

Paul: From Persecutor to Preacher, Teacher's Guide

Lesson 3: From Persecutor to Preacher: The Early Years

Acts 9:19–31; Galatians 1:15–24

Teaching Aim (Teacher Orientation)

This lesson follows Saul through the first years after his conversion, roughly A.D. 34 to 37, weaving together Luke's narrative in Acts 9 and Paul's own reflection in Galatians 1. The historical picture is dramatic: a newly converted Saul preaching Christ in the very synagogues he had come to use against the church, escaping a murder plot by being lowered over the Damascus wall in a basket, and finally being received in Jerusalem only because Barnabas vouched for him. Galatians fills in details Acts leaves out, that Saul withdrew (to Arabia and back to Damascus), did not rush to consult the apostles, and understood his whole new life as the result of God setting him apart and calling him by grace.

Two doctrinal themes run through the lesson and deserve the teacher's attention. The first is the nature of genuine conversion: it is not a private sentiment but a transformation that immediately bears fruit in confession, witness, and a changed life so visible that churches glorified God over it. The second, and the heaviest, is the divine origin and authority of the gospel Paul preached. In Galatians, Paul stakes everything on the claim that his message came by revelation from the risen Christ, not from human tradition. This grounds the authority of the New Testament that came through him, and it must be handled in a way that honors that authority without opening the door to modern claims of new revelation or continuing apostleship.

This lesson also aims squarely at the spiritual formation of the student. Most believers in your class will not be apostles, but every one of them is called to a visible, fruitful faith and to a sense of God-given purpose. Press them to ask whether their lives bear the kind of evidence that makes others praise God, and whether they are living out the assignment God has given them or merely drifting. Help them see that the same grace that set Saul apart has set them apart too, for good works God prepared beforehand (Ephesians 2:10). Send them home eager to be visibly Christ's and confident in the gospel handed down to them.

Question 1

Student Question:

Luke says that after his conversion Saul "immediately" proclaimed Jesus in the synagogues, "saying, 'He is the Son of God'" (Acts 9:20). What does this immediate, public preaching reveal about the nature of genuine conversion, and why is the truth that Jesus is the Son of God the heart of the message Saul now proclaimed?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

The word “immediately” is striking. There was no long probation, no quiet period in which Saul kept his new faith to himself. The same energy that had driven his persecution was now redirected toward proclaiming Christ. Genuine conversion does not produce a secret, dormant faith; it produces confession. As Paul would later write, “I believed, and so I spoke” (2 Corinthians 4:13).

Notice the content of his preaching: “He is the Son of God.” This is the very truth Saul had once denied by hunting those who confessed it. The heart of the Christian message is the identity of Jesus, the Son of God, the Christ, the risen Lord. Saul did not preach a vague spirituality or a moral program; he proclaimed a Person, and a specific claim about that Person that demands a response.

Help students see the connection between conviction and confession. What we truly believe about Jesus, we will eventually speak. A faith that never finds its way to the lips is worth examining. This does not mean every believer is a public preacher, but it does mean a converted heart cannot remain permanently silent about its Lord.

Apply it gently. Saul’s boldness flowed naturally from the magnitude of what had happened to him. When the wonder of grace is fresh and real, witness follows. If our witness has grown cold, the remedy is often to return to the wonder, to remember who Jesus is and what He has done for us.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Genuine conversion produces confession and witness, not a private, silent faith
- The identity of Jesus as the Son of God is the heart of the gospel message
- The link between true conviction and bold confession (2 Corinthians 4:13)
- Redeemed energy: the same zeal redirected toward Christ

Discussion Prompts

- Why is it significant that Saul preached ‘immediately’?
- What does it mean to proclaim a Person rather than merely a philosophy?
- What is the relationship between believing and speaking?

Question 2

Student Question:

When you first came to Christ, what changed right away, and what should have? Is your faith something others can plainly see, or has it stayed largely private and tucked away? Name one area where your life still needs to catch up with what you say you believe.

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This self-examining question invites honest comparison between Saul's immediate, visible change and the student's own experience. Some came to Christ with dramatic change; others grew up in the faith and cannot point to a single moment. Either way, the question is whether the faith they profess is actually visible in how they live.

Help students avoid two ditches: pretending everything changed instantly, and assuming nothing needs to change now. The Christian life is both a decisive new birth and an ongoing transformation. Ask them to name a specific area where their walk still lags behind their words, a habit, a relationship, a use of time.

Move toward one concrete step. The goal is not guilt but growth. Encourage each student to identify a single place where they will let their life catch up with their confession this week, so that their faith becomes a little more visible than it was.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Conversion as both a decisive beginning and an ongoing transformation
- The call to a visible, embodied faith rather than a private one
- Honest self-assessment of the gap between profession and practice
- Sanctification as the lifelong catching-up of life to confession

Discussion Prompts

- What changed when you came to Christ, and what still needs to?
- Can the people around you tell that you belong to Jesus?
- Where does your life most lag behind your words?

