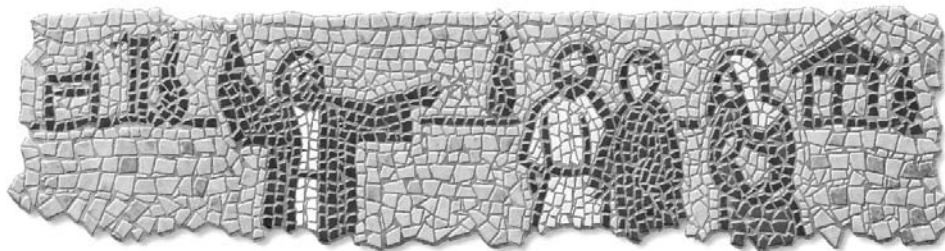


Paul: Apostle¹ to the Gentiles²



SABBATH—SEPTEMBER 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 didn’t [did not] object [protest; complain] anymore. They praised God. They said, ‘So then, God has allowed [let] even those who aren’t [are not] Jews to turn away from their sins and live’ ” (Acts 11:18, NlrV).

IT IS NOT HARD TO UNDERSTAND WHY SAUL OF TARSUS DID WHAT HE DID. He was the same Saul who later became the apostle Paul after he accepted Christ as his Savior. As a faithful Jew, Saul learned all his life about how important the law was and about the soon-to-come political freedom for Israel. The idea of putting the “false” Messiah (Chosen One) to death as the worst of criminals made much sense to Saul.

No wonder, then, that Saul believed that the followers of Jesus were being disloyal to the Torah.³ Saul believed that they were preventing God’s plan for Israel from being fulfilled. Saul also believed that the claims about the crucified⁴ Jesus being the Messiah and about His return to life from the dead were false. So Saul felt that he could not accept anyone who refused to give up those “foolish” ideas. That was when Saul decided to be God’s agent and get rid of people with those “foolish” beliefs. This is how Saul first appears in the pages of the Bible—as a terrible attacker of the Jews who believe that Jesus is the Messiah.

But God had far different plans for Saul. God had plans that Saul never could have expected for himself. God chose Saul to preach Jesus as the Messiah. And God planned for Saul to do it among the Gentiles!

1. apostle—a disciple (follower) of Jesus who preached and taught the gospel after Jesus returned to heaven.

2. Gentiles—non-Jews.

3. Torah—the first five books of the Bible.

4. crucified—having killed someone by nailing or tying his or her hands or feet to a cross.

SUNDAY—SEPTEMBER 25**PERSECUTOR⁵ OF CHRISTIANS
(Acts 6:9–15)**

Saul of Tarsus first appears in Acts. He takes part in the stoning of Stephen (Acts 7:58). He also attacks Jewish believers in Jerusalem (Acts 8:1–5). Peter, Stephen, Philip, and Paul have an important part in the book of Acts because they take part in events that spread the Christian faith outside the Jewish world. Stephen is very important because his preaching and death have a deep influence on Saul of Tarsus.

Stephen himself was a Greek-speaking Jew. He also was one of the original seven deacons (church officers) (Acts 6:3–6). According to Acts, a group of foreign Jews had come to live in Jerusalem (verse 9). They entered into arguments with Stephen over his preaching about Jesus. It is very possible that Saul of Tarsus was involved in these debates.

What charges were brought against Stephen in Acts 6:9–15? What do these charges remind you of? (Read also Matthew 26:59–61.)

The hate toward Stephen's preaching seems to have come from two different things. On the one hand, Stephen made his enemies angry by arguing that the Jewish law and the temple were not as important as the Jews thought they were. Instead,

Stephen strongly pointed to Jesus, the crucified and risen Messiah, as the true center of the Jewish faith.

No wonder, then, that Stephen made the Pharisee⁶ Saul (Philippians 3:3–6) angry. Saul's work against the early Christians shows that he probably belonged to a strict group of the Pharisees. Saul thought that the great, prophetic⁷ promises of God's kingdom had not yet been fulfilled (Daniel 2; Zechariah 8:23; Isaiah 40–55). And Saul probably believed it was his job to help God fulfill these prophecies⁸ by cleansing Israel of the false religion. This "falsehood" (lies) included the idea that this Jesus was the Messiah.

Saul believed that he was right. So he was willing to put those "false" believers to death. Like Saul, we need to work hard for what we believe. But why must we be careful to learn to use good judgment? What could happen if we are wrong about what we believe to be true?



Stephen preached that Jesus, the risen Savior, was the true center of the Jewish faith.

5. persecutor—a person who treats others cruelly or unfairly, especially because of race or religious or political beliefs.

6. Pharisee—a religious leader of Jesus' day who believed a person must keep God's law to be saved.

7. prophetic—foretelling future events.

