace
- God saving those everyone else has written off

Discussion Prompts

- What does Saul's conversion teach about the reach of God's grace?
- Is there someone you have written off whom God may yet save?
- Do you ever believe your own past puts you beyond grace, and how does Saul answer that?

Question 4

Student Question:

Before his conversion, Saul must have seemed hopelessly opposed to Christ, yet God saved him (vv. 1-19). Is there a person in your life you have stopped praying for or given up on? How might God be calling you to renewed hope and prayer for them?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Saul's conversion is a rebuke to our small hopes. We are quick to conclude that certain people will never change, never believe, never soften, and we quietly stop praying for them. But the God who saved Saul delights to overturn such verdicts.

Invite students to bring to mind a specific person, a family member, a friend, a coworker, whom they have given up on. Perhaps years of resistance have worn down their hope. Perhaps the person seems too hostile, too hardened, too far gone.

Saul reminds us that we cannot see what God is doing in a heart, and that no one is a lost cause to Him. Behind a hostile exterior, God may already be at work. Our part is to keep praying, keep loving, and keep trusting God with the outcome.

Encourage renewed hope and prayer. Pick up again the person you set down. Pray for them with fresh faith, remembering Saul. We are not promised that everyone will be saved, but we are forbidden to decide in advance that anyone cannot be. The God of Saul's conversion is still in the business of surprising us.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Renewed hope for the seemingly unreachable

- God at work in hearts we cannot see
- Persistent prayer for the lost
- Refusing to declare anyone a lost cause

Discussion Prompts

- Is there someone you have stopped praying for or given up on?
- What has worn down your hope for them?
- How might God be calling you to renewed prayer and hope?

Question 5

Student Question:

The Lord said that Saul was a chosen instrument to carry His name before the Gentiles and kings and the people of Israel (v. 15). What does this teach about God's sovereign purpose in calling people, and how is being chosen for God's service different from the idea that some are unconditionally predestined to be saved and others lost?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

God had a sovereign purpose for Saul: a chosen instrument to carry the name of Christ to the Gentiles, to kings, and to Israel. God knew what He would make of this man and what mission He would accomplish through him. This reveals a God who works with purpose, calling and equipping people for His plans.

It is important to teach this carefully, because language about being chosen is sometimes misread through the lens of Calvinism, which holds that God unconditionally predestines certain individuals to salvation and others to damnation, apart from any response on their part. That is not what Scripture teaches, and it is not what is happening here.

Saul was chosen for a task, a mission, a role in God's plan, not arbitrarily selected for salvation while others were doomed regardless of their will. And even Saul's salvation was not coerced; he heard, he believed, he prayed, and he obeyed in baptism. God's call came to him, but he responded. Throughout Scripture the gospel call is genuine and universal, God desires all people to be saved (1 Timothy 2:4; 2 Peter 3:9), Christ died for all (2 Corinthians 5:14-15), and people are genuinely able to respond to or resist God's call (Acts 7:51).

Help students distinguish two things. God does sovereignly choose people for purposes and roles, as He chose Saul, Israel, and the apostles. But salvation is offered to all and received through faith and obedience, not handed out by an unconditional decree that bypasses human response. God's election to service is real; the Calvinistic doctrine of unconditional election to salvation, with its denial of genuine human response, is not the teaching of Scripture.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- God's sovereign purpose in calling and equipping people for His plans
- Being chosen for a task and role, as Saul was (v. 15)
- The genuine, universal gospel call (1 Timothy 2:4; 2 Peter 3:9)
- Christ's death for all (2 Corinthians 5:14-15)
- The distinction between election to service and Calvinistic unconditional election
- Salvation received through genuine human response, not coercive decree

Discussion Prompts

- What was Saul chosen for, according to verse 15?
- How is being chosen for God's service different from being unconditionally predestined to salvation?
- What does Scripture teach about the genuineness and universality of the gospel call?

Question 6

Student Question:

God had a specific purpose for Saul's life and gifts (v. 15). Do you believe God has a purpose for you in His kingdom? Where might He be calling you to be His instrument, and what holds you back from offering yourself fully?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

If God had a purpose for Saul, He has a purpose for every one of His people. We are God's workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works that He prepared beforehand for us to walk in (Ephesians 2:10). No believer is purposeless in the kingdom.

