

The Conversion of Paul



SABBATH AFTERNOON

Read for This Week's Study: Acts 26:9–11, Deut. 21:23, Acts 9:1–20, 1 Cor. 9:1, Gal. 1:1, Acts 9:20–30.

Memory Text: “Go! This man is my chosen instrument to proclaim my name to the Gentiles and their kings and to the people of Israel.” (Acts 9:15, NIV).

The conversion of Saul of Tarsus (who became Paul) was one of the most remarkable events in the history of the apostolic church. The importance of Paul, however, goes way beyond conversion itself, for Paul is certainly not the only enemy of the church to have become a genuine Christian. The issue, instead, relates to what he ended up doing for the sake of the gospel. Paul had been an incorrigible opponent to the early believers, and the harm he could have done to the infant church was enormous. He had both determination and official support to destroy the church. Yet, he responded faithfully to God's call on the road to Damascus and became the greatest of the apostles. “From among the most bitter and relentless persecutors of the church of Christ, arose the ablest defender and most successful herald of the gospel.”—Ellen G. White, *Sketches From the Life of Paul*, p. 9.

Paul's previous actions in persecuting the early church always would bring him a deep sense of his own unworthiness, though he could say with a still deeper sense of gratitude that God's grace to him had not been in vain. With Paul's conversion, Christianity changed forever.

* Study this week's lesson to prepare for Sabbath, August 4.

Persecutor of the Church

Paul was a Hellenistic Jew. His birthplace was Tarsus, the capital of Cilicia (*Acts 21:39*). Notwithstanding, to a certain extent he deviated from the Hellenistic stereotype, for he was brought to Jerusalem, where he studied under Gamaliel (*Acts 22:3*), the most influential Pharisaic teacher at the time. As a Pharisee, Paul was strictly orthodox, though his zeal bordered on fanaticism (*Gal. 1:14*). This is why he led Stephen to his death and became the key figure in the ensuing persecution.

Read Acts 26:9–11. How did Paul describe his actions against the church?

Paul says elsewhere that the gospel was a stumbling block to the Jews (*1 Cor. 1:23*). Besides the fact that Jesus did not fit the traditional Jewish expectation of a kingly Messiah, they could by no means accept the idea that the One who had died *on a cross* could be God's Messiah, for the Scripture says that anyone who is hung is under God's curse (*Deut. 21:23*). To the Jews, therefore, the crucifixion was in itself a grotesque contradiction, the clearest evidence that the church's claims about Jesus were false.

Acts 9:1, 2 shows Saul of Tarsus in action against believers. Damascus was an important city about 135 miles north of Jerusalem, and it had a large Jewish population. The Jews living outside Judea were organized in a kind of network whose headquarters were in Jerusalem (the Sanhedrin), with the synagogues functioning as supporting centers for the local communities. There was constant communication between the Sanhedrin and such communities through letters normally carried by a *shaliah*, "one who is sent" (from the Hebrew *shalah*, "to send"). A *shaliah* was an official agent appointed by the Sanhedrin to perform several religious functions.

When Paul asked the high priest, the Sanhedrin's president, for letters addressed to the synagogues in Damascus, he became a *shaliah*, with authority to arrest any followers of Jesus and bring them to Jerusalem (*compare with Acts 26:12*). In Greek, the equivalent to *shaliah* is *apostolos*, from which the word *apostle* derives. Thus, before being an apostle of Jesus Christ, Paul was an apostle of the Sanhedrin.

When was the last time you were zealous for (or against) something you later changed your mind about? What lessons should you have learned from that experience?

On the Damascus Road

Read Acts 9:3–9. What happened when Paul was approaching Damascus? What is the significance of Jesus’ words in Acts 9:5 (see also Acts 26:14)?