Question 3

Student Question:

Looking back, Paul said God “had set me apart before I was born, and . . . called me by his grace . . . in order that I might preach him among the Gentiles” (Galatians 1:15–16). What does this teach about the source of Paul’s new life and mission, and how is being set apart and called by grace for a task different from the idea that God arbitrarily chooses some individuals to save and others to lose?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Paul traces his new life back to God's initiative and grace, not his own decision or merit. This guards us from imagining that Saul reasoned his way to Christ or earned his commission. God set him apart and called him; grace, not Saul, was the prime mover. Celebrate this. Every believer's story, rightly told, begins with God.

At the same time, teach the language carefully. Paul speaks of being set apart and called “in order that I might preach him among the Gentiles.” The emphasis is on a calling to a task, an apostleship and a mission, much like God’s setting apart of Jeremiah from the womb to be a prophet (Jeremiah 1:5). This is purpose and assignment, not a secret decree that Saul would be saved while others were predestined to be lost.

Distinguish this clearly from Calvinistic unconditional election. The Bible teaches that God genuinely desires all to be saved (1 Timothy 2:4; 2 Peter 3:9) and that the gospel call is real and universal. Saul was called by grace, and he responded in faith and obedience; he was not irresistibly dragged nor saved apart from his response. God’s sovereign purpose to use Saul among the Gentiles did not cancel Saul’s real, answerable response on the road and in the city.

Apply it to assurance and humility. Because our salvation begins in God’s grace, we have nothing to boast in; because His call is real and answerable, we have every reason to respond wholeheartedly. Grace that initiates does not make us passive; it makes us grateful and willing.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- God’s gracious initiative as the source of the believer’s new life and mission
- Being ‘set apart’ for a task and calling, after the pattern of the prophets (Jeremiah 1:5)
- The difference between God’s call to service and Calvinistic unconditional election
- God desires all to be saved; the gospel call is genuine and universal (1 Timothy 2:4)
- Grace initiates without canceling our real, answerable response

Discussion Prompts

- How does Paul trace his new life back to God’s grace rather than his own merit?
- What is the difference between being called to a task and being unconditionally chosen for salvation?
- How does grace that initiates make us grateful rather than passive?

Question 4

Student Question:

Paul came to understand that God had been at work in his life long before he ever knew it, setting him apart for a purpose. Where do you sense God has set you apart or called you to serve Him, in your home, your work, or the church? Are you living as though your life has a God-given assignment, or drifting as though it does not?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

While Paul’s apostolic calling was unique, every Christian is set apart for good works God prepared beforehand (Ephesians 2:10) and given gifts to serve the body (1 Peter 4:10). Help

students move from Paul's extraordinary commission to their own ordinary but real assignments as parents, workers, neighbors, and members of the church.

Many people drift through life with no sense of purpose beyond the next obligation. The gospel reframes everything: your life is not an accident, and your days are not aimless. Invite students to name where they sense God has placed and called them, and to consider whether they are stewarding that place intentionally.

Press toward intentional living. Ask each student to identify one God-given assignment they have been neglecting or taking for granted, and one way they could step into it more deliberately this week, living as people on mission rather than on autopilot.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Every believer is set apart for good works prepared by God (Ephesians 2:10)
- Spiritual gifts given to serve the body (1 Peter 4:10)
- Purposeful, intentional living versus aimless drifting
- Stewardship of the place and calling God has given each person

Discussion Prompts

- Where has God placed and set you apart to serve Him?
- What would change if you saw your daily life as a God-given assignment?
- What calling have you been neglecting or taking for granted?

Question 5

Student Question:

The churches of Judea kept hearing one report: "He who used to persecute us is now preaching the faith he once tried to destroy." And they "glorified God because of me" (Galatians 1:23–24). Why is a transformed life such powerful evidence of the gospel, and why did the credit go to God rather than to Saul?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

A changed life is one of the most compelling arguments for the gospel because it cannot be easily explained away. The Judean churches did not need to see Saul; the report alone was enough to make them worship. When a known enemy becomes a humble preacher, observers instinctively reach for an explanation beyond human effort, and the right explanation is God.

Notice where the glory went. They did not marvel at Saul's willpower or praise his decision; they "glorified God." The transformation pointed past the man to the One who transformed him. This is the proper aim of every changed life, not to draw admiration to ourselves but to direct praise to God (Matthew 5:16).

Teach students that their transformation is meant to be evidence, too. The patience that replaced their temper, the generosity that replaced their greed, the peace that replaced their anxiety, these are exhibits that point to a real and living God. A watching world is often more moved by changed people than by clever arguments.

