

The Conversion of Paul Acts 9:1-19a

"3 Now as he went on his way, he approached Damascus, and suddenly a light from heaven shone around him. 4 And falling to the ground, he heard a voice saying to him, "Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?" 5 And he said, "Who are you, Lord?" And he said, "I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting. "

Ice Breakers: Don't forget to start this session with an ice breaker from the back of last week's guide OR online at www.fbcportland.org/icebreakers.

It can be tempting to gloss over a familiar story like the conversion of Saul if you've heard it before. What did you learn from Jacob's sermon today OR did you have questions?

*Have someone in your group read **Acts 9:1-2***

What does 9:1-2 indicate about Saul's attitude toward Christ and toward His followers?

Imagine for a moment that this is the week of Saul's arrival at Damascus. By this time Saul has gained a reputation as the ringleader of the movement to make Christianity extinct. A devout Hellenistic Jew, of the tribe of Benjamin, born in Tarsus of Cilicia, Saul was a member of the Pharisees and was taught by none other than Gamaliel, whom we have already met **[Acts 5:34-40]**.

- *34 But a Pharisee in the council named Gamaliel, a teacher of the law held in honor by all the people, stood up and gave orders to put the men outside for a little while. 35 And he said to them, "Men of Israel, take care what you are about to do with these men. 36 For before these days Theudas rose up, claiming to be somebody, and a number of men, about four hundred, joined him. He was killed, and all who followed him were dispersed and came to nothing. 37 After him Judas the Galilean rose up in the days of the census and drew away some of the people after him. He too perished, and all who followed him were scattered. 38 So in the present case I tell you, keep away from these men and let them alone, for if this plan or this undertaking is of man, it will fail; 39 but if it is of God, you will not be able to overthrow them. You might even be found opposing God!" So they took his advice, 40 and when they had called in the apostles, they beat them and charged them not to speak in the name of Jesus, and let them go.*

Acts 22:3

- 3 *"I am a Jew, born in Tarsus in Cilicia, but brought up in this city, educated at the feet of Gamaliel according to the strict manner of the law of our fathers, being zealous for God as all of you are this day.*

Saul did not agree with his teacher, Gamaliel, on how the Christians should be dealt with, however. Rather, he sought the arrest, trial, conviction, and punishment [with imprisonment the norm and death the ideal, it would seem] of those in Jerusalem. His career as a persecutor of Christians seems to have begun with Stephen, but it quickly spread to all of the Christians in Jerusalem [Acts 7:58–8:3].

Acts 22:4–5a

- 4 I persecuted this Way to the death, binding and delivering to prison both men and women, 5 as the high priest and the whole council of elders can bear me witness.

Saul was not content to punish some and to drive the rest from the "holy city." He did not want to merely contain Christianity or to drive it from Jerusalem; he wanted to rid the earth of Christianity and its followers. Thus, his opposition to Christ and His church took on a "missionary" spirit. Saul went to other cities where he sought to arrest Christians and to bring them back to Jerusalem for punishment. Damascus, a city some 150 miles to the northeast of Jerusalem, was one such city. Word was out that Saul would soon be arriving.

Acts 9:1–2

- *But Saul, still breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord, went to the high priest 2 and asked him for letters to the synagogues at Damascus, so that if he found any belonging to the Way, men or women, he might bring them bound to Jerusalem.*

Acts 22:5b

- *From them I received letters to the brothers, and I journeyed toward Damascus to take those also who were there and bring them in bonds to Jerusalem to be punished.*

Suppose you were a Christian who had just arrived in Damascus, and you had been able to learn the whereabouts of a group of believers. Let us suppose further that the church had gathered on this particular evening for a time of prayer, prompted by the news that Saul was soon to arrive, with all the necessary legal machinery [that is, the authorization of the chief priests and the Sanhedrin] to arrest and extradite the saints who were in the city.

What do you suppose the saints would have prayed at this special prayer meeting?

- I very much doubt anyone prayed that this Saul might be saved. I can believe someone might have prayed that Saul be waylaid, or “terminated,” in some divine act or providential accident [*“act of God”*].
- I can believe the saints who gathered to pray would have prayed for the protection of the church in Damascus and for the safety of individual saints, especially the leaders and the most visible Christians.
- No one, it would seem, was even thinking of what God was about to do.

Do you think there would have been another group in Damascus? A group opposed to “the Way”?

- **What would they be doing on a night like this?**

There would likely be another group of people meeting on the evening before Saul arrived in Damascus—those who did not believe in Jesus as their Messiah, and who eagerly sought the eradication of the church in their city.

Were these people as eager as Saul to destroy the church? Did they send for Saul? Or did they somewhat dread his arrival, knowing how zealous he was in his opposition to the church.

If he were viewed as a reactionary, a trouble-maker, perhaps there were some unbelievers who thought Saul was too much trouble. Nevertheless, there must have been those who intended to use Saul’s coming to oppose the church. They may have been attempting to compile a list of known [*and even suspected*] Christians, along with addresses, to facilitate Saul’s task.

We don’t know...we can only speculate - but here is what we do know. If there were multiple groups meeting - we can safely say that whatever these groups EXPECTED to happen - didn’t.

What can this account of Paul’s conversion tell us about the ways of God versus the ways of man?

Have someone in your group read **Acts 9:3-9 & Acts 26:12-18**

Describe Saul’s conversion in your own words. What stands out to you about Saul’s experience?

Jesus accuses Saul twice of persecuting Him [9:4 and 9:5].

- **Do you think Saul thought he was persecuting Jesus? Why or why not?**
- **In what ways is the church today more like a “Saul”?**

Have someone in your group read **Acts 9:10–19a**

What is the role of Ananias in this story? Why was Ananias hesitant?

This Text describes the two complementary divine visions which Ananias and Saul received.

- Saul's vision prepared him for the arrival of Ananias, clearly indicating that he was the one God had appointed to reveal His will for him.
- Ananias's vision was intended to direct him to the house of Judas and to Saul.

I think it is interesting in that Luke uses more space describing how Ananias was convinced than there is to the conversion of Saul.

It is difficult to estimate the amount of resistance Ananias would have had to this divine instruction to receive Saul as a brother in the Lord.

- Perhaps Ananias called a meeting of the church to discuss how they would deal with Saul's arrival.
- Maybe he's the one that organized the church and the possible prayer meeting prior to Saul's arrival.
- He was a man of great respect and influence, and thus he realized that his actions would have broad ramifications.

So, what do you think the ultimate issue is for Ananias & the Church?

- *The ultimate issue was God's ability to save—even the most committed unbeliever.*

How humorous it seems to hear Ananias informing the Lord that Saul was an enemy, one who had caused many Christians great suffering and adversity, as though He was unaware of this!

What stands out to you about this section of Scripture that would have been difficult for Ananias?

Rather than attempt to pacify Ananias or to alleviate his apprehension, God went on to tell him that Saul would not only be a brother, but he would be His instrument for bringing the **gospel to Gentiles too**.

Now this would have been a very bitter pill to swallow for many Jewish Christians. Nevertheless, Ananias obeyed.

Paul knew his life changed forever the day he was converted on the Damascus Road. Not only did his mission change, but his entire perspective changed.

Spend some time looking at **Philippians 3:1–11**.

- **What was Paul's perspective on life in his years as a Christian?**