

Paul: Apostle to the Gentiles



SABBATH AFTERNOON

Read for This Week's Study: *Acts 6:9–15, 9:1–9, 1 Sam. 16:7, Matt. 7:1, Acts 11:19–21, 15:1–5.*

Memory Text: “When they heard these things they became silent; and they glorified God, saying, ‘Then God has also granted to the Gentiles repentance to life’” (*Acts 11:18, NKJV*).

It's not that hard to understand Saul of Tarsus (also known as the apostle Paul after his conversion) and why he did what he did. As a devout Jew who was taught all his life about the importance of the law and about the soon-coming political redemption of Israel, the idea of the long-awaited Messiah being ignominiously executed like the worst of criminals was just too much for him to tolerate.

No wonder, then, he was convinced that the followers of Jesus were being disloyal to the torah and, thus, hindering God's plan for Israel. Their claims that the crucified Jesus was the Messiah and that He had risen from the dead were, he believed, rank apostasy. There could be no tolerance for such nonsense or for anyone who refused to give up those notions. Saul was determined to be God's agent in ridding Israel of these beliefs. Hence, he first appears in the pages of Scripture as a violent persecutor of his fellow Jews, those who believed that Jesus was the Messiah.

God, however, had far different plans for Saul, plans that he never could have anticipated for himself: not only was this Jew going to preach Jesus as the Messiah, he was going to do it among the Gentiles!

* Study this week's lesson to prepare for Sabbath, July 1.

Persecutor of Christians

Saul of Tarsus first appears in Acts in his involvement in the stoning of Stephen (*Acts 7:58*) and then in connection with the more wide-scale persecution that broke out in Jerusalem (*Acts 8:1–5*). Peter, Stephen, Philip, and Paul play a significant role in the book of Acts because they were involved in events that led to the spread of the Christian faith beyond the Jewish world. Stephen is of particular significance because his preaching and martyrdom appear to have had a profound influence on Saul of Tarsus.

Stephen was a Greek-speaking Jew, and one of the original seven deacons (*Acts 6:3–6*). According to Acts, a group of foreign Jews who had come to live in Jerusalem (*Acts 6:9*) entered into a dispute with Stephen over the content of his preaching about Jesus. It is possible, maybe even likely, that Saul of Tarsus was involved in these debates.

Read Acts 6:9–15. What charges were brought against Stephen? Of what do these charges remind you? See also *Matt. 26:59–61*.

The fierce hostility toward Stephen's preaching appears to have resulted from two different things. On the one hand, Stephen drew the ire of his opponents by not placing primary importance on the Jewish law and the temple, which had become the focal point of Judaism and were treasured symbols of religious and national identity. But Stephen did more than merely downplay these two treasured icons; he vigorously proclaimed that Jesus, the crucified and risen Messiah, was the true center of the Jewish faith.

No wonder, then, that he angered the Pharisee Saul (*Phil. 3:3–6*), whose zeal against the early Christians indicates that he probably belonged to a strict and militant wing of the Pharisees, one full of revolutionary fervor. Saul saw that the great prophetic promises of God's kingdom had not yet been fulfilled (*Daniel 2, Zech. 8:23, Isaiah 40–55*), and he probably believed it was his task to help God bring that day about—which could be done by cleansing Israel of religious corruption, including the idea that this Jesus was the Messiah.

Convinced that he was right, Saul was willing to put those whom he thought wrong to death. While we need zeal and fervor for what we believe, how do we learn to temper our zeal with the realization that, at times, we just might be wrong?

Saul's Conversion

“And he said, ‘Who are You, Lord?’ Then the Lord said, ‘I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting. It is hard for you to kick against the goads’” (Acts 9:5, NKJV).

Although Saul's persecution of the early church begins rather inconspicuously (as he only holds the coats of Stephen's executioners), it quickly intensifies (see *Acts 8:1–3; 9:1, 2, 13, 14, 21; 22:3–5*). Several of the words Luke uses to describe Saul paint a picture of a wild, ferocious beast or a pillaging soldier bent on the destruction of his opponent. The word translated “ravaging” in *Acts 8:3 (ESV)*, for example, is used in the Greek translation of the Old Testament (*Ps. 80:13*) to describe the uncontrolled and destructive behavior of a wild boar. Saul's crusade against the Christians was clearly not a half-hearted matter of convenience; it was a deliberate and sustained plan to exterminate the Christian faith.