8. prophecies—messages from God that tell what will happen in the future.

MONDAY—SEPTEMBER 26**SAUL'S CONVERSION⁹ (Acts 9:5)**

Saul's role (part) in attacking the early church begins with an unimportant moment. (He only holds the coats of Stephen's killers.) But his part quickly increases in importance (read Acts 8:1–3; Acts 9:1, 2, 13, 14, 21; and Acts 22:3–5). Several of the words Luke uses show Paul as a wild beast or a cruel soldier trying hard to destroy his enemies. For example, the word translated as “ravaging” (to lay waste to; to destroy) in Acts 8:3 (ESV), comes from the Greek translation of the Old Testament (Psalm 80:13). This word describes complete destruction caused by a wild boar. Saul's crusade against the Christians is clearly not halfhearted. It is a determined plan to destroy and remove the Christian faith.

Read the three descriptions of Saul's conversion (Acts 9:1–18; Acts 22:6–21; and Acts 26:12–19). What difference did God's grace¹⁰ make in this experience? In other words, how much did Saul deserve the Lord's goodness toward him?

To human minds, Saul's conversion must have seemed impossible. This may explain why many people doubted and refused to believe it when they first heard about it.



Paul held the coats of Stephen's killers.

The only thing Saul deserved was punishment! But God showed grace to this stubborn Jew (Saul) instead. It is important to know that Saul's conversion did not happen by force.

Saul was no atheist.¹¹ He was a religious man. But he was greatly mistaken in his understanding of God. Jesus spoke to Paul, “ ‘It is hard for you to kick against the goads¹² ’ ” (Acts 26:14, ESV). These words show that the Spirit had been convicting¹³ Saul. Saul had refused to listen to God's warning for some time. But finally, on his way to Damascus, through a miracle with the risen Jesus, Saul chose to fight no longer.

Think back about your own conversion experience. Maybe it was not as wonderful as Paul's. (Most are not.) But in what ways were you the receiver of God's grace? Why is it important never to forget what we have been given in Christ?

9. conversion—the process of spiritual change a person experiences when he or she believes in and accepts Jesus as Savior.

10. grace—God's gift of forgiveness and mercy that He freely gives us to take away our sins.

11. atheist—someone who does not believe in God.

12. goads—pointed rods or sticks used to make an animal move forward.

13. convicting—causing a person to believe in Jesus.



“ ‘It is hard for you to kick against the goads.’ ”

TUESDAY—SEPTEMBER 27

SAUL IN DAMASCUS (1 Corinthians 4:5)

During Saul’s experience with Jesus, he was blinded and then told to go to the house of a man named Judas. There Saul was to wait for another man, Ananias. No doubt Saul’s physical blindness reminded him that he was spiritually blind when he attacked the followers of Jesus.

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

Read Acts 9:10–14. Imagine what must have been going on in the

mind of Ananias. Saul, the attacker of Christians, was now a believer in Jesus! But Saul also was Paul, God’s chosen apostle to take the gospel to the Gentile world (read Acts 26:16–18).

No wonder Ananias was a little confused! We know from the Bible that the church in Jerusalem was slow to accept Paul some three years after his conversion (Acts 9:26–30). So, a person 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. If Ananias had not had a vision, then he might not have accepted the truth of what he was told about Saul. The enemy (Saul) of the Jewish believers in Christ had now become one of them.

Saul had left Jerusalem with the authority and command of the chief priests to destroy the Christian faith (Acts 26:12). But God had a very different command for Saul. This command depended on far greater authority. Saul was to take the gospel to the Gentile world. This idea must have been even more shocking to Ananias and the other Jewish believers than the conversion of Saul himself.

Saul had tried to stop the spread of the Christian faith. Now God would use him to spread it far beyond anything that Jewish believers ever would have imagined.

How do 1 Samuel 16:7; Matthew 7:1; and 1 Corinthians 4:5 explain

why we must be careful in how we view the spiritual experiences of other people? What mistakes have you made in your judgments about others? And what have you learned from those mistakes?

WEDNESDAY—SEPTEMBER 28

THE GOSPEL GOES TO THE GENTILES (Acts 11:20–26)

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

The attacks that broke out in Jerusalem after Stephen's death caused many Jewish believers to flee 300 miles north to Antioch. As capital of the Roman province¹⁴ of Syria, Antioch was third only to Rome and Alexandria in its importance as a city. Antioch had about 500,000 people living in the city. These people were very educated and cultured. This made Antioch an ideal location for a Gentile church. And it also became a starting base for the worldwide mission (important work) of the early church.

What happened in Antioch that led to Barnabas' visit to the city and his decision to invite Paul to join him in Antioch? What kind of picture in Acts 11:20–26 is given of the church there?



Antioch became a starting base for the worldwide mission of the early church.

