



FOCUS VERSE

Acts 9:6

And he trembling and astonished said, Lord, what wilt thou have me to do? And the Lord said unto him, Arise, and go into the city, and it shall be told thee what thou must do.

LESSON TEXT

Acts 9:1–9

1 And Saul, yet breathing out threatenings and slaughter against the disciples of the Lord, went unto the high priest,

2 And desired of him letters to Damascus to the synagogues, that if he found any of this way, whether they were men or women, he might bring them bound unto Jerusalem.

3 And as he journeyed, he came near Damascus: and suddenly there shined round about him a light from heaven:

4 And he fell to the earth, and heard a voice saying unto him, Saul, Saul, why persecutest thou me?

5 And he said, Who art thou, Lord? And the Lord said, I am Jesus whom thou persecutest: it is hard for thee to kick against the pricks.

6 And he trembling and astonished said, Lord, what wilt thou have me to do? And the Lord said unto him, Arise, and go into the city, and it shall be told thee what thou must do.

7 And the men which journeyed with him stood speechless, hearing a voice, but seeing no man.

8 And Saul arose from the earth; and when his eyes were opened, he saw no man: but they led him by the hand, and brought him into Damascus.

9 And he was three days without sight, and neither did eat nor drink.



FOCUS THOUGHT

A miraculous encounter with God can alter a person's life.



CULTURE CONNECTION

Moments That Changed Us Forever

If we had to choose one event from our lives that has impacted us the most, what would it be? For some, it would be the birth of their first child. Mothers and fathers will remember that moment as if it were frozen in time. Holding that newborn for the first time is definitely life changing.

Others may sadly point to the other end of life's timeline. They remember the moment they buried their lifelong spouse as the event that changed them, never to be the same again. Standing at the graveside, grasping for answers, will surely change a person forever.

There are certainly defining moments for all of us. We have probably been in conversations when someone asked, "Where were you when . . . ?" We all remember where we

were when the space shuttle *Challenger* exploded in the sky. We remember where we were when we received reports of the World Trade Center towers being attacked by rogue planes.

In November 2013, on the fiftieth anniversary of the assassination of President John F. Kennedy, *Time* magazine proclaimed that his death was "the moment that changed America" (time.com/3889533/25-moments-changed-america/), accessed September 2016).

But in light of eternity and the most important things in life, we can say with certainty, the moment that forever changed our lives and destiny was when the Holy Ghost came to live inside us. Focusing on that moment gives us perspective and hope, no matter what we face in this life.

OUTLINE

I. SAUL AGAINST CHRIST

- A. Was Devout in His Beliefs
- B. Consented to Stephen's Death
- C. Journeyed to Damascus

II. SAUL MET JESUS

- A. Planned to Persecute Christians
- B. Encountered Bright Light
- C. Lord, Who Are You
- D. What Should I Do

III. THE CHANGE TO TRUTH

- A. Saul Preached in Damascus
- B. Saul Spent Rest of His Life for Christ
- C. God Can Change Any Life

CONTEMPLATING THE TOPIC

Saul was used to dragging men and women off to prison in Jerusalem (Acts 8:3). But when he asked the high priest for letters authorizing him to do the same in Damascus, he did not know his life would be instantly, radically, and permanently changed before he reached the end of his 135-mile trip. He

did not know he was about to become one of those he had threatened with murder.

How is it that one's life can be transformed in a moment? Can a light and a few words really cause a strong-willed, devout, and convinced person to abandon everything he believes and begin marching to the beat of a completely different drum?

There may be no better-known conversion story in the history of Christianity than Paul's. But multiplied millions—perhaps billions—of people around the world have their own stories of drastic transformation in response to their encounters with Jesus Christ. For some, like Paul, it involved some cosmic interruption as they were going about the normal pursuits of life. Others testify to hearing an audible voice calling their names. Still others were suddenly seized by the conviction that they were on the wrong path, going to do the wrong thing.