Guard against the counterfeit. The goal is not performance designed to impress, but genuine change that humbly gives God the credit. When people compliment the change, the Christlike response is to point them to Christ, the way Saul's story always pointed past Saul to God.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- A transformed life as powerful, hard-to-dismiss evidence of the gospel
- Changed lives meant to direct glory to God, not admiration to ourselves (Matthew 5:16)
- The witness of character: patience, generosity, and peace as exhibits of grace
- Pointing past ourselves to Christ when others notice the change

Discussion Prompts

- Why is a changed life so persuasive to people who hear of it?
- How do we make sure our transformation points to God and not to us?
- What change has grace worked in you that others have noticed?

Question 6

Student Question:

Paul's changed life caused whole churches to praise God. Does your life produce that effect on anyone? Think of the people closest to you. Would they say that knowing you has made them think more highly of God? What in your life right now would most encourage them to glorify Him?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This question brings the witness of a transformed life down to the student's nearest relationships. It is one thing for distant churches to praise God over a famous convert; it is another for a spouse, child, coworker, or neighbor to see Christ in us day after day. Those closest to us see us most honestly.

Encourage humble realism. None of us shines perfectly at home, where our edges are most exposed. The question is not whether we are flawless but whether the overall trajectory of our lives points people toward God. Ask students to consider what their nearest people would honestly say.

Lead toward one concrete encouragement. Rather than a vague resolve to be better, have each student name one specific thing, a controlled tongue, a more patient presence, an act of

unexpected grace, that would most help the people closest to them think more highly of God this week.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The witness of the home and the nearest relationships
- Consistency of character where we are most exposed
- Honest self-assessment through the eyes of those who know us best
- Concrete, livable steps that adorn the gospel (Titus 2:10)

Discussion Prompts

- What would those closest to you say about the God you serve?
- Where are your edges most exposed, and how does Christ meet you there?
- What one change would most bless the people nearest you?

Question 7

Student Question:

From the very start, Saul's preaching brought danger. The Jews in Damascus plotted to kill him, and in Jerusalem the Hellenists "were seeking to kill him" as well (Acts 9:23–29). What does the early opposition Saul faced teach us about the cost of following and confessing Christ, and why should it not surprise us?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Opposition met Saul almost immediately, and from both directions, his former allies now saw him as a traitor, and the Greek-speaking Jews in Jerusalem wanted him dead. The gospel that reconciles us to God often sets us at odds with a hostile world. Jesus had promised as much: "If they persecuted me, they will also persecute you" (John 15:20).

Help students see that opposition is not a sign that something has gone wrong, but often a sign of faithfulness. Saul was not persecuted for being obnoxious; he was persecuted for preaching Christ crucified and risen. The cross has always been an offense to those who reject it (1 Corinthians 1:23).

At the same time, note Saul's prudence. He did not court death recklessly; he let the disciples lower him over the wall and later accepted being sent to Tarsus. Courage and wisdom are not opposites. Faithfulness sometimes means standing firm and sometimes means living to preach another day.

Apply it to the student's world. Most believers today will not face death, but they will face ridicule, exclusion, lost opportunities, or strained relationships. Naming this honestly prepares

students so that when the cost comes, they are not caught off guard or tempted to think their faith has failed.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The cost of discipleship and the certainty of opposition (John 15:20; 2 Timothy 3:12)
- The offense of the cross to a world that rejects it (1 Corinthians 1:23)
- Persecution as a possible mark of faithfulness, not a sign of failure
- Courage and wisdom held together in the face of danger

Discussion Prompts

- Why should opposition not surprise a faithful Christian?
- What is the difference between courageous witness and reckless provocation?
- What forms does opposition usually take in your setting?

Question 8

Student Question:

Saul could have softened his message to stay safe, but he did not. Where have you trimmed your witness, or stayed silent, to avoid conflict, awkwardness, or cost? What would faithfulness look like in the specific setting where you find it hardest to be known as a follower of Jesus?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This question presses the cost of discipleship into the student's actual life. Few of us trim the gospel out of cowardice in dramatic moments; we do it quietly, by changing the subject, laughing along, or leaving our faith unmentioned where it might be unwelcome. Help students name the specific settings where they go silent.

Be honest about the pressures. The workplace, the extended family gathering, the group of old friends, each carries its own cost for being openly Christian. Naming the setting is the first step toward courage. Vague resolve rarely survives contact with real pressure; a specific plan can.

Aim for a concrete, achievable step. Faithfulness does not always mean a sermon; sometimes it means a quiet, unashamed mention of where we stand, a refusal to laugh at what dishonors God, a willingness to be known. Encourage each student to choose one setting and one small, faithful action this week.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The subtle ways we trim or hide our witness to avoid cost
- Naming specific settings of pressure as the path to courage
- Faithfulness as steady, unashamed identification with Christ (Romans 1:16)
- The difference between wise discretion and fearful silence

Discussion Prompts

- Where do you most often go silent about your faith?
- What specifically do you fear will happen if you are known as a Christian there?
- What is one small, faithful step you could take this week?

