

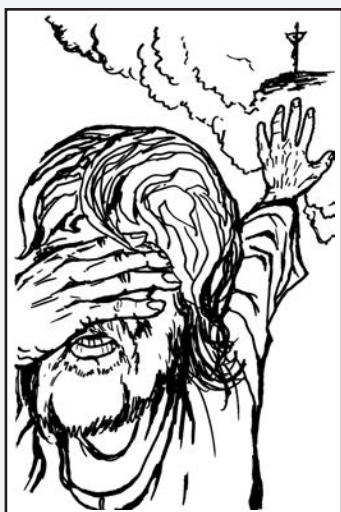
Paul: Preacher to the Non-Jewish Nations



SABBATH—JUNE 24

READ FOR THIS WEEK'S LESSON: Acts 6:9–15; Acts 9:1–9; 1 Samuel 16:7; Matthew 7:1; Acts 11:19–21; Acts 15:1–5.

MEMORY VERSE: “When they heard this, they [did not] object anymore. They praised God. They said, ‘So then, God has allowed even those who [are not] Jews to turn away from their sins and live’ ” (Acts 11:18, NIV).



The idea of a Messiah who was put to death was just too much for Paul to accept.

SAUL OF TARSUS was a very strict Jew. All his life he was taught how important the law was. He also was taught to hope in the coming Messiah. The Messiah was the One chosen by God to save Israel from sin. But the Jews believed the Messiah would free them from their political enemies instead. The Jews waited so long for the Messiah to come. And when He did, He was put to death as the worst of criminals. But the idea of a Messiah who was put to death was just too much for Saul to accept.

Saul believed that the teachings of Jesus' death on a cross and His return from the dead were terrible lies. And anyone who believed these lies should be punished. So Saul made up his mind to rid Israel of these beliefs. In fact, one of the first times we see Saul in the Bible, he is persecuting Jews who believed in Jesus.

But God had far different plans for Saul of Tarsus. Saul never imagined in his wildest dreams that one day he would preach that Jesus was the Messiah. And Saul would even preach this truth among those who were not Jews!

SAUL OF TARSUS ATTACKS CHRISTIANS (Acts 8:1–5)

We first meet Saul of Tarsus in the book of Acts. Saul takes part in the death of Stephen (Acts 7:58). Stephen is put to death by stoning. Stoning means to kill a person by throwing stones at him or her. The next time we meet Saul is in Acts 8:1–5. Here he takes part in putting Christians in Jerusalem to death.

Stephen's preaching and his death for the cause of Christ affect Saul of Tarsus deeply. Stephen was a Jew who spoke Greek. He was also one of the seven deacons first chosen to serve in the Christian church (Acts 6:3–6). The book of Acts tells a story about Stephen and a group of Greek-speaking Jews. These Jews came to live in Jerusalem. There they quarreled with Stephen over his preaching about Jesus. It is very possible that Saul of Tarsus took part in these debates.

Read Acts 6:9–15. What is Stephen accused of? What do the lies said against him remind you of? (Read Matthew 26:59–61 for the answer.)

Stephen angered the Jews. Their hatred against his preaching seems to be because of two things. First, the Jews felt Stephen did not place enough importance on the Jewish law and the temple. Both were at the heart of Jewish worship. They were symbols of what it meant to be a Jew. The second thing Stephen did was to say that Jesus was the Messiah. But Jesus had been put to death. And now Stephen said that the risen Jesus—and not the law or the temple—should be the true center of the Jewish faith.

No wonder Stephen angered Saul the Pharisee (Philippians 3:3–6)! The Pharisees were a Jewish religious group. They followed Jewish laws very strictly. So, Saul is eager to punish Christians for not honoring the law. The promise of God's kingdom had not yet come to pass. Saul may have believed it would come to pass only if Israel were cleansed of religious error first. For Saul, that error included the idea that this Jesus was the Messiah.

We need to act on what we believe, as Saul did. But how does his story show that we need to be careful about what we believe? After all, we, too, could be wrong at times. So then, how can we know what to believe?