However it happens, every testimony confirms that Christ is risen and He is still confronting people today, not only with rebuke but also with the promise of a new life in Him.

SEARCHING THE SCRIPTURES

The story of Saul's conversion is found three times in the Book of Acts. The first recounts the event in Luke's words (Acts 9:1–9). In the second account, Paul explained his transformation to a Jerusalem mob (Acts 22:1–11). The third account rehearses Paul telling his story before King Agrippa (Acts 26:12–18).

I. SAUL AGAINST CHRIST

Saul, also known as Paul, appears for the first time in Acts 7:58. Those involved in the stoning death of Stephen "laid down their clothes at a young man's feet, whose name was Saul."

A. Was Devout in His Beliefs

As Paul spoke to the Jerusalem mob, he explained his previous commitment to Judaism.

"I am verily a man which am a Jew, born in Tarsus, a city in Cilicia, yet brought up in this city at the feet of Gamaliel, and taught according to the perfect manner of the law of the fathers, and was zealous toward God, as ye all are this day. And I persecuted this way unto the death, binding and delivering into prisons both men and women" (Acts 22:3–4).

Gamaliel, a Pharisee and member of the Sanhedrin, was a respected doctor of the law. He advised his fellow council members not to harm the apostles. Instead, he said, "Refrain from these men, and let them alone: for if this counsel or this work be of men, it will come to nought: but if it be of God, ye cannot overthrow it; lest haply ye be found even to fight against God" (Acts 5:38–39).

It is apparent that Paul did not heed his teacher's advice. Rather than leaving the believers alone, he persecuted them to the point of death. It is not unusual for students to become more radical than their teachers in their views. Paul was at least a second-generation Pharisee (Acts 23:6). He was determined to perpetuate his religious heritage. In order to do this, he believed it was necessary to do everything possible to defeat this new upstart movement, the followers of the Way.

"I verily thought with myself, that I ought to do many things contrary to the name of Jesus of Nazareth. Which thing I also did in Jerusalem: and many of the saints did I shut up in prison, having received authority from the chief priests; and when they were put to death, I gave my voice against them. And I punished them oft in every synagogue, and compelled them to blaspheme; and being exceedingly mad against them, I persecuted them even unto strange cities" (Acts 26:9–11).

The Greek text behind the translation "exceedingly mad" indicates "to be so furiously angry with someone as to be almost out of one's mind" (Louw-Nida, *Greek-English Lexicon of the NT*).

Saul was a most unlikely first-century candidate for conversion to the Christian faith. He wrote that he "profited in the Jews' religion above many my equals in mine own nation, being more exceedingly zealous of the traditions of my fathers" (Galatians 1:14). To describe his pedigree, Paul wrote:

"Circumcised the eighth day, of the stock of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, an Hebrew of the Hebrews; as touching the law, a Pharisee; concerning zeal, persecuting the church; touching the righteousness which is in the law, blameless" (Philippians 3:5–6).

Paul was not merely circumcised; he was circumcised precisely on the right day (Leviticus 12:3). An Israelite, he could identify his tribe. The phrase "Hebrew of the Hebrews" means he was a top Hebrew. Pharisees are traced back to the second century BC, and it is impossible to paint them all with the same brush. In the New Testament, however, they are generally portrayed negatively in opposition to Jesus. (See Matthew 5:20.) Paul said he was a Pharisee "as touching the law." Pharisees were strict observers of the law of Moses as they interpreted it. Before Agrippa, Paul said, "After the most straitest sect of our religion I lived a Pharisee" (Acts 26:5).

B. Consented to Stephen's Death

The reason Saul allowed the witnesses to Stephen's stoning to lay their clothes at his feet is that he approved of Stephen's death (Acts 7:58; 8:1). When he returned to Jerusalem after his conversion, Paul fell into a trance while praying in the Temple (Acts 22:17). He saw the Lord saying to him, "Make haste, and get thee quickly out of Jerusalem: for they will not receive thy testimony concerning me" (Acts 22:18). Paul's memory of his behavior in Jerusalem before his conversion was keen.