As Paul and his companions neared Damascus, the unexpected happened: about noon they experienced an intensely bright light from heaven and a voice speaking. This was not merely a vision in the prophetic sense but a divine manifestation, aimed somewhat exclusively at Paul. His companions saw the light; yet, only Paul was blinded; they heard the voice; yet, only Paul understood it. The light was the divine glory of the risen Jesus, who personally appeared to Paul at that moment (*Acts 22:14*). Elsewhere Paul insists that he had seen Jesus, which made him equal to the Twelve as a witness of His resurrection and apostolic authority (*1 Cor. 9:1, 15:8*).

The ensuing dialogue with Jesus struck Paul infinitely more than the light itself. Paul absolutely was convinced that, by attacking the followers of Jesus of Nazareth, he was doing God’s work in purifying Judaism from that dangerous and dreadful heresy. To his dismay, however, he learned not only that Jesus was alive but also that by inflicting suffering on His believers he was attacking Jesus Himself.

When speaking to Saul, Jesus used a proverbial saying supposedly of Greek origin that Paul certainly was familiar with: “‘It is hard for you to kick against the goads’” (*Acts 26:14, NKJV*). The image is that of a yoke ox trying to move against the sharp stick used to guide it. When that happens, the animal only hurts itself even more.

This saying may point to a struggle in Paul’s mind—the Bible refers to this as the work of the Spirit (*John 16:8–11*)—that could go back to what happened with Stephen. “Saul had taken a prominent part in the trial and conviction of Stephen, and the striking evidences of God’s presence with the martyr had led Saul to doubt the righteousness of the cause he had espoused against the followers of Jesus. His mind was deeply stirred. In his perplexity he appealed to those in whose wisdom and judgment he had full confidence. The arguments of the priests and rulers finally convinced him that Stephen was a blasphemer, that the Christ whom the martyred disciple had preached was an impostor, and that those ministering in holy office must be right.”—Ellen G. White, *The Acts of the Apostles*, pp. 112, 113.

Why is it wise to pay heed to your conscience?

Ananias's Visit

When he realized he was talking to Jesus Himself, Saul asked the question that would give Jesus the opportunity He was looking for: “‘What shall I do, Lord?’” (*Acts 22:10, NKJV*). The question indicates contrition in view of his actions up to that moment, but more important, it expresses an unconditional willingness to let Jesus guide his life from then on. Taken to Damascus, Saul was to wait for further instructions.

In Acts 9:10–19, the Bible reveals how the Lord was working to prepare Saul of Tarsus for his new life as the apostle Paul. In a vision, Jesus gave Ananias the assignment to visit Saul and lay his hands on him for the restoration of his sight. Ananias, however, already knew who Saul was, as well as how many of the brethren had suffered and even lost their lives because of him. He was also well informed of the very reason why Saul was in Damascus, and so, surely, he did not want to become Saul's first victim there. His hesitation was understandable.

Yet, what Ananias did not know was that Saul had just had a personal encounter with Jesus that changed his life forever. He did not know that, instead of still working for the Sanhedrin, Saul—to Ananias's astonishment—just had been called by Jesus to work for Him, which means that Saul was no longer an apostle of the Sanhedrin but Jesus' chosen instrument to take the gospel to both Jews and Gentiles.

Read Galatians 1:1, 11, 12. What special claim does Paul make with regard to his apostolic ministry?

In Galatians, Paul insists that he received his message and his apostleship directly from Jesus Christ, not from any human source. This does not necessarily contradict the role performed by Ananias in his call. When visiting him, Ananias just confirmed the commission Saul had already received on the Damascus road from Jesus Himself.

In fact, the change in Saul's life was so dramatic that no human cause can be assigned to it. Only divine intervention can explain how Jesus' most obsessive opponent would suddenly embrace Him as Savior and Lord, leave everything—convictions, reputation, career—behind, and become His most devoted and prolific apostle.

In what ways does Saul's conversion illustrate the operation of God's wonderful grace? What can you learn from his story concerning those in your life whom you doubt will ever come to true faith?

