

Paul: From Persecutor to Preacher, Teacher's Guide

Lesson 2: The Damascus Road: Grace Stops a Persecutor

Acts 9:1–19; 22:6–16

Teaching Aim (Teacher Orientation)

This lesson stands at the center of the entire study, and it is the most doctrinally sensitive of the twelve. Paul's conversion on the Damascus road, around A.D. 34, is recounted three times in Acts (chapters 9, 22, and 26), a sign of how important Luke considered it. The historical setting is vivid: Saul, armed with letters from the high priest, is traveling to Damascus to arrest believers, when the risen and glorified Christ confronts him in blinding light. The spiritual drama is unmistakable, a violent enemy of the church laid in the dust and remade by grace. Teach the wonder of it. But teach it accurately, because this passage, more than almost any other, is misused to support the idea that a person is saved the instant he believes, before and apart from obedience.

Here is the heart of the matter, and you should hold it clearly. On the road, Saul did come to believe; he confessed Jesus as Lord and asked, "What shall I do, Lord?" That is genuine faith and submission. Yet the Lord did not pronounce him forgiven on the road. He sent him into the city to be told what he "must do" (Acts 9:6). For three days Saul prayed and fasted, still blind, still in his sins. Only when Ananias arrived was Saul told, "Rise and be baptized and wash away your sins, calling on his name" (Acts 22:16). The plain sense of Ananias's words is that Saul's sins were washed away at his baptism, as he called on the name of the Lord, not three days earlier on the road at the first moment of faith. This is the pattern of conversion throughout Acts, and Saul is no exception.

Be sure to keep the tone right. The aim is not to win an argument but to marvel at grace and to help students see, gently and clearly, how that grace lays hold of a sinner. Saving faith is not a bare mental assent that saves at the instant of believing; it is a faith that comes to Christ in repentance and baptism. As you teach, guard against two errors at once: the error that strips baptism out of conversion ("faith only"), and any suggestion that the water itself, apart from faith and the blood of Christ, has power. Saul was saved by grace, through a faith that obeyed. Send students home both awed by the God who pursues His enemies and clear about how they themselves come to be washed.

Question 1

Student Question:

Luke introduces this scene by telling us Saul was "still breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord" (Acts 9:1). What does the condition of the man Jesus stops on the road

reveal about the kind of people the grace of God seeks out, and about who actually takes the first step in salvation?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Linger on the word “still.” It connects this chapter to the violence of chapter 8 and tells us Saul had not cooled down; if anything, his rage was intensifying. Luke says he was “breathing threats and murder,” as though hostility were the very air he exhaled. This is the man Jesus chooses to confront, not a seeker inching toward the truth, but a committed enemy at the height of his opposition.

The point for students is that God took the initiative. Saul was not looking for Jesus; Jesus came looking for Saul. Salvation begins with a God who pursues. As Paul would later write, “while we were still sinners, Christ died for us” (Romans 5:8), and “I was found by those who did not seek me” (Romans 10:20). The Damascus road is grace on the offensive.

At the same time, guard against a misreading. God taking the initiative does not mean Saul was a passive lump with no ability to respond. The Lord confronts him, but then calls him to act, to rise, to go, to be told what he must do, and Saul responds in faith and obedience. Divine initiative and human response are both real. This is the gospel call, genuine and answerable, not the irresistible, unconditional decree of Calvinism.

Apply it pastorally. If grace could seek out a man breathing murder against the church, no one your students know is beyond its reach, and neither were they. This truth fuels both worship and evangelism. We pray for the hardest hearts because we remember whose heart this was.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- God takes the initiative in salvation; grace seeks the sinner first
- The genuine and universal gospel call, answerable by faith, not an irresistible decree
- Both divine initiative and real human response are taught in the text
- No sinner is beyond the reach of grace (1 Timothy 1:15–16)
- A warning against presuming grace cannot reach the hardened

Discussion Prompts

- What does it mean that Jesus sought Saul rather than Saul seeking Jesus?
- How do we hold together God’s initiative and our real responsibility to respond?
- Who in your life have you secretly decided is beyond grace?