Yet many of us doubt this. We assume God's significant purposes are for others, the gifted, the bold, the leaders, and not for ordinary us. Invite students to consider whether they truly believe God has a purpose for them, and what that doubt costs them.

God's purposes for us are usually worked out not in dramatic Damascus-road moments but in faithful service where He has placed us, our families, our workplaces, our congregations, our neighborhoods. To be God's instrument is to make ourselves available to Him right where we are.

Encourage students to examine what holds them back, fear, a sense of inadequacy, comfort, distraction, and to offer themselves afresh to God. Like Saul, we may not yet see the whole purpose, but we can take the next step of availability. God delights to use surrendered, willing people, however ordinary, for His kingdom.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- God's purpose for every believer (Ephesians 2:10)
- No Christian purposeless in the kingdom

- God's purposes worked out in faithful, ordinary service
- Availability as the key to being God's instrument

Discussion Prompts

- Do you truly believe God has a purpose for you in His kingdom?
- Where might He be calling you to be His instrument?
- What holds you back from offering yourself fully?

Question 7

Student Question:

Ananias overcame his fear to go to Saul and call him brother, and Barnabas later vouched for Saul when the disciples were afraid of him (vv. 10-19, 26-27). What do these believers teach us about welcoming and trusting those whom God has changed, even when their past is troubling?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Two believers play quiet but crucial roles in Saul's story. Ananias was understandably afraid; he knew Saul's reputation and the danger. Yet at God's word he went, laid hands on Saul, and called him brother Saul, embracing the former enemy as family. Later, when the Jerusalem disciples were afraid of Saul and would not receive him, Barnabas took him, vouched for him, and brought him to the apostles.

These believers teach us how to welcome those whom God has changed. It is natural to be wary of a person with a troubling past, to doubt that the change is real, to keep them at arm's length. But God calls us to receive the transformed as family, to extend trust and welcome, to give grace room to be believed.

Notice the cost and courage involved. Ananias had to overcome real fear. Barnabas had to stake his own reputation on Saul. Welcoming the changed is not always easy or risk-free, but it is essential to the body's life. Without an Ananias and a Barnabas, even Saul might have remained on the outside.

Help students consider how they treat those with a difficult past who come to Christ, the former addict, the ex-offender, the one who hurt the church, the unlikely convert. The gospel creates a family where former enemies become brothers and sisters. We are called to be the ones who say brother, who vouch, who welcome.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Welcoming the transformed as family (vv. 17-19)
- Extending trust and grace to those with a troubling past
- The courage and cost of receiving the changed (Ananias and Barnabas)
- The body of Christ as a family of former enemies reconciled

Discussion Prompts

- What did Ananias and Barnabas risk to welcome Saul?
- Why is it sometimes hard to believe and welcome those God has changed?
- How do you treat those with a difficult past who come to Christ?

Question 8

Student Question:

The disciples were slow to trust Saul because of his past, until Barnabas welcomed him (vv. 26-27). Do you tend to give people the grace to change, or do you hold their past against them? Is there someone you need to forgive, trust, or welcome more fully?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

The Jerusalem disciples' wariness of Saul is understandable, but it shows how hard it can be to let people move beyond their past. We often keep a mental file on people, defining them by their worst moments and doubting that they can truly change.

Invite honest reflection. Do I give people the grace to grow and change, or do I hold their past against them indefinitely? Is there someone I have written off, refused to trust, or kept at a distance because of who they used to be?

The gospel is a message of transformation; it insists that people can become new creations (2 Corinthians 5:17). To refuse to believe in the possibility of change is, in a sense, to doubt the very power of the gospel. Grace extended to us should make us generous in extending grace to others.

Encourage one concrete step toward someone. Perhaps it is to forgive a person who has wronged you, to give a second chance to someone who has changed, to welcome more warmly someone you have held at arm's length. Like Barnabas, we can be the ones who believe in what God can do in a person and help them find their place.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Giving people the grace to change
- The danger of defining people by their past
- Belief in transformation as trust in the gospel's power (2 Corinthians 5:17)
- Extending to others the grace we have received

Discussion Prompts

- Do you tend to give people grace to change or hold their past against them?
- Is there someone you have defined by their worst moments?
- Whom do you need to forgive, trust, or welcome more fully?