Building a history of Paul's life is difficult. But it seems that some five years passed between his visit to Jerusalem after his conversion (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 from Paul's comments in Galatians 1:21, he may have been preaching the gospel in Syria and Cilicia. Some have suggested that, perhaps, it was during this time that Paul was disinherited by his family (Philippians 3:8) and suffered many of the hardships he describes in 2 Corinthians 11:23–28.

The church in Antioch blossomed under the guidance of the Spirit. The description in Acts 13:1 shows that there were many different groups of people from the city who joined the church. These groups had different backgrounds and came from different races with different ways of life. For example, Barnabas was from Cyprus, Lucius from Cyrene, Paul from Cilicia, Simon probably from

14. province—any one of the large parts that a country or empire is divided into.

Africa. Think about all the Gentile believers in the church too. The Spirit now tried to take the gospel to even more Gentiles by using Antioch as the starting base for more far-reaching missionary (church) works outside of Syria and Judea.

Read again Acts 11:19–26. What can we learn from the church at Antioch, which had many kinds of believers? How could churches today be more like (the same as) the Antioch church?

THURSDAY—SEPTEMBER 29

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

Of course, nothing human is perfect. It was not long before trouble began within the community of faith in New Testament times.

For starters, not everyone was pleased with Gentile believers in the church. The disagreement was not over what the Gentile mission was. Instead, it was over how Gentiles should be invited to join the church. Some felt that faith in Jesus alone was not enough to become a Christian. Many felt that Gentiles should show their faith by being circumcised¹⁵ and obeying the law of Moses. To be a true Christian, they argued, Gentiles needed to be circumcised. (Acts 10:1–11:18 gives a good example of the disagreement between Jews and Gentiles. It is shown through Peter's

experience with Cornelius and how the Jews thought and felt about it.)

The Jews rebelled against Peter's baptism¹⁶ of Cornelius, an uncircumcised Roman soldier. This is a clear example of the disagreement between Gentile and Jewish believers. Many Jews might have felt uncomfortable about a Gentile such as Cornelius in their group. But Paul tried to open wide the doors of the church for Gentiles on the basis (foundation) of faith in Jesus alone. This led many Jews to think about destroying Paul's ministry (work done for God).

According to Acts 15:1–5, how did certain believers from Judea try to destroy Paul's work with Gentile Christians in Antioch?

The Jerusalem Council, in Acts 15, fully agreed with Paul on the issue (problem) of circumcision. But the opposition to (action against) 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 us!' . . . 'This is the man who teaches everyone in all places against our people. He speaks against our law and against this holy place' " (Acts 21:28, NIV; read also Acts 21:20, 21).

Put yourself in the position of these Jewish believers who were

15. circumcised—having the skin (called the foreskin) cut off at the end of the penis of a man or boy.

16. baptism—the act of putting a person completely under water and then bringing him or her back up out of it. This means that Jesus has forgiven this person's sins and has given him or her a new life.

concerned about Paul's teaching. Why does their concern make some sense? What can we learn from this about how our own false ideas can lead us astray (down the wrong path)? How can we learn to protect ourselves from making the same mistakes, even though we mean well?

FRIDAY—SEPTEMBER 30

ADDITIONAL STUDY: For the relationship between personal conversion and the church, read Ellen G. White, "Individual Independence," pages 430–434, in *Testimonies*¹⁷ for the Church, volume 3. For a helpful map of the early life of Paul and for comments on his conversion, read *The SDA Bible Commentary*, volume 6, pages 226–234.

"At first Paul had been known as a strong defender of the Jewish religion and a tireless persecutor [attacker] of those who followed Jesus. Courageous, independent, and determined, Paul's talents and training would have made him able to serve in almost any position. Paul could give clear reasons for his thinking. With sharp words, Paul could put an opponent in a very embarrassing position. And now the Jews saw this brilliant young man united [joined together] with those he used to

attack. They also saw him fearlessly preaching in the name of Jesus.

"A general killed in battle is lost to his army. But his death gives no additional strength to the enemy. But when a man with a brilliant mind joins the opposing force, his former team loses his services. And those to whom he joins himself gain a big advantage [strength; help]. Saul of Tarsus, on his way to Damascus, might easily have been struck dead by the Lord, and much strength would have been lost. But God in His wisdom saved Saul's life, and converted [changed] him. In this way God took a champion [defender of a cause] from the side of the enemy to the side of Christ. A powerful and courageous speaker, Paul had the very qualifications needed in the early church." —Adapted from Ellen G. White, *The Acts of the Apostles*, page 124.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

- ① What lesson can we learn from the fact that some of Paul's toughest opponents were fellow Jews who believed in Jesus?
- ② How can you stand up for religious principles (important rules) and at the same time make sure that you are not fighting against God?

17. Testimonies—the writings of Ellen G. White.