Saul may have thought it was his job to cleanse Israel of religious error.

SAUL BECOMES A CHRISTIAN (Acts 9:1–18)

Saul first attacks the church in a way that is not very noticeable at all. (He only holds the coats of the men who stone Stephen to death.) But very soon Saul's work in the attack on the church grows (read Acts 8:1–3; Acts 9:1, 2, 13, 14, 21; Acts 22:3–5).

Luke wrote the book of Acts. He uses several words to describe Saul. These words paint a picture of Saul as a savage beast. Luke also describes Saul as a soldier who wishes to destroy his enemy. The word translated as "destroy" in Acts 8:3 in the NIV also is used in the Greek translation of the Old Testament, in Psalm 80:13. It is used there to describe the cruel way that a wild pig or boar acts. What these words show us is that Saul's attack against Christians is a carefully thought-out plan to destroy the Christian faith from the earth.

Read Acts 9:1–18; Acts 22:6–21; and Acts 26:12–19. What part do God's mercy and forgiveness have in Saul's change? How worthy is Saul of the goodness God shows him?



The word Luke uses to describe how Saul attacked Christians also is used to describe how a wild boar acts.

Saul changes from a destroyer of the Christian faith to a believer in it. This change must seem impossible to everyone. So, it is no wonder that many people have difficulty believing Saul's change of heart is real.

The only thing Saul deserves is punishment. God gives him mercy and forgiveness instead. But it is important to realize that Saul's change does not happen without a cause. And he is not forced to become a Christian.

Saul is not an atheist. An atheist is a person who believes there is no God. Instead, Saul is a very religious man. But he is also very wrong in his understanding of God. Jesus' words in Acts 26:14 show that His Spirit had been working on Saul's heart. Jesus says to Saul, " 'It is hard for you to kick against the goads' " (ESV). In Bible times, a "goad" was a stick with a sharp point. It was used to poke oxen when they refused to plow. Saul refuses for a long time to do what God wants. But then Saul meets the risen Jesus. And Saul stops fighting God.

Think over your own experience of becoming a Christian. How, like Saul, did you receive God's mercy? Why is it important never to forget what Christ has given us?

SAUL IN DAMASCUS (Acts 9:10–14)

Saul loses his sight as a result of meeting Jesus. Then Jesus instructs Saul to go to the house of a man named Judas. There Saul is to wait for another man, Ananias. No doubt Saul's blindness is a powerful reminder to him of the spiritual blindness that once led him to harm Christians.

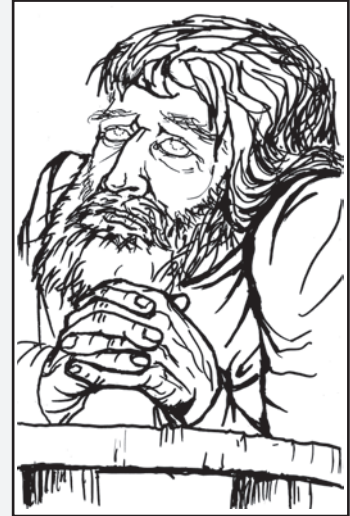
Meeting Jesus on the Damascus road changes everything for Saul. Saul once thought he was so right. But he was dead wrong. Saul believed he worked for God. Instead, he had worked against Him. So Saul enters Damascus a changed man. He is no longer the proud Pharisee who left Jerusalem, wanting to stamp out the Christian faith. So, Saul does not eat or drink anything his first three days in Damascus. Instead, he fasts and prays. He thinks about all that has happened.

Read Acts 9:10–14. Imagine how Ananias must have felt when he heard the news about Saul. The man who once attacked the believers of Jesus now believes in Him! Now he is no longer Saul but Paul. And God has chosen him to take the good news about Jesus to the Gentiles. Gentiles are people who are not Jews. Read Acts 26:16–18 for more about Paul's work among the Gentile world.