Question 9

Student Question:

Saul saw the risen Lord, believed, and prayed for three days, yet he was still not cleansed of his sins until Ananias came and told him, rise and be baptized and wash away your sins, calling on his name (v. 18; Acts 22:16). What does Saul's conversion teach about the necessity of baptism, and how does it correct the idea that we are saved by faith only or by praying a prayer?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This is the heaviest doctrinal block of the lesson, and Saul's conversion is one of the clearest refutations in all of Scripture of salvation by faith only. Trace the sequence carefully. On the road, Saul saw the risen Lord and called Him Lord; he certainly believed. For three days in Damascus he neither ate nor drank, but prayed (Acts 9:9, 11). By any modern definition, here was a man who had believed and prayed earnestly. If faith alone, or a prayer of faith, saved a person, Saul was already saved during those three days.

But he was not. When Ananias came, he did not tell Saul that he was already saved. He told him, and now why do you wait? Rise and be baptized and wash away your sins, calling on his name (Acts 22:16). Saul's sins had not yet been washed away, even after three days of believing and praying. They were washed away in baptism. This is decisive. A believing, praying Saul was still in his sins until he was baptized.

This dismantles two popular errors. First, it refutes salvation by faith only. Saul believed and was not yet saved; faith had to come to its God-appointed expression in baptism, where his sins were washed away. Second, it refutes the idea that one is saved by praying a sinner's prayer. Saul prayed for three days, yet he was told he still needed to be baptized to wash away his sins. The prayer was not the moment of cleansing; baptism was. (Note that calling on his name in Acts 22:16 is joined to and expressed in being baptized, not a separate prayer that saves apart from it.)

This is fully consistent with the rest of the New Testament. Baptism now saves you (1 Peter 3:21). We are baptized into Christ and into His death, raised to newness of life (Romans 6:3-4). As many as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ (Galatians 3:27). Whoever believes and is baptized will be saved (Mark 16:16). Saul's experience matches the pattern exactly: hearing, believing, repenting, and being baptized to wash away sins, then a life poured out in service.

Pastorally, this is clarifying and freeing. We are not saved by an inward decision alone, nor by a prayer we recite, but by the grace of God received through an obedient faith that comes to Christ in baptism. If even Saul, who saw the Lord and prayed for three days, needed to be baptized to have his sins washed away, then this is God's appointed way for all. Teach it with the same clarity and love Ananias showed.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Saul believing and praying for three days yet still in his sins (Acts 9:9-11)
- Sins washed away in baptism, calling on the name of the Lord (Acts 22:16)
- The refutation of salvation by faith only
- The refutation of the sinner's prayer as the point of salvation
- Baptism as the God-appointed point of cleansing (1 Peter 3:21; Romans 6:3-4)
- Consistency with the whole conversion pattern of Acts (Mark 16:16; Galatians 3:27)

Discussion Prompts

- If faith only or a prayer saved a person, why was Saul still told to be baptized after three days of believing and praying?
- What does Acts 22:16 say baptism accomplished for Saul?
- How does Saul's conversion correct the ideas of faith only and the sinner's prayer?

Question 10

Student Question:

Immediately after his baptism, Saul began proclaiming Jesus as the Son of God, and his whole life took a new direction (vv. 20-22). Looking back over his conversion, name one specific way the Lord is calling you to a more thoroughly changed life or a bolder witness, and what is one step you will take this week.

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This capstone draws the lesson to a personal response, anchored in the evidence of Saul's transformation. The proof of his conversion was a radically changed life: the man who came to destroy the name of Jesus immediately began to proclaim it. Genuine conversion shows itself in transformation.

Invite each person to name one concrete step. Perhaps it is to treat the body of Christ as Christ Himself, to renew hope and prayer for someone they had given up on, to welcome a person they had held at a distance, to offer themselves as God's instrument, or to live and witness more boldly as evidence of a truly changed life.

Keep the focus on transformation. Saul's story is not merely about a dramatic event but about a life turned completely around by grace. The aim of the gospel in us is the same: a thoroughly changed life that proclaims Christ.

Close by reminding students that the same grace that stopped Saul on the road, washed away his sins, and turned him into a bold witness is at work in them, able to change them deeply and use them greatly for the name of Jesus.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Genuine conversion evidenced by a transformed life (vv. 20-22)

- Bold witness as the fruit of grace received
- Personal response to the transforming power of the gospel
- The Christian life as a life turned around for Christ

Discussion Prompts

- What most challenged or moved you in Saul's conversion?
- What specific step toward a more changed life or bolder witness will you take?
- How can this group encourage and pray for you?