**CPC SUNDAY SCHOOL**

Study in the Book of Acts

#3 of 4

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**THE CONVERSION OF SAUL AND THE EXPANSION**

 **OF THE EARLY CHRISTIAN CHURCH**

**Main Idea**

Saul on his way to Damascus is met by Jesus by way of a blinding light. Saul is converted. Ananias helps out. Events quickly turn to the unfolding of ways the Holy Spirit is making a way for Gentiles to believe in Jesus Christ. The early church expands.

**Background Scripture**

Acts 9: 1-31 -The Conversion of Saul

 Acts 10: 9-48 -Vision of the Expansion of the

 Early Christian Church

**Preparatory Readings for Leaders**

**Reading #1 - PAUL’S CONVERSION**

The most important event in human history apart from the life, death and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth is the conversion to Christianity of Saul of Tarsus. If Saul had remained a Jewish rabbi, we would be missing thirteen of twenty-seven books of the New Testament and Christianity's early major expansion to the Gentiles. Humanly speaking, without Paul Christianity would probably be of only antiquarian or arcane interest, like the Dead Sea Scrolls community or the Samaritans.Saul the Enemy (9:1-2)

**SAUL IS SNORTING MAD ABOUT CHRISTIANS**

With Old Testament imagery for anger--snorting through distended nostrils (Ps 18:8, 15)--Luke builds up the picture of Saul as a rampaging wild beast in his hateful opposition to the disciples of the Lord (compare Acts 8:3; Gal 1:13, 23). When the NIV renders "threats and murder" as *murderous threats,* something is lost of the reference to the two-part Jewish judicial process (Longenecker 1981:368) and the highlighting of Saul's violence (Lake and Cadbury 1979:99). Saul does not just make threats (compare Acts 4:17, 29); he helps bring about actual executions (8:1; 26:10). Aside from this initial note, Luke gives us no indication of Saul's inner thoughts and motives before, during or after his conversion (but see 7:54-8:1; 26:9-11; Rom 7:7-12; Gal 1:13, 14; Phil 3:4-11).

Saul takes action. He goes to Caiaphas (4:6) and receives letters of introduction to the synagogues in Damascus, some 140 miles northeast. He seeks to enlist their aid, or at least permission, to arrest any fugitive Hellenistic Jewish Christians and return them to Jerusalem for trial (22:5).

The hostility to Christianity of pre-Christian Saul presents both challenge and hope to any non-Christian. The hope is that if God can turn the fiercest opponent of the Lord into his most willing servant, he has the ability to save anyone. The challenge is not to be deceived by self-satisfaction. Saul was quite content with his life spiritually. But God's sovereign grace arrested him.Saul's Encounter with Christ (9:3-9)

**JESUS CONFRONTS SAUL**

As Saul travels to Damascus at midday, he experiences the divine presence: *a light from heaven* flashing around him and a *voice* addressing him (compare 7:31/Ex 3:4-10). The descent from Mt. Hermon to Damascus in the plain goes through a region known for violent electrical storms. Though this flashing light may have had the effects of lightning, however, it was a supernatural midday phenomenon.

Saul and his traveling companions see the light, but Saul sees more: the risen Lord Jesus in all his resplendent glory (9:17, 27; 22:14; 26:16; 1 Cor 9:1; 15:8). So overwhelming is the sight that Saul falls to the ground (compare Ezek 1:28; Dan 8:17). The sound or voice probably reminds him of the *bat-qol* ("daughter of the voice"), the way pious Jews believed God had directly communicated with human beings since the gift of prophecy had ceased with Malachi (Longenecker 1981:370). But the divine presence creates confusion for Saul, for if God is speaking with him, who is this heavenly figure addressing him?

The voice gives the divine perspective on Paul's activity. With a repeated address (compare Gen 22:11; Ex 3:4; 1 Sam 3:10; Lk 10:41; 22:31) the voice asks, *Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?* Jesus identifies with his disciples, his body (see Lk 10:16; Acts 1:1; 9:1; 1 Cor 12:27; Eph 4:12). In doing so he reveals that Saul's teacher Gamaliel's worst fears have materialized (Acts 5:39).

