

Paul Becomes a Christian



SABBATH—JULY 28

READ FOR THIS WEEK'S LESSON: Acts 26:9–11; Deuteronomy 21:23; Acts 9:20–25; Acts 9:26–30.

MEMORY VERSE: “Go! I have chosen Saul for an important work. I want him to tell other nations, their rulers, and the people of Israel about me” (Acts 9:15, ERV).



Paul's change of heart changed the Christian religion forever.

ONE OF THE MOST AMAZING STORIES in the history of the New Testament church is the story about how Saul of Tarsus became Paul the Christian. Paul is not the only enemy of the church who later became a Christian. But what makes Paul's story so important and amazing are the many places he went to share the Good News about Jesus and the miracles that happened. Paul had been one of the strongest attackers of the church. He had the power to hurt the growing church very much. Paul wanted to destroy the church, and the Jewish leaders supported him. But then, on the road to Damascus, Paul chose to accept God's plan for him and to become God's most important apostle. Apostles were the men Jesus chose to lead the church after He went to heaven. “Paul was one of the worst attackers of the Christian church. But later, Paul became its strongest protector. Paul also had more success than any other apostle in the work of sharing the Good News with other people.”—Ellen G. White, *Sketches from the Life of Paul*, page 9, adapted.

Paul's attacks against the church in the past always made him feel that he was not worthy to work for Jesus. But God's forgiveness filled Paul with thankfulness. Paul's change of heart changed the Christian religion forever.

PAUL ATTACKS THE CHURCH (Acts 26:9–11)

Before Paul accepted Jesus, Paul was known as Saul of Tarsus. Saul was a Greek-speaking Jew. He was born in Tarsus. Tarsus was the capital city of Cilicia (Acts 21:39). Saul went to Jerusalem to study with Gamaliel (Acts 22:3). Gamaliel was the most important teacher at the time. Saul was a Pharisee. Pharisees followed the law very carefully. As a Pharisee, Saul sometimes went too far in doing what he believed was right (Galatians 1:14). That is why Saul helped kill Stephen. Then Saul became the leader in the attacks on the church after Stephen's death.

Read Acts 26:9–11. As these verses show, how does Paul describe his actions in the past against the church?

In 1 Corinthians 1:23, Paul says that the Good News about Jesus makes the Jews “stumble.” Why? Because the Good News does not match their idea about who a Savior should be. The Jews in Paul's day want a king who will free them from the Romans. Many Jews at that time cannot accept the picture of a Savior dying on a cross. The Bible says that anyone who hangs on a cross is under God's curse (Deuteronomy 21:23). So, the Jews in Paul's day think that Jesus' death is proof that He is not the Savior.

Acts 9:1, 2 shows us Saul of Tarsus harming believers. Saul wanted to go to Damascus. It was an important city, about 135 miles north of Jerusalem. Many Jews lived in Damascus. Jews living in cities outside Judea continued to communicate with Jerusalem. Jerusalem was the center of the Jewish religion. But the center of the Jewish cities were the synagogues. Synagogues were Jewish “churches.” Communication between Jerusalem and these synagogues happened often, mostly in letters. These letters were carried by a “shaliah.” The word “shaliah” means “a person who is sent.” A “shaliah” was someone chosen by the Sanhedrin. The Sanhedrin was the Jewish ruling group in Jerusalem. The Sanhedrin chose a “shaliah” to do a special job. Saul asked the Sanhedrin's president for letters to take to the synagogue in Damascus. So, Saul was a “shaliah.” These letters gave him the power to arrest any Christians and bring them to Jerusalem (read Acts 26:12). In Greek, the word for “shaliah” is “apostolos.” From this word we get the word “apostles.” Apostles is the same word we use for the the men Jesus chose to lead the church after He went to heaven. So, before Saul became Jesus' apostle, Saul was an apostle for the Sanhedrin.



In 1 Corinthians 1:23, Paul says the Good News about Jesus made the Jews “stumble.”

ON THE DAMASCUS ROAD (Acts 9:5)

Read Acts 9:3–9. What do these verses say happens when Saul is on his way to Damascus? What is the meaning of Jesus' words to Saul in Acts 9:5 (read also Acts 26:14)?

Saul and his friends were near Damascus when something happened that they did not expect. They saw a bright light from heaven and heard a voice speak. Saul and his friends did not dream this experience. They lived it. God meant this experience for Saul, not his friends. Saul's friends saw the light. But the light blinded only Saul. Saul's friends heard the voice. But only Saul understood what the voice said. The light was glory from Jesus. Jesus appeared to Saul on the road (Acts 22:14). Later, after Saul becomes Paul, he writes in his letters about how he saw Jesus. This experience made Paul the same as the Twelve followers of Jesus, who said they saw Jesus alive after He died.

Saul talked with Jesus. That talk with Jesus was more powerful for Saul than seeing the light was. Saul believed that he did God's work by fighting the followers of Jesus. He felt he protected the Jewish religion from false beliefs. But then on the road to Damascus, Saul learned that Jesus was alive. Saul also learned that when he fought Jesus' followers, he fought Jesus Himself.