Question 2

Student Question:

Grace found Saul while he was running hard in the wrong direction. Can you recall a time when God interrupted you, through a person, a hardship, or His word, while you were going your own way? How did you respond, and how do you wish you had responded?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This self-examining question lets students locate their own “Damascus road” moments. God rarely uses literal light from heaven, but He does interrupt, through a friend’s honest word, a sudden loss, a verse that will not leave us alone, a sleepless night of conviction. Help students recognize these interruptions for what they are: grace at work.

Invite honesty about the response. Saul surrendered immediately; many of us argue, delay, or change the subject when God interrupts. There is no shame in admitting we resisted at first. The value is in seeing the pattern, so that next time we recognize the voice sooner and yield more quickly.

Move toward the present tense. Ask whether God may be interrupting someone right now, in this season, and what a faithful response would look like this week. The goal is not nostalgia about past moments but readiness for the One who still pursues.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- God’s providential interruptions as expressions of His grace
- The difference between resisting and yielding to conviction
- Recognizing the voice of God in ordinary means (people, Scripture, circumstances)
- Readiness to respond promptly rather than delay

Discussion Prompts

- What ‘interruptions’ has God used in your life?
- What makes us argue with God instead of yielding?
- How might God be interrupting you right now?

Question 3

Student Question:

When Saul asks, “Who are you, Lord?” the answer comes, “I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting” (Acts 9:5). Jesus does not say “my people” but “me.” What does this teach about who Jesus is (alive, exalted, and Lord) and about how closely He identifies with His church?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Two massive truths meet in this single sentence. First, Jesus is alive. Saul had assumed the Jesus movement was built on a dead man and a stolen body. The voice from heaven shatters that assumption. Jesus is not a memory; He is the living, exalted Lord, speaking from glory. The

resurrection is not a doctrine Saul will later adopt; it is a Person who just knocked him to the ground.

Second, Jesus identifies Himself with His people to a stunning degree. Saul had been arresting disciples, yet Jesus says, “you are persecuting me.” To touch the church is to touch Christ. This is the seed of Paul’s later teaching that the church is the body of Christ, so united to Him that what is done to the members is done to the Head (1 Corinthians 12:27; Ephesians 5:30).

Draw out the lordship. Saul instinctively calls the voice “Lord,” and the lesson teaches that the One who confronts him is the rightful ruler of his life. Jesus is not offering Saul a perspective to consider; He is asserting an authority to obey. This sets the trajectory for everything that follows in Saul’s, and the student’s, life.

Apply it to how we treat the church. If Christ takes what is done to His people personally, then our love for the body, our words about fellow members, our care for the weakest disciple, all touch the Lord Himself. The way we treat the church is never merely horizontal.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The bodily resurrection and present exaltation of Jesus as living Lord
- The deity and lordship of Christ, confronting and commanding Saul
- The union of Christ and His church, the body joined to its Head
- How we treat fellow believers is how we treat Christ (Matthew 25:40)

Discussion Prompts

- How does the living, exalted Christ differ from a merely admired teacher?
- What does it mean that Jesus takes persecution of the church personally?
- How should Christ’s union with His church shape the way we treat one another?

Question 4

Student Question:

Saul’s response was to ask, “What shall I do, Lord?” (Acts 22:10). True faith does not merely admire Jesus; it submits to Him and asks what He requires. In what area of your life have you been content to call Jesus Lord without actually asking what He wants you to do? What would it look like to ask Him that this week?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Saul’s question is the posture of saving faith: not “What do I think?” but “What shall I do, Lord?” He surrenders his agenda before he is told the answer. Help students feel the difference between admiring Jesus and submitting to Him. It is possible to praise Christ in worship and quietly run our own lives the rest of the week.

Ask students to locate a specific zone of self-rule, a relationship, a financial habit, a use of time, an attitude they have never honestly submitted to Christ. The lordship of Jesus is not general; it presses into particulars. The question “What shall I do, Lord?” gets dangerous when we mean it about a concrete area.

Then move to action. Faith that asks the question is also ready to do the answer. Encourage each student to choose one area this week where they will genuinely ask, and obey, rather than merely admire. This is what it means to call Him Lord and mean it.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Saving faith includes submission and obedience, not bare admiration
- The lordship of Christ over specific, concrete areas of life
- The danger of honoring Jesus in worship while withholding obedience in practice
- Faith that asks “What shall I do, Lord?” and then does it

Discussion Prompts

- Where have you admired Jesus without obeying Him?
- What area of self-rule do you most need to surrender?
- What is one concrete act of obedience you can take this week?