"Lord, they know that I imprisoned and beat in every synagogue them that believed on thee: and when the blood of thy martyr Stephen was shed, I also was standing by, and consenting unto his death, and kept the raiment of them that slew him" (Acts 22:19–20).

Though he was a new man, Paul would never forget his life before his Damascus road experience. Now, however, he was preaching the same message for which Stephen was stoned.

C. Journeyed to Damascus

Damascus, northeast of Jerusalem and about sixty miles east of the Mediterranean Sea, is "one of the oldest continuously inhabited sites known to archaeologists [and] figured long and often in biblical awareness" (*Harper's Bible Dictionary*). For King David, Damascus was a place of military victory (II Samuel 8:5–6). The Pharisee Saul planned for the city to become a place of defeat for those who followed the Son of David, the Messiah, Jesus Christ.

II. SAUL MET JESUS

A. Planned to Persecute Christians

Saul had one thing on his mind as he began his six-day trek to Damascus. He planned to continue his persecution of those who believed on Jesus, and he carried documents from the high priest in Jerusalem authorizing him to do so. These documents were addressed to the synagogues in Damascus. According to the first-century Jewish historian Josephus, thousands of Jews lived in Damascus.

B. Encountered Bright Light

Saul must have been on the sixth day of his journey, nearing Damascus, when a brilliant light from Heaven shined around him. He was temporarily blinded by this light, which he later described as seeing Jesus.

"Am I not an apostle? am I not free? have I not seen Jesus Christ our Lord?" (I Corinthians 9:1).

"And last of all he was seen of me also, as of one born out of due time" (I Corinthians 15:8).

In a vision, the Lord visited Ananias, a disciple who lived in Damascus. As a result, Ananias affirmed that the Lord Jesus had appeared to Saul on his way to Damascus (Acts 9:10, 17).

After Saul's conversion, Barnabas confirmed that Saul had seen Jesus.

"But Barnabas took him, and brought him to the apostles, and declared unto them how he had seen the Lord in the way, and that he had spoken to him, and how he had preached boldly at Damascus in the name of Jesus" (Acts 9:27).

Perhaps we could compare Saul's experience to that of Moses. The angel of the Lord appeared to Moses in a flame of fire out of the burning bush. When Moses turned aside to see why the bush was not consumed, the Lord called to him, "Moses, Moses." He answered, "Here am I" (Exodus 3:4). When Saul fell to the earth bathed in the heavenly light, he heard a voice saying, "Saul, Saul, why persecutest thou me?" (Acts 9:4). The same Lord who called Moses' name called the name of Saul. Moses became the deliverer of the Israelites. Saul was transformed into "a chosen vessel" to bear the delivering name of Jesus to Gentiles, kings, and the children of Israel (Acts 9:15).

C. Lord, Who Are You?

To continue our comparison of Moses and Saul, we notice that Moses inquired about God's name.

“And Moses said unto God, Behold, when I come unto the children of Israel, and shall say unto them, The God of your fathers hath sent me unto you; and they shall say to me, What is his name? what shall I say unto them? And God said unto Moses, I AM THAT I AM: and he said, Thus shalt thou say unto the children of Israel, I AM hath sent me unto you” (Exodus 3:13–14).

When Saul heard the voice of the Lord, he asked, “Who art thou, Lord? And the Lord said, I am Jesus whom thou persecutest: it is hard for thee to kick against the pricks” (Acts 9:5). After his vision, Ananias confirmed that the Lord who spoke to Saul was Jesus (Acts 9:17).

The name *Jesus*, transliterated from the Greek *Iêsous*, which is transliterated from the Hebrew *Yeshua*, includes the abbreviated name for Jehovah in its first two letters. The second syllable, *sus*, is transliterated from the Hebrew *yasha*, which means *salvation*. Thus, the name *Jesus*, when translated, means *Jehovah-Savior*, or *Jehovah will save*. Further translated, it means *He is Savior*. It is for this reason Gabriel said to Joseph, “Thou shalt call his name JESUS: for he shall save his people from their sins” (Matthew 1:21).

