

The Book of Acts

The Conversion of Paul

Lesson #5 for August 4, 2018

Scriptures: Acts 9:1-30; 26:4-18; Deuteronomy 21:23; 1 Corinthians 9:1; Galatians 1:1.

1. This lesson will focus on what was, no doubt, the most incredible single experience in the history of the early Christian church—the conversion of Saul on the road to Damascus. The impact of Paul/Saul on the early Christian church is beyond computation. Paul/Saul and his friend Dr. Luke wrote most of the New Testament. Other than Jesus Himself, probably no one in the history of the New Testament church has had a larger impact on the church as a whole than Paul. Saul was his Hebrew name used up through Acts 13 and in part of his own telling of his conversion recorded in Acts 26; Paul was his Greek name used as he worked among the Gentiles. (See Acts 13:9.) The incredible thing is that when we first hear about Saul, he was adamantly opposed to the Christian church and everything it stood for. He believed that Jesus was an imposter. But, after that experience on the Damascus road, an absolutely incredible change took place.

From among the most bitter and relentless persecutors of the church of Christ, arose the ablest defender and most successful herald of the gospel. With the apostolic brotherhood of the chosen twelve, who had companied with Christ from his baptism even to his ascension, was numbered one who had never seen the Lord while he dwelt among men, and who had heard his name uttered only in unbelief and contempt. But beneath the blindness and bigotry of the zealot and the Pharisee, Infinite Wisdom discerned a heart loyal to truth and duty. And the voice from Heaven made itself heard above the clamors of pride and prejudice. **In the promulgation of the gospel, Divine Providence would unite with the zeal and devotion of the Galilean peasants, the fiery vigor and intellectual power of a rabbi of Jerusalem. To lead the battle against pagan philosophy and Jewish formalism, was chosen one who had himself [10] witnessed the debasing power of heathen worship, and endured the spiritual bondage of Pharisaic exaction.**—Ellen G. White, *Sketches From the Life of Paul** 9.1-10.0. [Bold type is added.]

2. How would you feel about yourself if you knew that you had started your career having had one of the best educations in the world and then turned that into an irresistible determination to destroy the Christian church? What was Saul's concept of God during those early years?
3. So, what were the characteristics of Paul that gave his life such an impact? Remember that Paul was a Hellenistic Jew. He was born in Tarsus where the predominant language was Greek. Tarsus was the capital of Cilicia, (Acts 21:39) an area in south-central Asia Minor known today as Turkey. However, Paul was sent to Jerusalem to get the best possible education from the Jewish leaders, and he ended up studying under the tutelage of Gamaliel. (Acts 22:3) What impact do you suppose Gamaliel had on Paul? Reading between the lines, we believe that Paul was married and had become a member of the Sanhedrin at the very young age of about 30. He was apparently promoted to the Sanhedrin because of his participation in the stoning of Stephen and his subsequent animosity against Christians and pursuit of them.

Read **Acts 26:9-11**: "I myself thought that I should do everything I could against the cause of Jesus of Nazareth. That is what I did in Jerusalem. I received authority from the chief priests and put many of God's people in prison; and when they were sentenced to death, **I also voted against them.** Many times I had them punished in the synagogues and tried to make them deny their faith. I was so furious with them that I even went to foreign cities to persecute them."—American Bible Society. (1992). *The Holy Bible: The Good News Translation** (2nd ed., Acts 26:9–11). New York: American Bible Society. [Bold type is added.]

4. Like the thief on the cross and even after he heard the sermon from Stephen, Saul allowed himself to be convinced by the teachings of the Pharisees that this Jesus could not be the Messiah for whom they were looking. How could someone who hung on a Roman cross possibly be the Jewish Messiah? (Deuteronomy 21:23) Jesus had been crucified as a traitor to the Roman government—that was the treatment for the worst kind of criminal.

