

Saul to Paul
Acts 9:1 -19
Week 12**Opening Prayer**

Ask if anyone would like to open in prayer. They can pray on their own or use the prayer printed below. It also might be a good idea to reach out to a group member prior to your meeting and ask them ahead of time if they'd be willing to open in prayer. That's a great way to encourage participation without putting anyone on the spot.

Gracious God, as we come together to place our lives in front of your Holy Word, we pray that you would give us wisdom and understanding. May we approach this sacred text with humility, curiosity, expectancy and love. Be among us and in our conversation through the power of your Holy Spirit. We pray in the name of the one to whom this whole story points, Jesus the Christ, amen.

Depending on time constraints you may want to take a bit of extra time to check in with folks and see how they're doing. You could also wait and do this at the end of the session before closing in prayer.

Check-in question

Each week, give an opportunity for folks to either respond to the check-in question below or, if they'd rather, share something that came up for them as they were reading the other texts assigned for the Big Read this week.

Both Saul and Ananias received unexpected calls in today's scripture, but Ananias had the tools he needed and knew what he had to do once the Lord told him about Saul's conversion. Similarly, Saul/Paul's experience as a "pharisee among pharisees" uniquely equipped him for his ministry among the people of Israel.

Can you think of a time where God prepared you ahead of time for a situation that you had no idea was coming your way?

Background

This is clearly an important story as it is told twice more in Paul's speech before the crowd in Jerusalem in Acts 22:3-16 and again in his testimony before Agrippa and Festus in Acts 26:4-18.¹

¹ Marshall, Howard. *The Tyndale New Testament Commentaries: Acts*. Eerdmans Publishing Company: Grand Rapids, MI. 1980.

In Acts 9, we pick up the story of Saul, who was briefly introduced at the end of chapter 7, where Stephen was martyred. He was one of the great opponents of the gospel, who traveled around threatening the believers and seeking to have them imprisoned. This passage is the dramatic account of his conversion to faith. Later known as Paul, he became one of Christianity's first missionaries and its chief apologist, writing 13 New Testament books. God, in His amazing grace, loved him, opened his heart to believe, and forgave him. In verse 3, Paul is on his way to Damascus to arrest any Christians he can find. On the way he meets Jesus, in all His blinding glory. Jesus asks him, "Why do you persecute Me?" Jesus took as an affront to Himself all the grief that was done to His followers. He suffered when they were hurt. Paul never answers the question, but immediately obeys Jesus' command to go into the city.

Meanwhile, a Christian named Ananias has a vision from God in which he is told to go meet Saul. He knows who Saul is and what his errand is, and so is afraid to go. But God assures him that He, too, knows all about Saul, and has a plan for his life that no one would ever expect. Believing God, Ananias ignores the risk, and goes to meet with Saul. He greets him as, "Brother Saul," identifying him as a believer, and restores his sight. Then Saul, signifying his new faith in Christ, is baptized. As if that wasn't extraordinary enough, in verse 20, Saul begins to preach the gospel. The Jewish leaders are astonished, baffled, and angered. It's absolutely inconceivable to them that Saul could turn like this, and they try several times to kill him, but fail. Undeterred, Saul continues to preach, and debate, proving that Jesus is the Christ. The bulk of the remainder of Acts is the record of Saul taking the gospel throughout the known world. Later in his life he wrote I Timothy, saying: I thank Christ Jesus our Lord, who has given me strength, that He considered me faithful, appointing me to His service. Even though I was once a blasphemer and a persecutor and a violent man, I was shown mercy because I acted in ignorance and unbelief. The grace of our Lord was poured out on me abundantly, along with the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus.

Tarsus

Tarsus was a large, prosperous commercial city located in the Roman province of Cilicia about ten miles inland from the Mediterranean Sea. The Worldwide traffic flowing through Tarsus carried, along with its goods, a steady stream of diverse peoples, philosophies, religions, and mystery cults. In particular, Tarsus was renowned for its intellectual life, second only to Athens as a center for the study of Stoic philosophy with an emphasis on duty, patriotism, reason, and honesty. Indeed, the founder of stoicism, Zeno, was a resident of Tarsus in the 4th c. BC.

Jews who lived outside of Palestine were in a situation that encouraged a certain amount of accommodation with the wider Hellenistic culture. Everyday life, buying and selling in the market, maintaining good relations with one's neighbors, would encourage a modicum of goodwill between Jews and non-Jews in the community.

Growing Up

Saul had been reared in the Jewish home of parents who had been Roman citizens. The Judaism that Saul experienced would have had a distinctly Hellenistic coloring. The everyday

language of his parents was Greek and the text of scripture commonly used for study and worship in synagogue was a Greek translation of the Hebrew scriptures known as the Septuagint.

During his teenage years Saul was sent by his parents to Jerusalem to study with the rabbis of that great center of Jewish life. According to Luke (though Paul himself never makes this claim), Saul became a disciple of the Pharisaic teacher Gamaliel, one of the most respected and influential scholars of his day. Paul does claim, "I advanced in Judaism beyond many among my people of the same age, for I was far more zealous for the traditions of my ancestors" (Galatians 1:14). It sounds as if the young man Saul possessed the zeal of one who was a convert from the relaxed religion of his parents to the demanding life of a rabbinic scholar.²

Meeting Jesus

Right at noon, when the sun is the brightest and the hottest, Saul sees a dazzling light and is enveloped in it. He is not able to remain on his feet but falls on the ground. Then he hears a voice which addresses him by name, "Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?"