When Saul asked for the name of the Lord, the Lord said, “I am Jesus” (Acts 9:5). Since the name of the God who spoke to Moses in the burning bush appears as an inseparable part of the name of the Lord who spoke to Saul, we know they are one and the same. Others have been named Jesus, but the Lord Jesus is the only one to receive the name by divine appointment. Biblical name theology means divinely given names identify those who bear them. They are not mere labels.

D. What Should I Do?

After learning the voice he heard belonged to Jesus, Saul asked, “Lord, what wilt thou have me to do?” (Acts 9:6). Saul recognized at this moment that his zeal had been misguided. He thought he was performing the Lord’s service in seeking to eradicate the community of believers, but now he trembled with astonishment.

The first account of Saul’s conversion reports that “the Lord said unto him, Arise, and go into the city, and it shall be told thee what thou must do” (Acts 9:6). A third and more extended account appears in Acts 26:16–18:

“But rise, and stand upon thy feet: for I have appeared unto thee for this purpose, to make thee a minister and a witness both of these things which thou hast seen, and of those things in the which I will appear unto thee; delivering thee from the people, and from the Gentiles, unto whom now I send thee, to open their eyes, and to turn them from darkness to light, and from the power of Satan unto God, that they may receive forgiveness of sins, and inheritance among them which are sanctified by faith that is in me.”

Saul’s Damascus-road experience did not complete his conversion. Ananias was an instrument in God’s hand to further explain to Saul the nature of his mission and what he needed to do to prepare for that mission. The first account of Saul’s conversion records these words of Ananias:

“Brother Saul, the Lord, even Jesus, that appeared unto thee in the way as thou camest, hath sent me, that thou mightiest receive thy sight, and be filled with the Holy Ghost” (Acts 9:17).

The second account declares Saul’s need to be baptized.

“And now why tarriest thou? arise, and be baptized, and wash away thy sins, calling on the name of the Lord” (Acts 22:16).

III. THE CHANGE TO TRUTH

A. Saul Preached in Damascus

From the moment of his visit from Ananias, the newly born again Saul committed his life without reservation to the proclamation of the gospel he had once hated. For a time he stayed with some of the disciples in Damascus

(Acts 9:19). Before his encounter with Jesus, Saul would have taken these people to Jerusalem for imprisonment and perhaps death.

“And straightway he preached Christ in the synagogues, that he is the Son of God. But all that heard him were amazed, and said; Is not this he that destroyed them which called on this name in Jerusalem, and came hither for that intent, that he might bring them bound unto the chief priests? But Saul increased the more in strength, and confounded the Jews which dwelt at Damascus, proving that this is very Christ” (Acts 9:20–22).

After Saul preached many days in Damascus, unbelieving Jews crafted a plan to kill him. They planned to ambush him at the city’s gates, but Saul learned of their plan and escaped as other believers let him down the wall in a basket during the night to return to Jerusalem. (See Acts 9:23–25; II Corinthians 11:32–33.)

B. Saul Spent the Rest of His Life for Christ

There is some uncertainty as to the precise chronology of Saul’s movements after his conversion. We know he stayed with believers in Damascus for a while and that he preached in Damascus. But Galatians 1:15–18 includes additional information:

“But when it pleased God, who separated me from my mother’s womb, and called me by his grace, to reveal his Son in me, that I might preach him among the heathen; immediately I conferred not with flesh and blood: Neither went I up to Jerusalem to them which were apostles before me; but I went into Arabia, and returned again unto Damascus. Then after three years I went up to Jerusalem to see Peter, and abode with him fifteen days. . . . Afterwards I came into the regions of Syria and Cilicia; and was unknown by face unto the churches of Judaea which were in Christ: But they had heard

only, That he which persecuted us in times past now preacheth the faith which once he destroyed. And they glorified God in me. Then fourteen years after I went up again to Jerusalem with Barnabas, and took Titus with me also” (Galatians 1:15–18, 21–24).