Acts 9:1-2: ¹In the meantime Saul kept up his violent threats of murder against the followers of the Lord. He went to the High Priest ²and asked for letters of introduction to the synagogues in Damascus, so that if he should find there any followers of the Way of the Lord, he would be able to arrest them, both men and women, and bring them back to Jerusalem.—*Good News Bible*.*

5. After having done as much damage as he possibly could to the Christian church in and around Jerusalem, he was looking for new territory in which to carry out his murderous plans. Damascus, in the country of Syria, was already an ancient city located about 135 miles north of Jerusalem, and it had a large Jewish population. The Jewish Sanhedrin had convinced the Roman government that the Sanhedrin should be allowed to have a certain amount of jurisdiction over Jews no matter where they lived. The Sanhedrin was in constant communication with the various Jewish communities through the use of letters normally carried by a *shaliah*—“one who was sent”—(from the Hebrew *shalal*, “to send”). A *shaliah* was obviously designated by the Sanhedrin to carry out their wishes.
6. When Saul sought permission from the high priest to carry authority from the Sanhedrin to Damascus to persecute Christians, he became a *shaliah*, sent by the Sanhedrin to destroy the Christian church in that area. Interestingly enough, the Greek equivalent of a *shaliah* is an *apostolos* from which we get the English word *apostle*. From being an *apostle* of the Sanhedrin, Saul/Paul became an *apostle* of Jesus Christ.
7. Would it be fair to say that one of Saul’s most important characteristics was zeal? Have you ever felt real zeal for any cause? What really made it “burn” within you? What was it that inspired you?

Acts 9:3-9: ³ As Saul was coming near the city of Damascus, suddenly a light from the sky flashed round him. ⁴He fell to the ground and heard a voice saying to him, “Saul, Saul! Why do you persecute me?”

⁵ “Who are you, Lord?” he asked.

“I am Jesus, whom you persecute,” the voice said. ⁶“But get up and go into the city, where you will be told what you must do.”

⁷ The men who were traveling with Saul had stopped, not saying a word; they heard the voice but could not see anyone. ⁸Saul got up from the ground and opened his eyes, but could not see a thing. So they took him by the hand and led him into Damascus. ⁹For three days he was not able to see, and during that time he did not eat or drink anything.—*Good News Bible*.* (Acts 9:3-9).

8. The road into Damascus from the foothills of Mount Hermon gives one an opportunity to look over the city. Somewhere on that road as Saul was traveling with his companions and they were thinking about how they would arrest Christians, Saul was suddenly struck down by a bright light. While Saul’s companions heard a noise, only Saul apparently heard the verbal message from Jesus Himself. (Acts 22:7-8) To Saul/Paul himself this was a very important moment. From then on in his life, he considered himself to have been commissioned by Jesus Himself to do His work. (1 Corinthians 9:1; 15:8)
9. While we may not have the entire conversation between Jesus and Saul, it was not a very lengthy conversation in any case. In effect, Jesus said to Saul: “You are having a hard time with your conscience. Aren’t you?”

Saul had taken a prominent part in the trial and conviction of Stephen, and the

striking evidences of God's presence with the martyr had led Saul to doubt the righteousness of the cause he had espoused against the followers of Jesus. His mind was deeply stirred. In his perplexity he appealed to those in whose wisdom and judgment he had full confidence. The arguments of the priests and rulers finally convinced him that Stephen was a blasphemer, that the Christ whom the martyred disciple had preached was an impostor, and that those ministering in holy office must be right.—Ellen G. White, *The Acts of the Apostles** 112.2-113.0.

10. How would you feel if you were struck to the ground by a bright light and Jesus Himself was talking to you? Would you be prepared to say, as Saul did: "What do you want me to do, Lord?" (See Acts 22:10.) Are we ready to say that? Already at that point, Saul was prepared to take up a new life. Blinded by the light, he was led into the city and taken to a house on Straight Street.

Acts 9:10-19: ¹⁰ There was a believer in Damascus named Ananias. He had a vision, in which the Lord said to him, "Ananias!"

"Here I am, Lord," he answered.