The Beginning of Paul's Ministry

Acts 9:19–25 gives the impression that after his conversion, Paul remained in Damascus for a while before returning to Jerusalem (Acts 9:26). In Galatians 1:17, however, Paul adds that, before going to Jerusalem, he went to Arabia, where he apparently lived in seclusion for a certain period. “Here, in the solitude of the desert, Paul had ample opportunity for quiet study and meditation.”—Ellen G. White, *The Acts of the Apostles*, p. 125.

Read Acts 9:20–25. How does Luke describe Paul's ministry in Damascus? How well did it go?

Paul's original target when he left Jerusalem with letters from the high priest was the Jewish believers that had presumably sought refuge in the synagogues of Damascus (*Acts 9:2*). Now, after coming back from Arabia, he finally made it to the synagogues, not to arrest believers but to increase their number; not to slander Jesus as an impostor but to present Him as the Messiah of Israel. What must have gone on in the minds of those who, having heard of him only as one of their persecutors, now hear him witness about Jesus? What could they do but marvel at what Saul of Tarsus had become and at what he was doing for the church? (They probably had no idea of the influence this new convert would eventually have!)

Not able to contradict Paul, some of his opponents conspired together to take his life. Paul's account of the episode (*2 Cor. 11:32, 33*) suggests that his opponents denounced him to the local authorities in order to achieve their intent. However, with the believers' help, Paul was able to escape in a basket, possibly through the window of a house built on the city wall.

Paul knew from the start that he would face challenges (*Acts 9:16*). Opposition, persecution, and suffering from various sources would be a constant in his ministry, but nothing would shake his faith or sense of duty, despite the hardships and trials that he faced practically at every step of his new life in Christ (*2 Cor. 4:8, 9*).

Despite struggles and opposition, Paul didn't give up. How can we learn to do the same when it comes to faith—that is, how to persevere amid discouragement and opposition?

Return to Jerusalem

Having escaped from Damascus, Paul returned to Jerusalem for the first time since he had left as a persecutor. This happened three years after his conversion (*Gal. 1:18*). It was not an easy return, as he faced problems both inside and outside the church.

Read Acts 9:26–30. What happened to Paul when he arrived in Jerusalem?

In Jerusalem, Paul tried to join the apostles. Though by that time he already had been a Christian for three years, the news of his conversion sounded so incredible that the apostles, like Ananias before them, were rather skeptical. They feared it was just part of a carefully elaborated plot. It was Barnabas, a Levite from Cyprus (*Acts 4:36, 37*), thus a Hellenist, who broke the apostles' resistance and introduced Paul to them. They, too, must have marveled at what God had done to Paul; that is, once they realized that he was genuine.

Such resistance, however, would never entirely disappear, if not because of Paul's past actions in persecuting the church, then at least because of the gospel he preached. As in the case of Stephen, the Judean believers, including the apostles, were quite slow to understand the universal scope of the Christian faith, a faith no longer based in the Old Testament ceremonial system, especially in the sacrificial system, which had lost its validity with Jesus' death on the cross. Paul's closest circle of relationship within the church in Judea would always be the Hellenistic believers: besides Barnabas himself, it included Philip, one of the Seven (*Acts 21:8*), and Mnason, also from Cyprus (*Acts 21:16*). Several years later, the Jerusalem church leaders would still accuse Paul of preaching basically the same doctrine Stephen had preached before (*Acts 21:21*).

During the fifteen days he stayed in Jerusalem (*Gal. 1:18*), Paul apparently decided to share the gospel with the same nonbelieving Jews whom he had incited against Stephen some time before. As with Stephen, however, his efforts met with strong opposition, posing a threat to his own life. In a vision, Jesus told him to leave Jerusalem for his own safety (*Acts 22:17–21*). With the help of the brethren, he went down to the city port of Caesarea and from there to his hometown in Cilicia, where he would stay for several years before starting his missionary journeys.