Question 9

Student Question:

Paul insisted that the gospel he preached “is not man’s gospel,” for he “did not receive it from any man, nor was I taught it, but I received it through a revelation of Jesus Christ” (Galatians 1:11–12), the same Christ who “was pleased to reveal his Son to me” (Galatians 1:16). Why does it matter so much that Paul’s gospel came by direct revelation from God rather than from human invention, how does this ground the authority of the New Testament Paul helped to write, and why does Paul’s unique, inspired role not support modern claims of new revelation today?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This is the doctrinal summit of the lesson, and it bears directly on why we trust the Scriptures. Paul is defending his gospel against the charge that he learned it secondhand and perhaps got it wrong. His answer is emphatic: the gospel he preaches did not originate with any human teacher; it came by revelation from the risen Christ Himself. This means Paul’s message carries the authority of God, not the opinion of a man.

Draw the line from this claim to the New Testament. The letters Paul wrote are not the reflections of a gifted religious thinker; they are the inspired word of God, given through an apostle who received his gospel from Christ. This is why Peter could class Paul’s letters with “the other Scriptures” (2 Peter 3:15–16), and why the church is said to be built “on the foundation of the apostles and prophets” (Ephesians 2:20). When we read Paul, we are reading God’s revelation, not human speculation.

Establish the authority of Scripture as the practical payoff. Because the gospel came from God, it is not ours to edit, supplement, or improve. “All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable . . . that the man of God may be complete, equipped for every good work” (2 Timothy 3:16–17). The standard for faith and practice is the revealed word, not human tradition, cleverness, or majority opinion.

Now address the boundary carefully. Paul’s reception of direct revelation was part of the unique, foundational era of the church, when God confirmed His word through the apostles by signs and inspiration (2 Corinthians 12:12; Hebrews 2:3–4). A foundation is laid once. The fact that Paul received new revelation does not mean people receive new revelation today; the completed New Testament is now our authority. Claims of fresh, binding revelation, new apostles, or messages that add to or alter the gospel run directly against Paul’s own warning in

the same chapter: even if an angel preaches a different gospel, “let him be accursed” (Galatians 1:8).

Apply it to confidence and discernment. Students can hold the Scriptures with full confidence, knowing they came from God through inspired men, and they can test every new teaching against that fixed standard. We do not need a new word from heaven; we need to obey the one already given. This both honors Paul’s extraordinary role and keeps us from the error of chasing supposed new revelations.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The divine origin of the gospel Paul preached, received by revelation, not from men (Galatians 1:11–12)
- The inspiration and authority of the New Testament Paul helped to write (2 Peter 3:15–16; 2 Timothy 3:16–17)
- The church built on the once-laid foundation of the apostles and prophets (Ephesians 2:20)
- The completed New Testament as our standard; no need for new, binding revelation today
- Apostolic revelation and confirming signs belonged to the foundational era (2 Corinthians 12:12; Hebrews 2:3–4)
- Paul’s own warning against any other gospel, even from an angel (Galatians 1:8)

Discussion Prompts

- Why does it matter that Paul’s gospel came from God rather than from men?
- How does this give us confidence in the New Testament Scriptures?
- Why does Paul’s reception of revelation not mean people receive new revelation today?

Question 10

Student Question:

Look back across these early years, the bold preaching, the narrow escapes, the grace that set him apart, and the churches praising God over a changed enemy. Name one specific way you sense Jesus using this part of Saul’s story to form you, whether to make your faith more visible, to embrace the assignment God has given you, or to trust the gospel He has handed down to us.

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This capstone draws together the lesson’s threads: the visibility of genuine faith, the grace that sets us apart for a purpose, and the divine authority of the gospel. Ask students to name one concrete way the Lord has met them, rather than offering a general resolution.

Offer the three doors the question opens. Some need to make their faith more visible, stepping out of silence into bold, gentle witness. Some need to embrace a God-given assignment they

have been neglecting. Some need a deeper confidence in the Scriptures, resting on a gospel that came from God and needs no improvement.

Close with encouragement. The early years were hard for Saul, full of danger and suspicion, yet grace carried him and bore fruit in churches that glorified God. The same grace is at work in your students. Send them out ready to be visibly Christ's, purposeful in their callings, and confident in the word God has given.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Visible, fruitful faith as the mark of genuine conversion
- Embracing the God-given assignment of one's life
- Confidence in the inspired, sufficient gospel handed down to us
- Spiritual formation through beholding grace at work in a changed life

Discussion Prompts

- Which thread of Saul's early years speaks most to you right now?
- What one step toward a more visible or purposeful faith will you take?
- How does the divine origin of the gospel strengthen your confidence this week?