¹¹ The Lord said to him, "Get ready and go to Straight Street, and at the house of Judas ask for a man from Tarsus named Saul. He is praying, ¹²and in a vision he has seen a man named Ananias come in and place his hands on him so that he might see again."

¹³ Ananias answered, "Lord, many people have told me about this man and about all the terrible things he has done to your people in Jerusalem. ¹⁴And he has come to Damascus with authority from the chief priests to arrest all who worship you."

¹⁵ The Lord said to him, "**Go, because I have chosen him to serve me, to make my name known to Gentiles and kings and to the people of Israel.** ¹⁶And I myself will show him all that he must suffer for my sake."

¹⁷ So Ananias went, entered the house where Saul was, and placed his hands on him. "Brother Saul," he said, "the Lord has sent me—Jesus himself, who appeared to you on the road as you were coming here. He sent me so that you might see again and be filled with the Holy Spirit." ¹⁸At once something like fish scales fell from Saul's eyes, and he was able to see again. He stood up and was baptized; ¹⁹and after he had eaten, his strength came back.—*Good News Bible*.* (Acts 9:10-19). [Bold type is added.]

Try to imagine what was going through Ananias's mind during this episode!

11. Which do you think would have been a bigger shock to the Jewish leaders in Jerusalem and to the Christian community in Jerusalem and/or Damascus at that point: 1) That Paul had suddenly become a *Christian*? Or, 2) That he was commissioned to carry the gospel to the *Gentiles*?
12. How often do you think Jesus communicated with Paul during the remainder of his ministry? Or, do you think this one time was the only direct encounter?

Galatians 1:1,11-12: ¹From Paul, whose call to be an apostle did not come from human beings or by human means, but from Jesus Christ and God the Father, who raised him from death....

¹¹ Let me tell you, my brothers and sisters, that the gospel I preach is not of human origin. ¹²I did not receive it from any human being, nor did anyone teach it to me. It was Jesus Christ himself who revealed it to me.—*Good News Bible*.*

13. Surely, that one brief conversation alone would not qualify as the *giving of the gospel* from Jesus to Paul. Were other communications only through God's Word and prophets?
14. As Paul went about his ministry, think about the audiences to whom he preached. Would they have been more impressed to know that Paul had been commissioned by the original disciples

in Jerusalem? Or, that Paul was given a commission by Jesus Christ Himself, the Son of God, to spread the gospel? Surely, no human or group of humans, no matter what efforts or what methods they may have used, could have impacted Paul as did that one encounter on the road to Damascus.

15. Paul preached the gospel in Damascus for a while, and then, fled to the desert in Arabia where he spent time in meditation, prayer, and study. Remember that it is quite likely that Paul had memorized much or all of the Old Testament in Hebrew during his education. Three years after the experience on the road to Damascus, he returned to Damascus to take up his defense of Christianity. Notice these words from Ellen White.

Here, in the solitude of the desert, Paul had ample opportunity for quiet study and meditation. He calmly reviewed his past experience and made sure work of repentance. He sought God with all his heart, resting not until he knew for a certainty that his repentance was accepted and his sin pardoned. He longed for the assurance that Jesus would be with him in his coming ministry. He emptied his soul of [126] the prejudices and traditions that had hitherto shaped his life, and received instruction from the Source of truth. Jesus communed with him and established him in the faith, bestowing upon him a rich measure of wisdom and grace.—Ellen G. White, *The Acts of the Apostles** 125.3.-126.0.

16. Try to imagine how you would feel if you were a faithful Jew worshiping in one of the synagogues in Damascus and Paul showed up to preach. The faithful Jews, including the leaders of the synagogues, must have received messages through other *shalihs* that Saul was coming to arrest and persecute the Christian believers. What a shock it must have been to hear Paul speak in favor of Jesus Christ. Did they have any idea of the impact Paul would have on the Christian church down through the ages from that point until the second coming of Jesus?
17. It is possible that Paul may have been one of those who tried to defeat Stephen in the synagogues of the Freedmen in Jerusalem.