Question 5

Student Question:

Though Saul believed and called Jesus “Lord” on the road, Jesus did not declare him saved there. Instead He said, “rise and enter the city, and you will be told what you must do” (Acts 9:6). Why is it significant that Saul was sent into the city still needing to be told what he “must do,” and what does this reveal about how a person comes into a right relationship with Christ?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This question prepares the ground for the heaviest doctrinal block at Question 9, so handle it carefully. Notice what Jesus did not say. He did not say, “Saul, your faith has saved you, go in peace.” He said, in effect, “Get up and go; there is more you must do, and you will be told what it is.” The phrase “what you must do” (Greek *dei*, it is necessary) signals that something remained for Saul beyond the moment of belief on the road.

This matters because it shows that genuine faith, even faith that confesses Jesus as Lord, was, in Saul’s case, the beginning of his coming to Christ, not the completed transaction. Saul believed on the road; he was not yet forgiven on the road. The Lord deliberately routed him through a process: go, wait, be told, obey. God could have spoken every word of the gospel from heaven, but He sent Saul to a human messenger and a divine appointment in the city.

Affirm clearly that faith is essential and that Saul's faith was real. The point is not to diminish faith but to define it. Saving faith is the kind that submits and obeys; it goes where it is sent and does what it is told. Saul's faith expressed itself in obedience, and that is precisely the pattern Scripture commends.

Let the suspense stand for a moment. The text itself makes us wait, just as Saul waited, for the answer to "what must I do?" Resist resolving it prematurely. By Question 7 and especially Question 9, students will see that the answer Ananias finally brings is, "be baptized and wash away your sins." For now, fix in their minds that Saul left the road a believer, but not yet a forgiven man.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Faith on the road was real but was the beginning of Saul's response, not its completion
- "What you must do" signals more than mental assent was required (Acts 9:6; 22:10)
- God's design to bring the gospel through a human messenger (Ananias)
- Saving faith is a faith that goes, waits, and obeys
- A guard against treating the moment of belief as the moment of forgiveness

Discussion Prompts

- Why didn't Jesus simply pronounce Saul forgiven on the road?
- What does the phrase 'what you must do' tell us was still ahead for Saul?
- How does this shape the way we explain conversion to others?

Question 6

Student Question:

For three days Saul sat blind, fasting and praying, stripped of everything he had trusted in (Acts 9:9, 11). Have you ever walked through a season of being undone before God, when your usual confidence was gone? What did God do in you in the waiting and the darkness?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

These three days are easy to skip, but they are spiritually rich. The proud Pharisee who had everything figured out now sits in literal darkness, unable to feed himself, dependent on others, with nothing to do but pray. Every credential from Philippians 3 has been knocked out of his hands. This is the emptying that grace often works before it fills.

Help students connect with their own undone seasons, a diagnosis, a failure, a loss that stripped away their self-sufficiency. Such times feel like punishment, but they are often the very places God does His deepest work, teaching us to depend on Him rather than on ourselves.

Note that Saul was praying (Acts 9:11). The darkness drove him to God rather than away from Him. Encourage students that the right response to being undone is not to grit our teeth and rebuild our old confidence, but to pray, wait, and let God lead us to the next step of obedience, as He did with Saul.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- God often empties us of self-sufficiency before He fills us with Himself
- Seasons of darkness and waiting as places of real spiritual work
- Prayer as the right response to being undone
- Dependence on God replacing confidence in the flesh

Discussion Prompts

- When has God stripped away your usual confidence?
- How do waiting and darkness become places of growth rather than despair?
- What helps you pray instead of panic when you are undone?

Question 7

Student Question:

Ananias came to Saul and told him, “And now why do you wait? Rise and be baptized and wash away your sins, calling on his name” (Acts 22:16). According to Ananias’s own words, at what point and in what act were Saul’s sins washed away, and why does the wording matter?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Read Ananias’s sentence slowly, because every phrase counts. “Why do you wait?” implies Saul’s sins were not yet washed away after three days of believing and praying; there was still something to be done, and delay was needless. “Rise and be baptized” gives the action. “And wash away your sins” gives the result tied to that action. “Calling on his name” shows that this is no empty ritual but an appeal to the Lord, an act of faith.