No wonder Ananias is confused! Later, the church in Jerusalem is slow to accept Paul. And that is three years after he became a Christian (Acts 9:26–30). So imagine how hard it must have been for the believers in Damascus only a few days after his change! But God gives Ananias a vision about Saul's change. Anything less than a vision might not have convinced Ananias that what he heard was true: the enemy of Jewish believers is now one of them!

Saul left Jerusalem with power from the chief priest to destroy the Christian faith. But God has a far different work for Saul to do. Saul is to take the gospel to the Gentiles. This idea must have shocked Ananias and the other Jewish believers even more than Saul's becoming a Christian. After all, Saul once tried to stop the spread of the Christian faith. But now God would use him to spread it far beyond anything the Jewish believers ever dreamed possible.

Read 1 Samuel 16:7; Matthew 7:1; and 1 Corinthians 4:5. What do these verses teach us about why we must be careful of how we judge the spiritual experiences of others? What mistakes have you made in your judgments of others? And what have you learned from these mistakes?



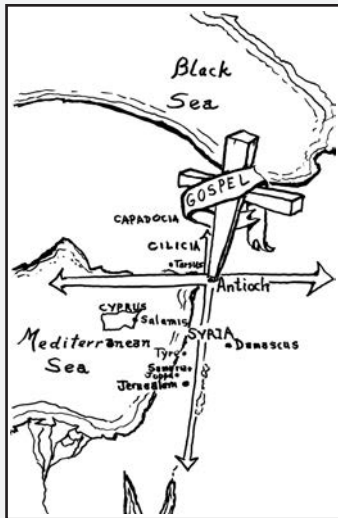
No doubt Saul's blindness was a powerful reminder to him of the spiritual blindness that led him to harm the followers of Jesus.

THE GOSPEL GOES TO THE GENTILES (Acts 11:19–21, 26)

Read Acts 11:19–21, 26. Where is the first Gentile church started? What causes believers to go there?

Persecution breaks out in Jerusalem after Stephen's death. Many Jewish believers flee north to the city of Antioch, 300 miles away. Antioch was the capital of Syria. Antioch was the third most important city in the Roman Empire, after Rome and Alexandria. About 500,000 people from all over the world lived in Antioch. So Antioch was the perfect spot to have a church with many Jews and Gentiles. The large mix of people there also made Antioch a good place to begin the worldwide mission of the church in its early days.

What happens in Antioch that causes Barnabas to visit the city and then invite Paul to join him there? What picture of the church does Acts 11:20–26 give us?



The church in Antioch would be the center for taking the gospel to the Gentile world beyond Syria and Judea.

It is hard to put together a time line of Paul's life. A time line shows when important events have happened. But it seems that five years pass between Paul's visit to Jerusalem in Acts 9:26–30 and the invitation from Barnabas for Paul to join him in Antioch. What does Paul do for those five years? It is hard to say. But Galatians 1:21 gives us a hint. Paul may have been preaching the gospel in Syria and Cilicia. Some believe that during this time Paul's family took away his legal right to receive money or land from them when they died (Philippians 3:8). As a result, Paul suffers many hardships. (Read 2 Corinthians 11:23–28.)

The church in Antioch grows under the Spirit's leading. Acts 13:1 shows that the church is a mix of people from all over the world: Barnabas is from Cyprus, Lucius from Cyrene, and Paul from Cilicia. Simeon is possibly from Africa. And there are Gentile believers from many other places. But the Spirit now wants to take the gospel to even more Gentiles beyond Syria and Judea. And Antioch would be the center in Syria from which this work would spread.

Read Acts 11:19–26 again. These verses show that the church at Antioch is made up of all kinds of people with different ways of life, customs, traditions, art, and so on. What can we learn from this fact that could help churches today to do the good work done in Antioch?