Wherever Paul went, he preached the gospel of Christ fully.

“For I will not dare to speak of any of those things which Christ hath not wrought by me, to make the Gentiles obedient, by word and deed. Through mighty signs and wonders, by the power of the Spirit of God; so that from Jerusalem, and round about unto Illyricum, I have fully preached the gospel of Christ” (Romans 15:18–19).

Illyricum was about eight hundred miles as the crow flies from Jerusalem. This was apparently the farthest reach of Paul’s ministry until his journey to Rome.

We are not certain about the time and circumstances of the end of Paul’s life. We do know, however, he was certain he had done what Jesus had commissioned him to do. He who had violently fought Jesus and those who believed on Him died at peace with Him.

“For I am now ready to be offered, and the time of my departure is at hand. I have fought a good fight, I have finished my course, I have kept the faith: henceforth there is laid up for me a crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous judge, shall give me at that day: and not to me only, but unto all them also that love his appearing” (II Timothy 4:6–8).

C. God Can Change Any Life

There is no one whose life cannot be changed as radically and permanently as Paul’s. We know this because Scripture testifies to the universal availability of salvation.

“For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that

INTERNALIZING THE MESSAGE

whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life. For God sent not his Son into the world to condemn the world; but that the world through him might be saved” (John 3:16–17).

“The Lord is . . . not willing that any should perish, but that all should come to repentance” (II Peter 3:9).

“And he is the propitiation for our sins: and not for ours only, but also for the sins of the whole world” (I John 2:2).

These inspired statements of Scripture must be taken at face value. The term *the world* includes all people. None are excluded. The word *whosoever* indicates that salvation is available for anyone. Since God wants all people to repent, all can. The word *propitiation* refers to “the satisfaction of God’s righteous judgment.” There is no sin in the entire world that lies outside the realm of this satisfaction.

To say there is anyone who cannot be saved is to say the work of Christ on His cross was insufficient to atone for the sins of the world. This notion runs counter to the teaching of Scripture. (See II Corinthians 5:21; I John 1:9; Romans 3:23–26; Romans 6:23.)

Satan does not want any of us to believe our lives can be transformed and we can be changed. He will tell us whatever lie he thinks will work to accomplish his purpose. When those who have believed on Jesus and obeyed the gospel struggle with uncertainty about their salvation, it is probably due to Satan’s attempt to deceive them.

“And the Lord said, Simon, Simon, behold, Satan hath desired to have you, that he may sift you as wheat: but I have prayed for thee, that thy faith fail not: and when thou art converted, strengthen thy brethren” (Luke 22:31–32).

“And the great dragon was cast out, that serpent of old, called the Devil, and Satan, which deceiveth the whole world: he was cast out into the earth, and his angels were cast out with him” (Revelation 12:9).

The name *Satan* is transliterated from the Hebrew language. It means “adversary.” True to the meaning of his name, Satan attempts to take advantage of us. (See II Corinthians 2:11.) We can be sure, however, that if a person like Saul of Tarsus could be saved, so can we. His story can be the story of anyone willing to respond to God’s voice in faithful obedience. Whatever road we are on, it can lead to the transformation of our lives, just as Saul’s Damascus road led to his. ■

REFLECTIONS

- Do you see any advance clue in Saul’s story that his life was about to change? If not, what does that tell you about people you know who are not now living for God?
- Have you ever wondered whether you are truly saved? If so, it may be helpful to meditate on the Scriptures listed above under “God Can Change Any Life.”
- Can you think of any conversion stories involving people you know whose transformation was so radical it could be compared to Saul’s? If so, share them with a friend.
- What about a “quiet” conversion? Do you know anyone whose conversion experience may not have been as dramatic as Saul’s but whose life was transformed nevertheless?
- Why do you think the conversion of some people is quiet while for others it may involve phenomena like heavenly lights and voices?
- As you look back over your life since conversion, can you see specific changes that are remarkable in retrospect?