Jesus said these words of wisdom to Saul: " 'You are only hurting yourself by fighting me' " (Acts 26:14, ERV). For sure, Saul knew these words of wisdom very well. These wise words come from a word picture of an ox trying to move against the sharp stick a farmer used to push the ox. When that happened, the animal only hurt itself even more.

These wise words point to a fight in Saul's mind. The Bible names this fight the work of the Holy Spirit (John 16:8–11). This fight may have started when Stephen was killed. "Saul had a big part in the trial of Stephen. Saul helped make the decision to put Stephen to death. But Saul saw proof that God was with Stephen. This proof led Saul to feel unsure about his attacks against Jesus' followers. Saul's mind was deeply moved. He was confused. So, he went to the people that he trusted. These were people who were wise and had good sense. In the end, these religious leaders and rulers convinced Saul that Stephen was speaking against God and that Jesus was a false Savior."—Ellen G. White, *The Acts of the Apostles [leaders and teachers]*, page 112, 113, adapted.



Paul and his friends saw a bright light from heaven and heard a voice speak.

ANANIAS'S VISIT (Galatians 1:1, 11, 12)

When Saul knows he talks with Jesus Himself, Saul asks the question that Jesus needs him to ask: “ ‘Lord, what should I do?’ ” (Acts 22:10, NLV). Saul’s question shows us what is in Saul’s heart. He is sorry for fighting against Jesus. More important, Saul’s question shows that he is willing to let Jesus guide his life from now on. Jesus tells Saul to go to Damascus and wait there until he is told what to do.

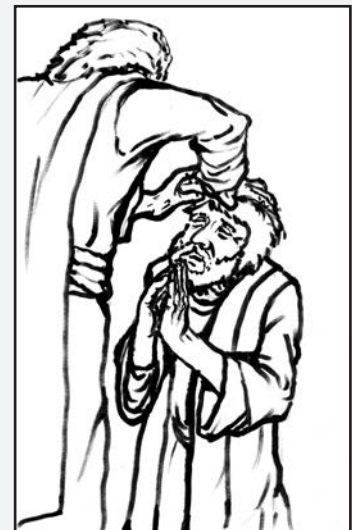
In Acts 9:10–19, the Bible shows us how the Lord worked to get Saul of Tarsus ready for his new life as Paul the apostle. An apostle was one of the men Jesus chose to lead the church in New Testament times. So, what did Jesus do to get Saul ready? First, Jesus gave Ananias a vision. In this vision, Jesus told Ananias to visit Saul and lay his hands on him to give him back his sight. Ananias already knew who Saul was. Ananias also knew that many believers suffered and even died because of Saul. Ananias also knew the reason why Saul was in Damascus. So, we can easily understand why Ananias did not really want to go meet Saul.

But what Ananias did not know was that Saul had a personal meeting with Jesus that changed his life forever. Ananias did not know that Saul no longer worked for the Jewish leaders. Ananias was very shocked and surprised to learn that Jesus asked Saul to work for Him. Jesus chose Saul to be the person to take the Good News to both the Jews and the non-Jews everywhere.

Read Galatians 1:1, 11, 12. What does Paul say about his work as an apostle?

In Galatians, Paul says that no human gave him his message or made him an apostle. But Jesus Himself gave Paul his message. When Ananias comes to visit Saul, of Tarsus, Ananias says again what Jesus already told Saul about the work the Lord gave Saul to do as His apostle. The change in Saul’s life is so amazing that only God could have changed his heart. God’s power is the only explanation for why the one who fought Jesus the most becomes His most loving apostle.

We see Saul’s heart change. How does Saul’s change of heart give you hope for the people you pray for who act as if they have no interest in serving God?



In a vision, Jesus told Ananias to visit Saul and lay his hands on him to give him back his sight.

PAUL STARTS TO WORK FOR GOD (Acts 9:20–25)

Acts 9:19–25 hints that Paul may have stayed in Damascus for a while before going back to Jerusalem (Acts 9:26). But in Galatians 1:17, Paul adds that before he goes to Jerusalem, he goes to Arabia. There, Paul lives alone for some time. “Here, Paul was alone in the desert. He had lots of time to think about God and to study.”—Ellen G. White, *The Acts of the Apostles [leaders and teachers]*, page 125, adapted.

Read Acts 9:20–25. What does Luke tell us about Paul’s work for God in Damascus? What success does Paul experience?

Paul goes to Damascus to arrest Christians who hide in Jewish synagogues in the city (Acts 9:2). Synagogues are Jewish “churches” or places of worship. But now Paul’s reasons for going to Damascus change. He goes to the synagogues, but it is not to arrest Jesus’ followers. Now Paul goes to the synagogues to help other Jews accept Jesus. Think about what people must feel when they see and hear Paul! Here is the same man who arrested Christians and killed them. Now, he is preaching about Jesus! The Jewish believers are shocked and amazed about Saul of Tarsus and his change. Luke tells us “the Jews living in Damascus wondered about Saul’s preaching” (Acts 9:22, NLV). (Clearly, no one in the church has any idea about how much power Paul will have in the future in bringing other people to Jesus.)