The grammar links the washing to the baptism. Saul’s sins were washed away when he was baptized, calling on the name of the Lord, not three days earlier on the road, and not during the three days of prayer. This is why the wording matters so much. If Saul had been forgiven the instant he believed on the road, Ananias’s words would be inexplicable; there would have been nothing to wait for and nothing left to wash away.

Be clear about what actually cleanses. It is not the water itself that has power, and it is not Saul’s own merit. His sins were washed away by the blood of Christ, received through an obedient faith that expressed itself in baptism. Baptism is the appointed moment at which God applies the cleansing Christ purchased, to the one who comes believing, repentant, and calling

on His name. This guards us from both ritualism and from emptying baptism of its God-given meaning.

Show that this fits the whole New Testament pattern. Peter said, “be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins” (Acts 2:38); Paul wrote that we are baptized into Christ’s death and raised to new life (Romans 6:3–4) and “baptized into Christ” to “put on Christ” (Galatians 3:27); Peter said baptism “now saves you” through the resurrection of Christ (1 Peter 3:21). Saul’s case is not an oddity; it is the norm.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Saul’s sins were washed away in baptism, calling on the Lord’s name (Acts 22:16)
- Baptism as the appointed point of forgiveness, not a mere symbol added later
- The blood of Christ, not the water itself, is what cleanses; baptism is the obedient appeal of faith
- The consistent New Testament pattern (Acts 2:38; Romans 6:3–4; Galatians 3:27; 1 Peter 3:21)
- A guard against both ritualism and against stripping baptism of its meaning

Discussion Prompts

- What does ‘why do you wait?’ imply about Saul’s condition during the three days?
- What actually does the cleansing, and what is baptism’s role in it?
- How does Saul’s baptism line up with Acts 2:38 and Romans 6?

Question 8

Student Question:

Saul had now believed in Jesus as Lord, repented in three days of prayer and fasting, and was ready to obey. Compare your own coming to Christ with his. Have you responded to Jesus as Saul did, believing, repenting, confessing Him, and being baptized to have your sins washed away? Or are you, in some sense, still “on the road,” convinced of Jesus but not yet fully obedient to Him?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This question turns the doctrine into a mirror. Saul’s conversion gives a clear template, faith in Jesus as Lord, repentance, confession of His name, and baptism for the washing away of sins, and students can lay their own experience alongside it. Lead this gently; the goal is clarity and assurance, or honest reckoning, not shame.

Some in the class will be able to say, with joy, that they came to Christ just as Saul did, and this is a moment to strengthen their assurance. Others may realize they are “still on the road”, convinced of who Jesus is, even moved by Him, but never having actually obeyed the gospel as Saul did. For them, Ananias’s question becomes personal: “Why do you wait?”

Be ready, as a teacher, to talk privately and lovingly with anyone the Spirit stirs through this question. The aim is not to manufacture doubt in the settled, but to make sure no one is leaning on a faith that admires Jesus without ever having come to Him on His terms.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The biblical pattern of conversion as a personal measuring line
- Assurance for those who have obeyed the gospel as Saul did
- Loving honesty with those who are convinced but not yet obedient
- The danger of a faith that admires Christ but never comes to Him

Discussion Prompts

- How does your own coming to Christ compare with Saul's?
- What would you say to someone who believes but has never been baptized into Christ?
- Why is it loving, not harsh, to ask 'why do you wait?'

Question 9

Student Question:

Saul's conversion is often used to teach that he was saved the moment he believed, or the instant he saw the Lord on the road. Yet the text shows him sent into the city still in his sins, praying and fasting for three days, and finally told to "be baptized and wash away your sins" (Acts 22:16). Walk carefully through the whole account: when and how were Saul's sins actually forgiven, and what does this teach about the claim that a person is saved by "faith only" or at the point of faith alone?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This is the doctrinal summit of the lesson, and it deserves the most time and the greatest care. Begin by laying the timeline of the account side by side, drawn from both Acts 9 and Acts 22. On the road, Saul sees the Lord, believes, calls Him "Lord," and asks, "What shall I do, Lord?" He is then told to go into the city and be told what he "must do" (Acts 9:6). For three days he is blind, fasting, and praying (Acts 9:9, 11). Then Ananias comes and says, "Rise and be baptized and wash away your sins, calling on his name" (Acts 22:16). The forgiveness comes at the end of that sequence, at his baptism, not at its beginning.