Saul grapples with his dawning realization that his life, though lived in zeal for the one true God even to the point of persecuting the church, has in reality been one of "ignorance in unbelief" (1 Tim 1:13). Through the question "why?" he begins to see that in proving his commitment to God by persecuting the church, he has actually been proving himself an enemy of God. As Saul deeply considers that "why?" and accepts the divine perspective on his actions, his whole spiritual world will be turned upside down. What was gain will become loss (Phil 3:6-9). What was a badge of honor will become a lifelong shameful blot on his character (1 Cor 15:9; 1 Tim 1:13, 15).

Out of his confusion, Saul calls, *Who are you, Lord?* Is he simply addressing the heavenly being with respect (Marshall 1980:169), or is he for the first time confessing Jesus as his Lord (compare Rom 10:9-10; 1 Cor 12:3; Kistemaker 1990:332)? His inquiry about the person's identity may indicate the former. He receives a divine disclosure in the clear reply, "I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting." Jesus of Nazareth is risen from the dead! Stephen was telling the truth when he bore witness to the Son of Man standing at God's right hand (Acts 7:56). Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, the Savior, the Lord (9:20, 28).

Immediately Jesus issues a divine demand that requires Saul's trust and obedience. In the city he will learn what he *must do* to fulfill God's purposes (compare 9:16; 14:22).

For Saul the physical effects are devastating. Getting up from the ground, he opens his eyes and discovers he is blind! Led by the hand (Judg 16:26; Tobit 11:16) into the city, he neither eats nor drinks *for three days.*

As Saul meditates on the light during those three days of darkness, then, the greatness of the divinely promised final salvation available only in the last person he saw must become more and more clear and precious (Acts 26:18). And the role he is to play in becoming a light to the Gentiles must become increasingly evident (26:17).

What is Saul to make of his blindness? It is not a punishment (as Hamm 1990:70) nor an indication of divine disfavor (as Hedrick 1981:419) nor simply a concrete proof of the vision (as Haenchen 1971:323). An acted parable, it shows Saul the spiritual bankruptcy of his pre-Christian condition.

Saul's fast may be caused by the shock. Eye doctor John Bullock notes that the electrical shock from being struck by lightning causes violent muscular contractions; the throat can be so affected that it is hard to swallow (see notes for 9:8, 18). Or the fast may be a conscious act of penance for past sins (Haenchen 1971:323). The former seems more likely, since in 9:19, after his healing, Saul takes nourishment and is strengthened.

All conversion experiences are unique to the individual. What of Saul's experience does Luke intend us to take as normative? We should focus on the dynamic pattern of conversion, which includes a personal encounter with Jesus Christ via a witness to the gospel, a response of surrender in penitence and faith, and the reception of salvation blessings and incorporation into the church.Saul the Chosen Vessel (9:10-19)

**ENTER ANANIAS**

In a *vision* the Lord speaks to Ananias, sending him on a mission to restore the new convert. The mission serves to preserve Paul's apostleship as by "revelation from Jesus Christ" (Gal 1:12), to bring him into the church, despite his notorious reputation, and to ensure that the Gentile mission will take place with the approval of the church (Acts 13:1-4; compare other visions that guide the church's advance: 10:3, 17; 16:9-10: 18:9-10).

Ananias, a resident of Damascus and a devout disciple (22:12), is part of a "double vision" divine encounter (9:12) in which both he and Paul are made aware of the next step. Ananias should proceed to the main east-west thoroughfare of Damascus, *Straight Street.* With great porches and gates at each end and colonnades for commerce running along each side, this fashionable address would be as well known in its day as Regent Street in London or Fifth Avenue in New York is today. He is to look for Saul of Tarsus in Judas's house. Tradition locates Saul's abode at the west end (Lake and Cadbury 1979:102). Saul *is praying,* probably in preparation for his restoration (compare 1:14).

To be converted means to move from self-centered independence to dependence on the Lord and interdependence with fellow disciples. Saul the convert needs the support and encouragement of the church. Today too the gospel witness should emphasize by word and deed that being born again is being born into the family of God, the church.

Ananias protests. He has misgivings grounded in the convert's past reputation. All the Lord has told him is that this Saul is blind and praying. When Ananias puts that together with the *harm* Saul has perpetrated against the saints (9:21; 26:10) in Jerusalem, he is not sure he wants the assignment. Besides, Saul's mission in Damascus, with the authority of the high priests (either Annas and Caiaphas [Kistemaker 1990:329] or the high-priestly families [Bruce 1990:238]), is *to arrest all who call on [the Lord's] name.* By negative example, at this point, Ananias teaches us that reluctant gospel messengers must not only love their enemies but also trust that the gospel has such redemptive power that a praying converted persecutor is a persecutor no more.