Paul’s attackers cannot argue with his message. So, some of Paul’s attackers decide to kill him. Paul writes about their plan to end his life (2 Corinthians 11:32, 33). Paul’s story about what happens shows us that Paul’s attackers go to the local rulers to get their support for their plan to kill Paul. But Jesus’ followers help Paul escape in a basket from the city.

Paul knows from the start he will suffer many hard times and attacks from his enemies (Acts 9:16). But nothing can stop Paul’s faith or his wish to do his duty.

Paul suffers many attacks in his new life with Jesus (2 Corinthians 4:8, 9). But he does not give up. How can we learn to do the same with our faith? How can we learn to keep going when we feel like giving up?



The Christian believers are shocked and amazed when they hear Paul preaching about Jesus!

PAUL GOES BACK TO JERUSALEM (Acts 9:26–30)

Paul went back to Jerusalem after he escaped from Damascus. This visit was Paul's first time back in Jerusalem since he left that city to go to Damascus. Paul went back to Jerusalem three years after he became a Christian (Galatians 1:18). Paul's visit to the city was not an easy one. Many problems waited for Paul inside and outside the church.

Read Acts 9:26–30. What do these verses tell us happens to Paul when he arrives in Jerusalem?

In Jerusalem, Paul tried to join the apostles. The apostles were the men Jesus chose to lead His church after He went to heaven. By now, Paul was a Christian for three years. But the news about his becoming a Christian seemed so amazing that only a few of the apostles believed it was true. The apostles thought that Paul became a Christian to get Christians to trust him so that he could give their names to the Jews. But Barnabas helped the apostles to accept Paul. Barnabas was a Levite from Cyprus (Acts 4:36, 37). He introduced Paul to the apostles. Then the apostles believed that Paul was really a Christian. The apostles also must have been amazed by how God changed Paul.

Sadly, Paul always met people in the church who did not trust him because he hurt believers in the past. Some believers did not trust the message Paul preached. Paul preached that Jesus saves us from sin. But many Jews, including the apostles, were slow to understand that the old Jewish worship plan ended when Jesus died on the cross. Maybe that is why Paul's closest friends in the church were the Greek-speaking believers: Barnabas; Philip; one of the Seven church leaders (Acts 21:8); and Mnason (Acts 21:16).

Paul stayed in Jerusalem for 15 days (Galatians 1:18). During that time, Paul decided to share the Good News about Jesus with the same Jews that he turned against Stephen. But these Jews refused to accept Paul's message and even tried to end Paul's life. Later, Jesus came to Paul in a vision. Jesus told Paul to leave Jerusalem for his own safety (Acts 22:17–21). Christians in Jerusalem helped Paul go to the city of Caesarea. From there, Paul went to his hometown of Tarsus in Cilicia. He stayed in Cilicia for several years before starting his many trips to share the Good News.



Jesus came to Paul in a vision and told Paul to leave Jerusalem for his own safety (Acts 22:17–21).

ADDITIONAL THOUGHT: “When an army general is killed in war, the army loses its leader. But the general’s death does not make the enemy any stronger. But what happens when a powerful man joins the enemy’s side in war? The first thing that happens is that the side he was fighting for loses his special skills. Second, the other army gets this man’s wisdom and strength. The Lord easily could have killed Saul of Tarsus while he was on his way to Damascus. Then the Jewish group who hurt the church would have lost much of their power to hurt Christians. But God in His wisdom let Saul live. Then God changed Saul’s life. In this way, God took a champion who fought for the enemy and brought him over to fight for Jesus.”—Ellen G. White, *The Acts of the Apostles [leaders and teachers]*, page 124, adapted.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

- ① Think more about Jesus’ question to Saul of Tarsus on the Damascus road: “ ‘Why are you working so hard against Me?’ ” (Acts 9:4, NLV). For Saul, who later became known as Paul, this question proved that Jesus of Nazareth woke up from the dead. This question also meant that there was a special tie between Jesus and His church (read also Matthew 25:34–45). Jesus was connected with His church. The meaning of Jesus’ question to Saul was clear: any harm done to the church was harm done to Jesus Himself. What does that truth mean to us today?
- ② Our witnessing for Jesus means that we must suffer for Jesus. The Greek word for “witness” is “martyr.” A martyr is a person who suffers and dies for his or her faith. What does it mean for you to suffer for Jesus?
- ③ There is an old Latin saying, “Credo ut intelligam.” It means, “I believe so that I may understand.” How does this idea help us understand what happened to Saul of Tarsus? Before Saul became a believer in Jesus, he did not understand the truth about Jesus. But Saul had his experience with Jesus on the Damascus road. Then Saul understood who Jesus was. What lesson can we learn from this story to help us when we are upset with people who do not believe in Bible truths that are so clear to us?



“God took a champion who fought for the enemy and brought him over to fight for Jesus.”—Ellen G. White, *The Acts of the Apostles [leaders and teachers]*, page 124, adapted.