

Paul: From Persecutor to Preacher

Lesson 2: The Damascus Road: Grace Stops a Persecutor -- Acts 9:1–19; 22:6–16

The road from Jerusalem to Damascus runs about a hundred and fifty miles north, a journey of several days under a hot sun. On that road, sometime around noon, a man is riding hard with murder on his mind. Luke does not soften it: Saul was “still breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord.” He has letters in his bag authorizing him to arrest any followers of the Way he can find in Damascus and drag them back in chains. He is a hunter closing in on his prey, and he is certain that God is pleased with every mile.

Then the sky tears open. A light brighter than the noonday sun blazes around him, and Saul is thrown to the ground. Out of the blinding glory comes a voice that knows his name: “Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?” Trembling, he asks the only question that matters now: “Who are you, Lord?” And the answer turns his whole world upside down: “I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting.” The Jesus he thought was dead, the Jesus whose followers he was hunting, is alive, exalted, and speaking to him from heaven. The persecutor has run straight into the risen Christ.

What happens next is easy to rush past, but every detail matters. The Lord does not pronounce Saul saved on the spot. He sends him: “rise and enter the city, and you will be told what you must do.” Saul gets up from the dirt, and the man who came to Damascus to put others in chains is led into the city by the hand, blind and helpless. For three days he neither eats nor drinks. He simply waits and prays, undone, a Pharisee with nothing left to lean on, in the dark with his sin and the voice of Jesus still ringing in his ears.

Then God sends a frightened disciple named Ananias with a word for Saul, and that word is the hinge of the whole account. Ananias lays his hands on him, his sight returns, and he tells him plainly what he must do: “rise and be baptized and wash away your sins, calling on his name.” This is the moment the persecutor becomes a forgiven man. It is one of the most studied conversions in all of Scripture, and one of the most misunderstood. So we will read it slowly and let it teach us, with wonder, exactly how the grace of God lays hold of a sinner.

Group Discussion: On the Damascus road, Jesus went looking for the very man who was hunting His people. What does it tell you about the grace of God that He pursued His worst enemy, and that no one is beyond His reach? Where have you seen grace reach someone everyone else had written off?

Personal Reflection: Saul’s first words to the risen Lord were “Who are you, Lord?” and then “What shall I do, Lord?” Both questions surrendered everything he thought he knew. Is there a place in your life where Christ is confronting you and waiting for you to ask, honestly, “What shall I do, Lord?” What makes that surrender hard?

Read Acts 9:1–19; 22:6–16

Study Questions

1. 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?
2. 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?
3. 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?
4. 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?
5. 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?
6. 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?
7. 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?
8. 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?
9. 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?

10. 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.

Now or Later

Reflect on these passages: Acts 2:36–38, Peter's hearers cut to the heart and told to repent and be baptized for the forgiveness of sins; Romans 6:3–4, baptized into Christ's death and raised to walk in newness of life; 1 Timothy 1:12–16, Paul, once a blasphemer and persecutor, shown mercy as a pattern; Galatians 1:13–16, God who set Saul apart and called him by His grace; Acts 26:12–18, Paul's own retelling of the commission he received from the risen Lord