The Lord does not directly answer Ananias's misgivings; he simply repeats his command: "Go!" The sovereign Lord has spoken. That is all the rationale Ananias or we need. Yet in his mercy the Lord also tells Ananias Saul's new status as *my chosen instrument* (Jer 18:1-11; 2 Cor 4:7; 2 Tim 2:20-21), his new mission, *to carry my name before the Gentiles and their kings and before the people of Israel,* and new relationship to persecution, to *suffer* for Jesus' name. These new realities mean Ananias has nothing to fear from Saul.

Ananias obeys and performs his ministry to Paul. Laying hands on Saul, he declares that he has been sent by the Lord Jesus so that Saul may see again and *be filled with the Spirit* (Acts 9:17). Saul's vision (v. 12) linked only the healing and the laying on of hands, consistent with other passages in Luke-Acts (Lk 4:40; 13:13; Acts 28:8). Ananias also seems to link it with Paul's being filled with the Spirit (Williams [1985:157] and Marshall [1980:172] say no). Saul's filling with the Spirit is not a delayed reception of the baptism of the Spirit as a salvation blessing, but is the first of many empowerments for apostolic witness (compare 13:9; also see 2:4; 4:8, 31). This is Paul's "Pentecost," further validating his apostleship.

**A MODEL FOR CHRISTIAN HOSPITALITY**

Ananias ministers to Saul as a convert. He heals him--sight is regained as *something like scales* (film or scar tissue) falls from Saul's eyes. He instructs Saul, confirming that the Jesus whom Saul saw on the road is indeed the Lord. He comforts Saul, addressing him as a Christian brother. He baptizes Saul, formally incorporating him into the body of Christ. Finally Saul knows full physical restoration as he takes nourishment. In all, Ananias's ministry models for us the supportive, restorative role the church is to play in the lives of newly converted Christians.

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**Note:** The excerpted reading comes from Bible Gateway Resources/ Commentaries – here’s the link for further reading.

<https://www.biblegateway.com/resources/commentaries/IVP-NT/Acts/Pauls-Conversion>

**Reading #2 - PETER AND SIMON THE TANNER**

**PETER AND SOCIALLY SHUNNED SIMON THE TANNER**

The author of Acts reminds the reader two more times (10:6 and 10:32) that Peter took up residence with Simon the tanner. We find out that the home of Simon the tanner eventually served as the launching point for Peter to travel up the coast to Caesarea and the home of Cornelius the centurion. This resulted in an outpouring of God’s spirit upon Cornelius’ household, which in turn convinced Peter that God’s household includes Gentiles, which in turn set the stage for Peter’s convincing testimony at the Jerusalem council.

Here is the interesting thing about this, which we might easily overlook: The ancient hearers of Acts would have known that a tannery was not by any means a desirable place to stay. Simon’s home was a despised place and, despite being a Jew, his profession as a tanner would have rendered him a social and religious outcast.

The process of tanning hides to make leather in the ancient Middle East is described in Unger’s Bible Dictionary in this way:

“A three-day treatment with salt and flour cleansed the skins from foreign matter. Lime was used to remove the hair. The acrid juices of desert plants or oak bark were also used. The skin was dried for several days and treated with acid barks and leaves, like sumac. … The art of tanning, although very necessary, was a malodorous task and one that was regarded as unclean by many who recognized certain animals as unclean. Thus, under Judaism, tanners had to live outside the city, often near the water…”

The Babylonian Talmud states, “The world cannot do without perfume makers and tanners, happy is he who prepares perfumes, woe to him whose craft is tanning.” Joachim Jeremias, in his book, *Jerusalem in the Time of Jesus*, places tanners (along with dung collectors and copper smelters) in his list of “despised trades” because of the foul smell associated with the craft (a tanner was often also a collector of the dung used in the tanning process). The stench of the ingredients would permeate the clothing and the skin of the tanner.

The wife of a tanner had the right to file for divorce—even if she knew prior to marrying that her husband was a tanner—by explaining that although she thought she could endure the smell, she was unable to stand it. From a ceremonial standpoint, the tanner’s continuous contact with dead animals placed him in a state of perpetual ritual uncleanness, according to the stipulations of Leviticus (11:39-40). The Babylonian Talmud mentions that tanners were excluded from participation in temple festivals.