Look at the three descriptions of Saul's conversion (Acts 9:1–18, 22:6–21, and 26:12–19). What role did the grace of God have in this experience? In other words, how much did Saul deserve the goodness that the Lord showed toward him?

Saul's conversion, from a human perspective, must have seemed impossible (hence the skepticism that many expressed when they first heard about it).

The only thing Saul deserved was punishment, but God extended grace to this fervent Jew instead. It is important to note, however, that Saul's conversion did not happen in a vacuum, nor was it forced.

Saul was no atheist. He was a religious man, though gravely mistaken in his understanding of God. Jesus' words to Saul, “ ‘It is hard for you to kick against the goads’ ” (*Acts 26:14, ESV*), indicate that the Spirit had been convicting Saul. In the ancient world, a “goad” was a stick with a sharp point used to prod oxen whenever they resisted plowing. Saul had resisted God's prodding for some time, but finally on his way to Damascus, through a miraculous encounter with the risen Jesus, Saul chose to fight no longer.

Think back about your own conversion experience. Maybe it wasn't as dramatic as Saul's, but in what similar ways were you the recipient of God's grace? Why is it important never to forget what we have been given in Christ?

Saul in Damascus

During Saul's encounter with Jesus, he was blinded and instructed to go to the house of a man named Judas to wait for another man, Ananias. No doubt Saul's physical blindness was a powerful reminder of the greater spiritual blindness that led him to persecute the followers of Jesus.

The appearance of Jesus to Saul on the Damascus road changed everything. Where Saul had thought he had been so right, he had been dead wrong. Rather than working for God, he had been working against Him. Saul entered Damascus a different man from the proud and zealous Pharisee who had left Jerusalem. Instead of eating and drinking, Saul spent his first three days in Damascus in fasting and prayer as he reflected on all that had happened.

Read Acts 9:10–14. Imagine what must have been going on in the mind of Ananias: not only was Saul, the persecutor, now a believer in Jesus, he was also Paul, God's chosen apostle to take the gospel to the Gentile world (*see Acts 26:16–18*).

No wonder Ananias was a little confused. If the church in Jerusalem was hesitant to accept Paul some three years *after* his conversion (*Acts 9:26–30*), one can imagine what questions and concerns filled the hearts of the believers in Damascus only days after the event!

Notice, too, that Ananias was given a vision by the Lord telling him the surprising and unexpected news about Saul of Tarsus; anything less than a vision might not have convinced him that what he was told about Saul was true—that the enemy of the Jewish believers had now become one of them.

Saul had left Jerusalem with the authority and commission of the chief priests to root out the Christian faith (*Acts 26:12*); God had, however, a vastly different commission for Saul, one that rested on far greater authority. Saul was to take the gospel to the Gentile world, an idea that must have been even more shocking to Ananias and the other Jewish believers than was the conversion of Saul himself.

Where Saul had sought to curtail the spread of the Christian faith, now God would use him to spread it far beyond anything that Jewish believers ever would have imagined.

Read 1 Samuel 16:7, Matthew 7:1, and 1 Corinthians 4:5. What is the message of these texts in regard to why we must be careful in how we view the spiritual experience of other people? What mistakes have you made in your judgments about others, and what have you learned from those mistakes?

The Gospel Goes to the Gentiles

Where was the first Gentile church established? What events caused the believers to go there? *Acts 11:19–21, 26*. What does that remind you of from Old Testament times? See *Daniel 2*.

The persecution that broke out in Jerusalem after Stephen's death caused a number of Jewish believers to flee three hundred miles north to Antioch. As capital of the Roman province of Syria, Antioch was third only to Rome and Alexandria in significance. Its population, estimated at five hundred thousand, was extremely cosmopolitan, making it an ideal location not only for a Gentile church but as the starting base for the worldwide mission of the early church.

What occurred in Antioch that resulted in Barnabas's visit to the city and his subsequent decision to invite Paul to join him there? What kind of picture is presented of the church there? *Acts 11:20–26*.