Acts 6:9-10: ⁹But he [Stephen] was opposed by some men who were members of the synagogue of the Freedmen (as it was called), which included Jews from Cyrene [Libya] and Alexandria. They and other Jews from the provinces of **Cilicia** [where Paul was from] and Asia started arguing with Stephen. ¹⁰But the Spirit gave Stephen such wisdom that when he spoke, they could not refute him.—*Good News Bible*. [Content in brackets and bold type are added.]

18. Then it was Paul whose preaching could not be contradicted! The local authorities among the Jews in Damascus got permission from the Roman authorities to arrest Paul and put him to death. Fortunately, the believers heard about their plan and secretly let Paul down from a window in the city wall in a basket so he could escape.
19. From there, he returned to Jerusalem; but, the people in Jerusalem were just as skeptical of him as were the believers in Damascus! Try to imagine yourself traveling with Paul and discussing his situation during travel from Damascus back to Jerusalem. What do you think was going through his mind? He knew what he would find in Jerusalem. No one would believe his story. He had been gone for three years. What did he say to his wife? What did she say to him? Had he tried to communicate with her during his absence? What did those soldiers say about Paul?
20. So, what did happen?

Acts 9:26-31: ²⁶ Saul went to Jerusalem and tried to join the disciples. But they would not believe that he was a disciple, and they were all afraid of him. ²⁷Then Barnabas came to his help and took him to the apostles. He explained to them how Saul had seen the Lord on the road and that the Lord had spoken to him. He also told them how boldly Saul had preached in the name of Jesus in Damascus. ²⁸And so Saul stayed with them and went all over Jerusalem, preaching boldly in the name of the

Lord. ²⁹He also talked and disputed with the Greek-speaking Jews, but they tried to kill him. ³⁰When the believers found out about this, they took Saul to Caesarea and sent him away to Tarsus.

³¹ And so it was that the church throughout Judea, Galilee, and Samaria had a time of peace. Through the help of the Holy Spirit it was strengthened and grew in numbers, as it lived in reverence for the Lord.—*Good News Bible*.* (Act 9:26-31).

21. Once again, we find that Barnabas served a key role in the church in Jerusalem.
22. It was hard for the disciples of Jesus and the other Christian believers in Jerusalem ever to fully accept Paul's commission to spread the gospel to Gentiles. Somehow, they felt that it was at least partly wrong for Paul to so completely leave his commitment to Judaism. Years later, it was the Christian believers in Jerusalem who persuaded Paul to shave his head and go to the temple with four other believers; it was there on the last day of that commitment, that Paul was spotted and arrested, and he spent most of the rest of his life in prison.
23. Read Acts 21:8,16,21. Fortunately for Paul, the Hellenistic believers were much more ready to accept him as a fellow believer.

A general slain in battle is lost to his army, but his death gives no additional strength to the enemy. But when a man of prominence joins the opposing force, not only are his services lost, but those to whom he joins himself gain a decided advantage. Saul of Tarsus, on his way to Damascus, might easily have been struck dead by the Lord, and much strength would have been withdrawn from the persecuting power. But God in His providence not only spared Saul's life, but converted him, thus transferring a champion from the side of the enemy to the side of Christ. An eloquent speaker and a severe critic, Paul, with his stern purpose and undaunted courage, possessed the very qualifications needed in the early church.—Ellen G. White, *The Acts of the Apostles** 124.2.

Christ had commanded his disciples to go and teach all nations; but the previous teachings which they had received from the Jews made it difficult for them to fully comprehend the words of their Master, and therefore they were slow to act upon them. They called themselves the children of Abraham, and regarded themselves as the heirs of divine promise. **It was not until several years after the Lord's ascension that their minds were sufficiently expanded to clearly understand the intent of Christ's words, that they were to labor for the conversion of the Gentiles as well as of the Jews.** Their minds were particularly called out to this part of the work by the Gentiles themselves, many of whom [39] embraced the doctrine of Christ. Soon after the death of Stephen, and the consequent scattering of the believers throughout Palestine, Samaria was greatly stirred. The Samaritans received the believers kindly, and manifested a willingness to hear concerning Jesus, who, in his first public labors, had preached to them with great power.—Ellen G. White, *Sketches From the Life of Paul** 38.2-39.0. [Bold type is added.]