So, the aggregate picture of Simon the tanner is of a man who lived on the outskirts of town and who was socially marginalized and religiously unclean. His *very being* was considered offensive. He was the epitome of an excluded person.

**AND THEN PETER STAYS WITH THE TANNER**

And here comes Peter. He has been traveling through the region, preaching the Gospel and performing miraculous healings, which has culminated in raising Tabitha from the dead. Peter was a rock star! Surely, he had his pick of lodging options. But he chose to stay with Simon the tanner. Do you see how profound that little sentence in Acts 9:43 is?  “Peter stayed in Joppa for some time with a tanner named Simon.”

I think that by the time Peter came to Joppa, he was already well on his way to laying aside the Jewish purity stipulations that he had grown up with; but he was still negotiating the boundaries. How far would he go? The home of Simon the tanner, it turns out, was not just a launching pad for the conversion of the Gentile household of Cornelius. It was another important marker along Peter’s journey from Law to Grace. Peter was already well on his way into a new paradigm which rejected exclusionary Jewish purity codes and social conventions. I can’t help but think that when Luke wrote the book of Acts, he relished the counter-cultural subversiveness of mentioning Peter’s lodging choice.

It is interesting to note that Joppa was the same city where, in a much older biblical story, Jonah ran away in a ship to avoid God’s call to preach a message to Gentiles. By contrast, Peter obeyed the leading of the Spirit and embarked from Joppa to Caesarea and delivered his message of God’s radical inclusion to the household of the Gentile Roman officer Cornelius. Ironically, it was in a putrid house of ritual impurity that Peter received the preparatory vision about crossing the Gentile boundary by no longer calling unclean what God had made clean (Acts 10:15).

**WHAT DO YOU DO NOW?**

So, what does this mean to us here and now? Who are the outcasts today? Who are the marginalized ones? Who are the ones considered offensive and unfit for inclusion in our worship of God? Who are the tanners? The Samaritans? The godless Gentiles? The Ethiopian Eunuchs? What religious taboos and social boundaries of exclusion is Jesus breaking down today? Do we dare to follow?

**Note:** The excerpted reading comes from *Patheos* – a Critical Thinking Christian Online Magazine – here’s the link for further reading.

<https://www.patheos.com/blogs/danielpcoleman/2017/05/simon-the-tanner/>

**Leading the Session**

1. Gathering:
* Welcome/ Share stories
* Sing a hymn or song
* Prayer
1. Starting the Lesson:
* Share with the class the theme of the study.
* Guide the class in answering the questions in the Participants Guide.
1. Close in prayer.

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**Participants Guide** (The Conversion of Saul (Paul) and the Expansion of the Early Christian Church – Lesson 3 of 4

Note: For purposes of this lesson we will use the name Saul. He has not yet changed his name at this point and the Scripture references still uses Saul for Paul. The first use of the name Paul happened in Acts 13: 9

**Acts 9: 1-31**

**-The Conversion of Saul (Paul)**

Questions – Part A: (refer to vv. 1-9)

1. Why did Saul go to the High Priest before proceeding to Damascus?
2. Describe the events leading to Saul’s conversion, his encounter with Jesus Christ on the way to Damascus.

Questions – Part B (refer to vv.10-19)

1. Why was Ananias hesitant at first to help Saul?
2. What did God say to Ananias?
3. How does this story about Paul and Ananias impact our own dealings with new converts and non-followers of Jesus.

Question – Part C (refer to vv. 19b-31)

1. Describe the ministry of Barnabas for Saul. How was this important?

**Acts 10: 1-48**

**-Gentiles now are included in God’s Kingdom**

Questions – Part A (refer to chapter 10: 9-16)

1. Explain the vision of Peter.

Question – Part B (refer to vv. 17-34)

1. Describe the work or words of the Holy Spirit to Peter. How did that turn out?

Question – Part C (34-48)

1. Peter declares: (from v. 34)

*“I now realize how true it is that God does not show favoritism but accepts from every nation the one who fears him and does what is right.”*

What does this mean?

1. How is Peter staying in the house of Simon the Tanner significant?

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**Next Sunday:**

**-The Message of the Gospel and Initial Church Conflicts**

**Assignment – read: Acts 15: 7-20, Galatian 2: 1-19**

* Paul and Peter disagrees
* Conflict resolutions and the Good News

(end)