Constructing a chronology of Paul's life is difficult, but it appears that some five years passed between his post-conversion visit to Jerusalem (*Acts 9:26–30*) and the invitation by Barnabas to join him in Antioch. What was Paul doing all those years? It is hard to say for sure. But based on his comments in Galatians 1:21, he may have been preaching the gospel in the regions of Syria and Cilicia. Some have suggested that it was perhaps during this time that he was disinherited by his family (*Phil. 3:8*) and suffered a number of the hardships he describes in 2 Corinthians 11:23–28. However, the church in Antioch blossomed under the guidance of the Spirit. The description in Acts 13:1 indicates that the cosmopolitan nature of the city was soon reflected in the ethnic and cultural diversity of the church itself. (Barnabas was from Cyprus, Lucius from Cyrene, Paul from Cilicia, Simeon presumably from Africa, and many of the Gentiles were converts, too.) Thus, the Spirit now sought to take the gospel to even more Gentiles by using Antioch as the base for missionary activities far beyond Syria and Judea.

Read again Acts 11:19–26. What can we learn from the church at Antioch, a very culturally and ethnically diverse church, that could help churches today emulate the good that existed there?

Conflict Within the Church

Of course, nothing human is perfect, and it wasn't long before trouble began within the early community of faith.

For starters, not everyone was pleased with the entry of Gentile believers into the early church. The disagreement was not over the concept of a Gentile mission but over the basis on which Gentiles should be allowed to join. Some felt that faith in Jesus alone was not sufficient as the defining mark of the Christian; faith, they argued, must be supplemented with circumcision and obedience to the law of Moses. To be a true Christian, they asserted, Gentiles needed to be circumcised. (We can, in Acts 10:1–11:18, see the extent of the division between Jews and Gentiles through Peter's experience with Cornelius and the reaction that followed.)

The official visits from Jerusalem, which monitored Philip's work among the Samaritans (*Acts 8:14*) and the work with Gentiles in Antioch (*Acts 11:22*), may suggest some concern about the inclusion of non-Jews in the Christian community. Yet, the reaction to Peter's baptism of Cornelius, an uncircumcised Roman soldier, is a clear example of the disagreement that existed on the Gentile question among the earlier believers. The inclusion of an occasional Gentile such as Cornelius may have made some feel uncomfortable, but Paul's intentional efforts to open wide the doors of the church for Gentiles on the basis of faith in Jesus alone resulted in deliberate attempts by some to undermine Paul's ministry.

How did certain believers from Judea try to counteract Paul's work with Gentile Christians in Antioch? *Acts 15:1–5*.

Although the Jerusalem Council ultimately sided with Paul on the issue of circumcision in Acts 15, the opposition to Paul's ministry continued. About seven years later, during Paul's final visit to Jerusalem, many were still suspicious about Paul's gospel. In fact, when Paul visited the temple, he nearly lost his life when Jews from Asia cried out, "Men of Israel, help: This is the man, that teacheth all men every where against the people, and the law, and this place" (*Acts 21:28; see also 21:20, 21*).

Put yourself in the position of these Jewish believers who were concerned about Paul's teaching. Why do their concern and opposition make some sense? What can we learn from this about how our own preconceived ideas, as well as our cultural (and even religious) notions, can lead us astray? How can we learn to protect ourselves from making the same kind of errors, no matter how well-intentioned we are?

Further Thought: For the relationship between personal conversion and the church, read Ellen G. White, “Individual Independence,” pp. 430–434, in *Testimonies for the Church*, vol. 3. For a helpful map of the early life of Paul and commentary on his conversion, see *The SDA Bible Commentary*, vol. 6, pp. 226–234.

“Paul had formerly been known as a zealous defender of the Jewish religion and an untiring persecutor of the followers of Jesus. Courageous, independent, persevering, his talents and training would have enabled him to serve in almost any capacity. He could reason with extraordinary clearness, and by his withering sarcasm could place an opponent in no enviable light. And now the Jews saw this young man of unusual promise united with those whom he formerly persecuted, and fearlessly preaching in the name of Jesus.

“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*, p. 124.