24. Now that we have reviewed the history of Paul at least through his early years and his conversion, why do you think he made the following statement?

Paul described himself as “the least of the apostles” (*1 Cor. 15:9, NKJV*). But no single person was as influential as Paul in taking the good news about Jesus to the world. This “least of the apostles” crossed the most frontiers to spread the gospel, established the most churches, and wrote the most texts in Christian theology.—*Adult Teachers Sabbath School Bible Study Guide** 66.

25. What caused Paul to make such a statement? He remembered what he had done to early converts.

26. Can you think of others who made a great impact on the spread of the gospel who considered themselves of lesser importance? John the Baptist did. (See John 3:30; *Desire of Ages* 220.2; *Review and Herald*, April 8, 1873, par. 15.)

27. And what about Ellen White's comments about herself?

The Lord has sent His people much instruction, line upon line, precept upon precept, here a little, and there a little. Little heed is given to the Bible, and the Lord has given a lesser light to lead men and women to the greater light. Oh, how much good would be accomplished if the books containing this light were read with a determination to carry out the principles they contain! There would be a [126] thousandfold greater vigilance, a thousandfold more self-denial and resolute effort. And many more would now be rejoicing in the light of present truth.—Ellen G. White, *Review and Herald*,* January 20, 1903, par. 9-10; *CM** 125.2-126.1.

28. Should we consider Paul, John the Baptist, and Ellen White as not very important because they described themselves in humble terms?

When Christ revealed Himself to Paul, and he was convinced that he was persecuting Jesus in the person of His saints, he accepted the truth as it is in Jesus. A transforming power was manifested on mind and character, and he became a new man in Christ Jesus. He received the truth so fully that neither earth nor hell could shake his faith.—Ellen G. White, *Selected Messages*,* book 1, 346.3; *2MCP** 539.3.

29. The earliest references we have to Saul/Paul talk about his opposition to Christianity. (Acts 7:58-8:3; 9:1) Ellen White described the experience of Paul as follows.

After the death of Stephen, Saul was elected a member of the Sanhedrin council in consideration of the part he had acted on that occasion. For a time he was a mighty instrument in the hands of Satan to carry out his rebellion against the Son of God. But soon this relentless persecutor was to be employed in building up the church that he was now tearing down. A Mightier than Satan had chosen Saul to take the place of the martyred Stephen, to preach and suffer for His name, and to spread far and wide the tidings of salvation through His blood.—Ellen G. White, *The Acts of the Apostles** 102.1.

30. Gamaliel had Saul/Paul as a student and mentee. It was Gamaliel who had convinced the Sanhedrin not to kill Peter and John. But, we have no evidence that Gamaliel himself accepted the Christian religion. Do you think he will be in heaven?

31. In addition to the accounts in Acts 7-9, we gather additional information about those early years of Paul's conversion in Galatians 1:15-24. Saul/Paul was welcomed to the Christian community by Ananias (Acts 9:17) who went on to baptize Saul. Paul then began to preach convincingly in Damascus about Jesus. But, being the careful student that he was, he left for Arabia to spend some time in meditation, prayer, and reflection on his past experiences. Returning to Damascus, he preached Christ. Finally, he returned to Jerusalem. No one in Jerusalem was quite sure how to relate to Saul/Paul. Finally, Barnabas was convinced and took Paul to the disciples. After only a short time in Jerusalem, the Jews there determined that they should kill Paul. Paul then escaped and returned to Tarsus, his hometown. Fortunately, he was not left there. Barnabas went from Antioch where the church was growing by leaps and bounds and called Paul to join him in the work. From that point on, Paul spent the rest of his life basically being a missionary for the gospel.

32. How has the ministry of Paul affected your life?

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