The One who is speaking to Saul out of the light identifies Himself with those whom he is persecuting! Therefore, the important question is: Who are you, Lord?

The answer comes immediately, "*I am Jesus whom you are persecuting.*"

He is not dead! He is not the heretic Saul thought Him to be. Saul wanted to erase the name of Jesus from the consciousness of Israel as well as those who followed Him. And now, here the Lord Jesus is speaking to him from heaven.

Notice how Jesus is in complete control, as He always is. He tells Saul to go into the city of Damascus and where he will receive further instructions. Saul has intended to enter the city triumphantly and drive fear into the hearts of all those who follow Jesus of Nazareth. Now he is going to be led into the city while someone else holds his hand, because he has been stricken blind. What a difference! What a change!

Those who were with him heard the voice, but they saw no one — Saul didn't either. There has always been much speculation on just what took place. Why did it affect Saul differently from the men who were with him? We must stick to that which Luke tells us. When Saul gets up he is blind — helpless! They take him into the city of Damascus and the Lord lets him sit there stark blind for three days. In all that time Saul neither ate nor drank.³

NT Wright has this to say about Saul's call and conversion,

"It confirmed everything Saul had been taught; it overturned everything he had been taught. The law and the prophets had come true; the law and the prophets had been

² Walaskay, Paul W. *Westminster Bible Companion: Acts*. Westminster John Knox Press: Louisville, KY. 1998.

³ Vanderkam, Henry. *The Conversion of Saul*. Christian Library, 1986.

<https://www.christianstudylibrary.org/article/acts-91-19-conversion-saul>

torn to pieces and put back together in a totally new way. It was a new world; it was the old world made explicit. It showed him that the God he had loved from childhood, the God for whose glory he had been so righteously indignant, the God in whose name and for whose honor he was busy rounding up those who were declaring that Jesus of Nazareth was Israel's Messiah, that he was risen from the dead, that he was the Lord of the world (this Jesus who had led Israel astray with his magic tricks and false prophecy about the Temple, this Jesus who the Romans had, thankfully, crucified, to make it clear that whoever was God's Messiah it certainly couldn't be him!) – it showed him that the God he had been right to serve, right to study, right to seek in prayer, the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, had done what he always said he would, but done it in a shocking, scandalous, horrifying way. The God who had always promised to come and rescue his people had done so in person. In the person of Jesus.”⁴

Ananias

Now the Lord is setting things in motion to relieve Saul of his blindness and to prepare him for his future work. God speaks to Ananias, of whom nothing else is known. This man is a believer in Jesus Christ, and he at once responds to the call of his Lord whose orders are: You go to a certain street, to a certain house, and ask for a man named Saul! Do not be afraid because *he is praying*.

This mandate astounds Ananias. He is always ready to carry out the orders which he receives from his Lord, but this is asking the virtually impossible! This man is too dangerous. Saul's notoriety has preceded him. The believers in Damascus know all about this ruthless man who is coming to arrest them. The attitude of Ananias is understandable.

But orders are orders! The Lord says to Ananias: Go! This man is my chosen instrument to carry my name before the Gentiles and their kings and before the people of Israel.

The Apostles are still at Jerusalem. Peter and John returned there after they had been with Philip in Samaria. *This man* will bear Christ's name before the Gentiles and before the kings of the earth and before all of Israel. This man will have a tremendous task to do. Although he does not yet know it, the Lord has already determined that that will be his life's task. He will show Saul how much he will have to suffer for Christ's name. He will indeed carry the Gospel to the Gentiles. This man's name will be the most important in the rest of the New Testament history!⁵

Read Acts 9:1-19

Initial Reactions

⁴ Wright, NT. *Acts for Everyone: Part 1*. Westminster John Knox Press: Louisville, KY. 2008.

⁵ Vanderkam, Henry. *The Conversion of Saul*. Christian Library, 1986.

<https://www.christianstudylibrary.org/article/acts-91-19-conversion-saul>

1. What from this passage confuses, inspires, or resonates with you? What questions or curiosities do you have about this passage?
2. What does this passage tell us about God? What does this story tell us about humanity?
3. Were there any images, stories or insights that stuck out to you from Sunday's sermon?

Going Deeper

1. Why does Saul view Christians as a threat? Why do you think they are called "The Way"?
2. What is the first question Jesus asks Saul? Why did He phrase His question this way?
3. With whom do you identify more in this study, Ananias or Paul? Why?
4. What does Paul's neither eating nor drinking indicate? How do you think this incident changed his prayer life? What kinds of thoughts and feeling do you think he was experiencing during the three days mentioned in verse 9?
5. What do you make of Ananias calling Saul "brother"?

So What Questions

6. For the rest of Saul's life, his walk as a Jesus follower was not going to be easy (9:16). What do we know about Saul's (Paul's) sufferings (consider, for example, 2 Corinthians 11:24-33)? How do Paul's life and ministry counter the modern Western presumption that Jesus simply wants His followers to have an easy, problem-free life?
7. The Lord specifically prepared Ananias to care for Saul even though Ananias was hesitant. What does this say about how God might intentionally put His followers in uncomfortable situations to serve others? Do you have a personal example of this?
8. One of the most compelling witnesses to Jesus' Lordship is a transformed life. Paul's conversion proved that Jesus was the Messiah. Where do you see transformation in your life that would fill others with wonder? What areas of your life do you still need to lay before Jesus and trust in his power for transformation?

Closing

Check in if you haven't already done so and ask for any prayer requests. Encourage group members to write down these requests and follow up as necessary. Close with prayer.