Discussion Questions:

- ① What lesson can we learn from the fact that some of Paul’s harshest opponents were fellow Jews who believed in Jesus?
- ② How can we stand up for matters of religious principle and, at the same time, make sure that we are not fighting against God?

Summary: Saul’s encounter with the risen Jesus on the Damascus road was the defining moment in his life and in the history of the early church. With it, God changed the one-time persecutor of the church and made him His chosen apostle to bring the gospel to the Gentile world. Paul’s inclusion of Gentiles in the church by faith alone, however, proved a difficult concept for some within the church to accept—a powerful example of how preconceptions and prejudice can hinder our mission.

Inside Stories and More

Each quarter the Office of Adventist Mission brings you the exciting Inside Story column in the *Adult Sabbath School Bible Study Guide*. Did you know that in addition to these stories, we also provide at no charge a number of other resources containing great mission stories? All the resources listed below are available for free download at www.adventistmission.org/resources.

- **Youth and Adult Mission Quarterly**, featuring exciting mission stories each week to share in Sabbath School, academy and Pathfinder worships, home worships, and more.
- **Children's Mission Quarterly**. In addition to exciting mission stories for children, recipes, crafts, and games are included. This excellent material may be used in children's Sabbath Schools, school and home worships, and more.
- **Mission Spotlight**. Produced by the Office of Adventist Mission at the General Conference, these short programs give you a firsthand look at where your mission offerings are going and the opportunity to meet some of the people who will benefit from your generosity.

In addition to visiting the sites of the Thirteenth Mission Offering projects, *Mission Spotlight* takes you to a number of places where your regular mission offerings are making a difference.

The popular *Mission Spotlight* DVD is great to show during Sabbath School, before the church service, during youth programs, prayer meetings, and more. It is available absolutely free from the Adventist Mission Web site.

Thirteenth Sabbath Projects

This quarter, the Thirteenth Sabbath Offering will be going to the Southern Asia Division (SUD) and will benefit the following projects in India:

1. **Training center in Ibrahimpatnam.** This centrally located training center will be used for lay-member training programs. The auditorium will be on the main level, with dormitory rooms on the second and third floors.
2. **Girls' dormitory at the Seventh-day Adventist high school in Dimapur.** This Adventist high school was started seven years ago. A girls' dormitory is now needed to accommodate more students.
3. **Girls' dormitory at the James Memorial Higher Secondary School in Prakasapuram, Tamil Nadu.** The current building accommodates 100 girls and isn't large enough for the demand.
4. **Fourteen new classrooms at the Seventh-day Adventist high school in Vellarada.** The current classrooms are very old and constructed with mud walls and a tin-sheet roof. The Ministry of Education building codes no longer allow conducting classes in tin-roof buildings. The new classrooms will allow the school to again function.
5. **New classroom building at the Seventh-day Adventist high school in Hatkanangale.** This school opened in 1931 as one of the most prestigious in the country. The classroom building, however, is old and needs to be replaced.

Thank you for your generous support of mission!

The Lesson in Brief

▶ **Key Text:** *Acts 11:18*

▶ **The Student Will:**

Know: Outline the challenging events that led to the preaching of the gospel to the Gentiles.

Feel: Sense the tensions surrounding Paul's transformation from zealous Pharisee to zealous gospel preacher to the Gentiles.

Do: Offer his or her talents and life ministry to God to be fitted for service.

▶ **Learning Outline:**

I. Know: Go to All the World.

A What circumstances surrounded the development of the ministry of the young church to the Gentiles?

B Why was preaching the gospel to the Gentiles such a revolutionary practice for the early Christians, and how did they respond to this challenge?

II. Feel: Challenges and Tensions

A What effect did Saul's persecutions have on the early church?

B In what variety of ways did the early church leaders respond to Paul's transforming call to gospel ministry?

C How did the young church resolve the tensions raised by the evolving ministry of the gospel to the Gentiles?

III. Do: Fitted for Service

A What transformations do we need in order to be fitted for ministry?

B How might we learn to adapt to the changing faces of the gospel ministry as did the early church?

C What different challenges do we as an older church face, and what transformations do we need?