DISAGREEMENT WITHIN THE CHURCH (Acts 15:1–5)

It was not long before trouble began within the churches of the first believers. To begin with, not everyone was happy that Gentile believers had joined the church. The first Christians agreed they needed to reach the Gentiles. But they disagreed over what Gentiles should be asked to do to join the church. Some felt that faith in Jesus was not enough to be a Christian. They argued that to be true Christians the Gentiles would need to do two things. First, all male Gentiles would need to be circumcised. To be circumcised means that the skin at the end of the sex organ of a man or a boy is cut off. Second, Gentile believers would need to obey the law of Moses.

Acts 10:1–11:18 tells of Peter’s experience with Cornelius, a Gentile. Cornelius is a Roman soldier who is not circumcised. Peter baptizes Cornelius. The Jewish believers in the church are upset over the baptism. Their feelings are a clear example in the church of the disagreement over Gentiles. Letting one or two Gentiles join the church may have upset some believers. But Paul wants to throw open wide the doors of the church for all Gentiles to join just by believing in Jesus alone. This is why some believers try to stop Paul’s work among the Gentiles.

Read Acts 15:1–5. How do the believers from Judea try to overturn Paul’s work with Gentile Christians in Antioch?

In the end, the Jerusalem Council takes Paul’s side in the debate over whether Gentile believers need to be circumcised. But many Jewish believers still try to stop Paul from taking the gospel to the Gentiles. Seven years pass after the Jerusalem Council. Then Paul makes one last visit to Jerusalem. Many people there are still suspicious about Paul’s gospel. In fact, Paul nearly loses his life when he visits the temple. Jews from Asia cry out against him, “ ‘Men of Israel,’ ” (Acts 21:28, KJV) “ ‘help us! . . . This is the man who teaches everyone in all places against our people. He speaks against our law and against this holy place’ ” (NIRV).

Put yourself in the place of the Jewish believers who were upset by Paul’s teaching. What can they teach us about how our own ideas can lead us in the wrong direction? How can we learn to keep from making the mistakes they did?



Paul wants to throw open wide the doors of the church for all Gentiles to join just by believing in Jesus alone.

ADDITIONAL THOUGHT: Read Ellen G. White, “Individual [Personal] Independence [Freedom],” pages 430–434, in *Testimonies [Messages] for the Church*, volume 3. This chapter deals with what it means to be a true Christian in the church. Also read *The SDA Bible Commentary [Explanation]*, volume 6, pages 225–234. These pages map out the early life of Paul and talk about his becoming a Christian.

“Once Paul was known as a strong defender of the Jewish religion and as one who punished the followers of Jesus. Paul had courage. He never gave up. He had strong powers of reason. He could make someone look like a fool with his powerful gift of words. And now the Jews saw this gifted young man had joined those he once fought against. Without any fear, Paul preached in the name of Jesus.

“A general killed in battle is lost to his army. Yet, his death does not make his enemy stronger. But suppose a well-known man joins the enemy. Then those whom he joins gain a strong advantage. Saul of Tarsus easily might have been struck dead by the Lord on his way to Damascus. Suppose Saul had been killed. Then the Jews would have lost much of their power to punish Christians. But God in His goodness spared Saul’s life. And then He changed Saul. And so, the champion of the enemy joined the side of Christ. Saul had the strong purpose and the courage needed to lead the church in its early years.”—Adapted, Ellen G. White, *The Acts of the Apostles [Leaders]*, page 124.



Wrong ideas and feelings of dislike against others can get in the way of our work for God.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

- ① Some of Paul’s harshest enemies were Jews who believed in Jesus. What can we learn from this fact?
- ② It is important to stand up for what we believe. At the same time, how can we make sure that we are not fighting against God when we take our stand?

SUMMARY: Saul met the risen Jesus on the road to Damascus. It was a life-changing moment for him and for the history of the church. God changed the man who attacked the church. And God chose him to take the gospel to the Gentile world. Paul taught that Gentiles should join the church by faith alone. This teaching was hard for some in the church to accept. Their fight against Paul is a warning. It shows how wrong ideas and feelings of dislike against others can get in the way of our work for God.