Further Thought: “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.”—Ellen G. White, *The Acts of the Apostles*, p. 124.

“Christ had commanded his disciples to go and teach all nations; but the previous teachings which they had received from the Jews made it difficult for them to fully comprehend the words of their Master, and therefore they were slow to act upon them. They called themselves the children of Abraham, and regarded themselves as the heirs of divine promise. It was not until several years after the Lord’s ascension that their minds were sufficiently expanded to clearly understand the intent of Christ’s words, that they were to labor for the conversion of the Gentiles as well as of the Jews.”—Ellen G. White, *Sketches From the Life of Paul*, p. 38.

Discussion Questions:

- ① Dwell more on Jesus’ question to Paul on the Damascus road: “Why do you persecute me?” (*Acts 9:4, NRSV*). For Paul, this question was an indication that Jesus of Nazareth had indeed been resurrected from the dead. But, more than that, it was also an indication of the spiritual identification that exists between Jesus and His church (*see also Matt. 25:34–45*). The implication is obvious: any harm done to the church is harm done to Jesus Himself. In practical terms, what does this mean to us today?
- ② Witnessing for Jesus involves suffering for Jesus. It is not by chance that the Greek word for “witness” (*martyrs*) came to be associated with “martyrdom.” What does it mean to suffer for Jesus?
- ③ There’s an old Latin saying, *Credo ut intelligam*, which means, “I believe in order that I may understand.” How does this idea help us understand what happened to Saul of Tarsus? That is, before his conversion, before Paul became a believer in Jesus, he didn’t understand. Only after his experience was he able to comprehend. What lesson can we draw from this for the times when we may find ourselves frustrated with those who don’t believe in truths that seem so clear to us?

Facebooking the Gospel

By Andrew McChesney, Adventist Mission

South Koreans are among the most diligent Seventh-day Adventist gospel workers. Visit the Middle East, and you will find faithful Koreans in Turkey and Lebanon. Koreans live in Africa and South America. Even remote places in Bangladesh and India have an active Korean presence.

But despite this mission spirit, some young people in South Korea are struggling. The problem is connected with a cultural generation gap and career challenges in a country where Saturday is a workday. But derision from other Christians also hurts. While more than a quarter of South Korea's population of 51 million is Christian, Adventists represent a tiny minority. The Adventist Church is dismissed as a cult, and members are mockingly referred to as "sdas," a play on the church's acronym, SDA.

Six Adventist university students decided that they had seen enough. They created a Facebook group and an online radio station aimed at nurturing young fellow Adventists. "Our focus is to reach young people who feel that they don't belong to mainstream Adventism," said project cofounder Hansu Hyun, 27, a graphic design student at church-owned Sahmyook University in South Korea's capital, Seoul.

Young Adventists have taken notice. The Facebook group, opened in 2014, has about 900 followers, a significant number for the Adventist Church in South Korea. It offers colorful memes with vegetarian recipes and testimonies. For the testimonies, administrators interview young adults or sometimes a national actor who is Adventist, and the testimony is spread across five or more memes. A big hit was made with memes about Adventist war hero Desmond Doss during the theatrical release of *Hacksaw Ridge*.

"We have found that informal content like this is easy for young people to embrace," said project cofounder Taegyun Bong, 25, a theology major at Sahmyook University. "Young Adventists who have left the church have told us that they are finding healing through our ministry."

The radio station, linked to the Facebook group, has the cheeky name RadioSda in a nod to the slur toward Adventists, and it offers a two-hour weekly broadcast. Topics have included church youth leaders talking about how they spend Sabbath afternoons and a law school student discussing Sabbath challenges. Some 700 to 2,000 people tune in every week.



"Our whole project can be described in one word: *willingness*," said cofounder Hyunho Kim, 27, an English literature student. "It's easy to become passive in our Christian life, but we are young people who are willing to act to have an impact on the Adventist community."