Now press the logic kindly but firmly. If Saul had been saved the instant he believed on the road, then for three days he would have been a forgiven, saved man, and Ananias's command, "why do you wait? Rise and be baptized and wash away your sins," would make no sense. You cannot wash away sins that are already washed away. The text itself rules out the idea that Saul was saved at the point of faith alone. His sins remained until he obeyed in baptism.

State the positive doctrine plainly. Saul was saved by grace, through faith, a faith that repented and was baptized. This is not salvation by works, and it is not salvation that earns anything; it is the obedient response God appointed for receiving the gift. The faith that saves is never bare assent; it is the faith that comes to Christ, turns from sin, confesses His name, and is buried with Him in baptism to rise to new life. Saul's conversion is the clearest biographical illustration of this in the New Testament.

Anticipate the common objections so the teacher is equipped. Some will cite passages that say we are justified by faith and not by works (Romans 3:28; Ephesians 2:8–9). Explain that Paul's target there is the works of the law, human merit by which a person could boast, exactly the confidence in the flesh Saul renounced. Paul never sets faith against the obedient response of baptism; he himself was baptized to wash away his sins and later wrote that baptism unites us with Christ (Romans 6:3–4; Galatians 3:27). "Faith only" pits against each other two things the Bible joins together.

Bring it home with the right tone. The purpose of this careful study is not to score points but to tell people the truth about how they are saved, the very thing Saul desperately needed to be told. The same grace that washed a persecutor clean is offered on the same terms today. Let students leave amazed that God would forgive such a man, and certain about how that forgiveness came to him and comes to us, through the blood of Christ, received by an obedient faith, in the waters of baptism.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Saul's sins were forgiven at his baptism, not at the first moment of faith on the road
- The clear refutation of salvation by "faith only" or at the point of faith alone
- Saving faith defined: belief that repents, confesses Christ, and is baptized into Him
- Justification 'apart from works' targets the works of the law and human boasting, not the obedience of faith (Romans 3:28; Ephesians 2:8–9)
- Salvation is by grace, through an obedient faith, never by human merit
- The blood of Christ as the ground, baptism as the appointed point of cleansing
- The pastoral duty to tell people the truth about how they are saved

Discussion Prompts

- If Saul were saved on the road, how would you explain Ananias's command three days later?
- How would you lovingly answer a friend who says we are saved by 'faith only'?
- What is the difference between the works of the law Paul rejects and the obedient faith he commends?

Question 10

Student Question:

Look back over the entire road to Damascus, the blinding light, the voice that knew his name, the three dark days, and the water that washed his sins away. Marvel for a moment at what grace did to this man. Name one specific way you sense Jesus using Saul's conversion to form you, whether to deepen your wonder at grace, to clarify your own response to Christ, or to soften your heart toward someone far from God.

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This capstone gathers the lesson's threads, the pursuing grace of God, the lordship of the risen Christ, the undoing of the proud, and the washing away of sin, and asks for a personal response. Keep it from becoming abstract by asking each student to name one concrete way the account has touched them.

Offer the three doors the question opens. Some need a renewed wonder at grace, the sheer mercy that would save a man breathing murder. Some need clarity about their own response, a settled assurance, or a decision to finally obey. Some need a softened heart toward a hard person in their life, a child, a coworker, an enemy, remembering that this is exactly the kind of person grace reaches.

Close on worship and hope. The same Lord who met Saul still meets sinners, still pursues enemies, still washes the guilty clean. Send students out not merely informed about Paul's conversion but moved by the God who accomplished it and ready to live in light of it.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Wonder at grace as the proper response to Saul's conversion
- Personal clarity and assurance about one's own response to Christ
- A softened heart toward those who seem far from God
- Spiritual formation flowing from beholding what grace has done

Discussion Prompts

- Which part of Saul's conversion most moves you, and why?
- What response is Christ asking of you through this account?
- Who is the 'Saul' in your life you have stopped praying for?