▶ **Summary:** At first the young church faced determined opposition from the zealot Saul of Tarsus; but his transformation in response to God's call resulted in the development of a strong ministry to the Gentiles.

Learning Cycle

►STEP 1—Motivate

Key Concept for Spiritual Growth: Like Saul of Tarsus we can be absolutely sure—and just as absolutely wrong—about what we believe. Being open to God’s leading means being open to surprises, even when they aren’t easy or pleasant.

Just for Teachers: Emphasize the fact that both Saul/Paul and the early Christian church needed to allow God to open their minds. Paul needed to be shown that what he thought couldn’t possibly be true was, in fact, true. The early Jewish Christians, in turn, had to be woken up to the fact that the gospel was for all, even Gentiles.

Do you want to become really bad? Not bad as in “misunderstood”; not bad as in a diamond-in-the-rough kind of character with the proverbial heart of gold; but bad as in some of the world’s most evil men? You must start by convincing yourself you’re good. So good, in fact, that you believe you’re better than anybody else. Or that you can do no wrong. Not only that, but you have God on your side, and anyone who opposes you opposes God. French philosopher and mathematician Blaise Pascal wrote: “Men never do evil so completely and cheerfully as when they do it from a religious conviction.” That could be you. It could be any of us if, in misguided devotion, we put ourselves in God’s place and stopped listening to the real God.

This week, we will study someone who was following that path, Saul of Tarsus. Saul was well on his way to becoming, as he later put it, the chief of sinners (*1 Tim. 1:15*). But God had other plans.

Discuss With the Class: It is important for us to be reasonably sure of what we believe and why. How can we balance that requirement with the need for the humility to realize that our ideas and perceptions are fallible and may need to change as we deepen our relationship with God and our understanding of His Word?

►STEP 2—Explore

Just for Teachers: In the Gospels, we are introduced to Jesus Christ. We become familiar with His personality, His nature, His mission, and His relationship to—and fulfillment of—all that had gone before. In Acts, we see how the early disciples went forward in the light of Jesus’ mission and message. We see old ways challenged and transformed and lives made new. Nowhere is this process

clearer than in the life and career of Saul/Paul. Emphasize how this process of trial and transformation is paralleled in our lives as individuals.

Bible Commentary

I. Guilty Bystander *(Review Acts 7:58 and 8:1–5 with your class.)*

In English there's an expression, "I'll hold your coat for you." Like so many other expressions in the English language, it could have come from the Bible, in this case, Acts 7:58. It can be used in one of two ways. One can either be approving of an act of violence or aggression but not quite willing to do it himself or herself, or it can be a trenchant commentary on someone else's fervor for bloodshed that never quite manifests itself in personal risk taking.

As Christians and students of the Bible, we view Saul of Tarsus as a great persecutor. But we know little about him or his activities before the events recounted in these verses. Did he have strong opinions about the early Christians before he saw Stephen preach? Obviously Stephen's preaching was enough to motivate him into some sort of action, but why? Was he attracted to the message at the same time he was repelled by it? Did he know it was true, even while he attempted to force himself and others to believe it wasn't?

And look at his actions. He wasn't an active participant in Stephen's death, to judge by the passage. The author might not have bothered to mention it at all, except to introduce Saul as a character who would later be important to the narrative of Acts. If acting as an innocent bystander had been all Paul did, it would have been hard to blame—much less charge—him with wrongdoing on the basis of the information given in the text. Maybe he incited Stephen's murderers to kill, but it's not recorded. He watched his colleagues stone Stephen. Two verses later we are told he approved of Stephen's death. But we can surmise it probably wasn't his idea.

Does this mean that Paul was not guilty of Stephen's death? He himself felt he was; he carried the guilt for the rest of his life. We have good reason to believe that the account of the events here was related to Luke (generally thought to be the author of Acts, as well as of the Gospel bearing his name) by Paul himself, and that Paul was quite insistent that Luke mention his role and his approval. And several verses later, in Acts 8:1–5, he was shown to be the bloodthirsty persecutor we all know.

