

Paul: From Persecutor to Preacher

Lesson 3: From Persecutor to Preacher: The Early Years -- Acts 9:19–31; Galatians 1:15–24

Imagine the buzz in the Damascus synagogues. Word had gone ahead that the famous Saul of Tarsus was coming, the rising star of the Pharisees, armed with authority to arrest the followers of Jesus. The believers in the city had been bracing themselves, perhaps hiding, perhaps praying through the night. And then the man finally stands up to speak, and what comes out of his mouth is the last thing anyone expected. He is not denouncing Jesus. He is proclaiming Him. “Immediately he proclaimed Jesus in the synagogues, saying, ‘He is the Son of God.’”

The whole city is thrown off balance. “All who heard him were amazed,” Luke says, and you can hear them asking one another, “Is not this the man who made havoc in Jerusalem of those who called upon this name?” The hunter has become a herald. The man who came to drag Christians to prison is now arguing in the synagogues that Jesus is the Christ, and he only grows more powerful at it. It is such a complete reversal that his old allies cannot make sense of it, and before long they decide the only solution is to kill him. Saul escapes Damascus over the wall in a basket, lowered through a window in the dark.

The transformation was not a passing burst of enthusiasm. Looking back years later, Paul explained where it all came from. It was not his idea and not his achievement. “He who had set me apart before I was born, and who called me by his grace, was pleased to reveal his Son to me, in order that I might preach him among the Gentiles.” The grace that stopped him on the road had a purpose, and that purpose was already unfolding. Saul did not run to confer with the leaders in Jerusalem; he went away to be shaped by God, and the gospel he would preach came to him from heaven, not from men.

In time he came to Jerusalem, where the disciples were understandably terrified of him, until a generous man named Barnabas took him by the arm and vouched for him. Wherever Saul went, the same astonishing report ran ahead of him, and the churches of Judea responded not with suspicion but with worship. They had only heard it said, “He who used to persecute us is now preaching the faith he once tried to destroy.” And, Luke tells us, “they glorified God because of me.” This lesson follows the early years of that transformation, and asks what a life truly changed by grace looks like, and where the gospel that changes it actually comes from.

Group Discussion: When the Damascus believers heard that their fiercest enemy was now preaching Christ, the churches “glorified God” (Galatians 1:24). A genuinely changed life makes people praise God. When others look at the change Christ has made in you, what do they see, and does it point them to God or to you?

Personal Reflection: Saul did not keep his new faith quiet; “immediately” he proclaimed Jesus, even at great risk (Acts 9:20). Where have you been tempted to keep your faith private and safe? What holds you back from speaking about Christ, and what would it look like to take one bold step this week?

Read Acts 9:19–31; Galatians 1:15–24

Study Questions

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

9. 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?
10. 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.

Now or Later

Reflect on these passages: Galatians 1:11–12, the gospel Paul preached received through revelation of Jesus Christ; Acts 22:14–15, Saul appointed to know God’s will and be a witness to all people; 2 Corinthians 5:17, anyone in Christ is a new creation; Ephesians 2:19–20, the church built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets; 1 Timothy 1:16, Paul as a pattern of the mercy shown to sinners