Why didn't Saul take a more active part in the stoning of Stephen? Was he a manipulator behind the scenes, or was he waiting to see what the authorities he revered and modeled himself after would do? In any event, his decision to facilitate this act of mob violence, disguised as theocratic justice, made him as guilty as if he had gathered and thrown all the stones himself, although he seemed to take no action at all. Only the grace of God

could divert him from the course he had chosen freely for himself.

Consider This: Have you ever made a wrong decision—a decision that had repercussions far beyond the immediate circumstances—by taking no action at all or by acting passively to facilitate injustice or wrongdoing? If so, how did you make it right?

II. Saul's Conversion (*Review Acts 9:1–18; 22:6–21; 26:12–19; 1 Corinthians 9:1; 15:3; Galatians 1:11, 12, 15, 16 with your class.*)

To refer to the event mentioned or discussed in the passages above as a conversion is accurate, but not really adequate. The biblical words we usually translate as “conversion” (*sub* in Hebrew and *epistrophe* in Greek, respectively) refer to a turning or returning to God or the path that leads to God. As such, it is an act of will, aided by God or His Spirit.

Saul, on the other hand, does not so much turn as he is turned. Until the moment when the living Christ appears and incapacitates him, we see no sign of a change of heart in Saul. The passages in chapters 8 and 9 tell us nothing at all about his internal state. We see a lot of his external state, vividly described in terms evoking a fierce predatory animal (*Acts 8:3*). Was the Holy Spirit working with him? Undoubtedly, but to see it would have taken greater faith than most had then or have now.

The experience that Saul had was a conversion that resulted in a dramatic turn from his previous path. And as overwhelming as the call and the experience were, and as preposterous as the very idea may be to the reader, Saul could have—at least, in theory—refused. But what did happen here? First, Saul was deprived of his faculties, including sight. God took away the things Saul depended upon. All he could do was sit and listen. And when God finally had his undivided attention, He gave Saul a revelation—a revelation he later described in several places as a glimpse of the risen Christ. As skeptical as others may have been, Paul had no hesitation in matching this experience with those of apostles, who had walked and talked with Jesus Christ, the Man, during His earthly ministry.

Jesus Christ gave the best that He had to Saul, a man who deserved it least. To some this generosity may have been disconcerting or even infuriating. But if one is aware that one is a sinner in need of grace, Saul's conversion demonstrates how limitless and powerful grace is.

Consider This: While we all claim to believe in God's grace, we may sometimes be tempted to picture Him doling it out in strictly measured spoonfuls. Why are we tempted to think this way? When may we sometimes even wish that were the case?

►STEP 3—Apply

Just for Teachers: Use the following questions to help your students to see what the conversion of Saul of Tarsus teaches us about God’s grace and how one should respond to it.

Thought Questions:

- ❶ We actually are told little about Saul’s early life and the influences that shaped him. What do you think his motivations for persecuting the Christians might have been?
- ❷ In Acts 9:5, the mysterious voice refers to Saul kicking against the goads. How exactly was God “goading” Saul, even when Saul seemed to be acting in a way most contrary to God’s will?

Application Questions:

- ❶ We have all met, or heard from, people with spectacular conversion stories, and perhaps ours is a bit more prosaic. In what ways do you see the grace of God manifested in yours? Perhaps it is in the very fact that you did not have to experience all those things.
- ❷ How do you react when a person you distrust or have reason to fear or dislike seems to have changed for the better?

►STEP 4—Create

Just for Teachers: The story of Saul is most of all a story of grace. God showed grace to him when he wasn’t even looking for it and didn’t feel the need of it. And those whom Saul persecuted, or might have persecuted, learned how one can genuinely be changed by that grace and how to show grace themselves. The following activity is intended to encourage students to make grace a part of their daily thoughts and lives.

Activity: We all face challenging situations or people in our daily lives. How do we react? Do we fly into a rage? Do we say certain words and phrases when we think no one can hear them? Do we nurse our resentments silently?

Over the next week, bring grace into your thoughts when faced with a challenging situation or relationship. Look at it as a learning opportunity or an opportunity to practice showing grace. Where the usual thoughts enter your mind and perhaps come out of your mouth, consciously think—and say—something else. Shield your thoughts with a relevant biblical verse. Report back the next week. How did practicing grace change the way you acted and felt in such situations?