

## MAIN POINT

*Jesus intrudes in our lives to correct our vision and change our future.*

## INTRODUCTION

Today we begin a six-week journey through Paul's life. As a brilliant, driven, respected leader, Paul had a crystal-clear view of his world and future. Or so he thought. In one moment, everything changed. After his encounter with Christ, Paul's entire view of reality was transformed, making him less arrogant yet more deeply confident in who he was. He traveled widely, took huge risks, challenged authority, and made lifelong friends. And by living out his new vision, he shaped Christianity more deeply than anyone other than Jesus Himself.

What would happen if God clarified our vision just as he did for Paul? How would it change the way we view ourselves...our calling...our suffering...our definition of success? These are the questions we will work through today and in the coming weeks.

Imagine you were blind. What would you miss seeing the most? What do you imagine having the hardest time doing?

What kind of help would you need?

How would you describe spiritual blindness? How is spiritual blindness similar to physical blindness? How are the two different?

Blindness is a form of physical bondage. There are places you can't go, things you can't do, and some freedoms you can't enjoy. But in some ways, physical blindness is a picture of a greater reality—spiritual blindness. In the same way that the physically blind are dependent on others for help, those who are spiritually blind are dependent on Jesus to open their eyes to Him and His calling. Paul was a well-educated, driven Jewish leader, and found deep confidence in his nationality and accomplishments. All of that changed when Jesus confronted and blinded him on the road to Damascus. When Paul regained his sight, everything looked different—from his self-image to his purpose in life. Similarly, Jesus intrudes in our lives to correct our vision and change our future.

## UNDERSTANDING

### > READ ACTS 7:54–8:3.

These verses describe the death of Stephen, the first Christian martyr mentioned in Scripture. What do we learn about Paul (Saul) from his part in Stephen's death and the events that soon followed?

Paul was a devout Pharisee. What reasons did that give Paul for persecuting Christians?

What do Paul's actions reveal about the commitments he had made in his life up to this point?

**Stephen gave a speech before the Jewish council that connected the Jewish faith with Jesus and identified Jesus as the promised Messiah. In his speech, he accused Israel's leaders of killing the Messiah, which obviously enraged them. The result was Stephen's death by stoning for his perceived blasphemy. Present and participative in that death was Saul, who later became Paul. Following Stephen's death, we read that persecution broke out against Christians with Paul leading the charge. Paul did not just persecute the church: he began to destroy it. Paul led the charge in the streets, house to house, men and women. He did not just arrest Christians; he dragged them off, and he did so in defense of his Jewish faith.**

These verses give us a picture of who Paul was before he met Christ. What is one word you would use to describe yourself before you came to know Jesus?

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**> READ ACTS 9:1-19.**

**While persecution was scattering believers, Paul continued to ravage the church. The high priest authorized Paul to go to Damascus, arrest believers, and bring them to Jerusalem to be imprisoned. As Paul approached Damascus, he encountered the risen Jesus, who blinded him and commanded him to go into Damascus and wait for instructions.**

Why do you think Saul was struck blind? What might God have been trying to teach him through blindness?

What plans did the Lord have for Saul, as revealed through God's instructions to Ananias (vv. 10-19)?

Why do you think God chose one of Christianity's worst enemies to serve Him? What does this tell us about the character of God?

**Saul's encounter with Jesus impacted him physically. He was unable to see when he got up from the ground. His traveling companions had to lead him by the hand into Damascus. For three days Saul was blind and did not eat or drink anything. His meeting with Jesus was a traumatic experience that would change his life. In the instructions God gave Ananias, we learn that Saul was God's "chosen instrument" to spread the good news to both Gentiles and Jews and that Saul himself would suffer for Jesus' name. Saul, who had persecuted Christ's followers, would experience the same suffering he had inflicted on others. This is not a message of divine retaliation, but a prophecy about a privilege Saul would experience as he followed God.**

What about you? What was your encounter with Jesus like? How did it leave you changed?

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**> READ ACTS 9:20-31.**

**If there was any doubt regarding the authenticity of Paul's conversion, it was dispelled by his words and actions. Paul immediately began to proclaim Jesus in Damascus as the Son of God and the Messiah. As a result of his preaching, his opponents plotted to kill Paul. He escaped to Jerusalem, where believers realized he was indeed a changed man. Once again his preaching resulted in threats to kill him.**

What do these verses reveal about Paul's self-image following his conversion? What do they reveal about his new mission and purpose?

What changes in your own beliefs and actions demonstrate the reality of your commitment to Christ?

**A real commitment to Jesus Christ is life changing. We demonstrate our commitment by dismissing previously held anti-Christian beliefs, embracing biblical truth, and changing our behavior as the Holy Spirit directs us. Genuine commitment is proven by our Christ-like lifestyle.**

## APPLICATION

How do you demonstrate the intensity of your commitment to Christ? What would it look like to be more committed to Christ than to work, family, leisure, and security?

Because of Paul's Jewish heritage, he had an immediate mission field for the gospel. What prior experiences make you a credible witness to specific groups of people? With whom could your specific testimony have an impact?

We don't only need God to correct our vision when we first become Christians; this is an ongoing need in our walk with Him. In what ways has God clarified your vision for your life recently? How did that change you?

## PRAY

**Thank God for using the most unlikely people for His kingdom. Praise God for His grace in your life that transformed you into a new person living for Jesus.**

## FOLLOW UP

Midway through this week, send a follow-up email to your group with some or all of the following:

### 1. Questions to consider as they continue to reflect on what they learned this week:

Paul tells the story of his conversion several times in the rest of the book of Acts. What is your story? How could you share it this week with someone who has not believed the gospel?

### 2. The challenge to memorize Acts 9:15-16.

## COMMENTARY

## ACTS 7:54–8:3

7:54. Stephen's audience expressed displeasure both inwardly (enraged in their hearts) and outwardly (gnashed their teeth at him). They took themselves to be Israel's religious leaders, pious men of God, and yet Stephen charged them with deep spiritual corruption.

7:55. Stephen was a stark contrast to his audience. They were fuming with rage, but he was filled with the Holy Spirit and gazed peacefully into heaven even as he knew death was coming.

7:56-57. Son of Man was Jesus' favorite self-designation. Each use of this expression in the NT came from the lips of Jesus, except where people quoted His words back to Him (Jn 12:34) and in this verse. Jesus' enthronement beside God in heaven implies His divine status and equality with God the Father, which is why the members of the Sanhedrin became enraged.

7:58. The Romans allowed the Jewish leaders to maintain the sanctity of the temple area, but not carry out the death penalty. That is why Jesus was taken to Pilate, a Roman official, for trial. In this instance, however, Stephen was killed illegally by an enraged mob. This is the first reference in Scripture to Saul (later called Paul). It is disputed whether he was a member of the Sanhedrin or just a young rabbinic student who was zealous for traditional Jewish faith. Whether he was formally involved in the Sanhedrin or not, he "agreed" with the decision to stone Stephen (8:1).

7:59-60. Both of Stephen's requests are remarkable. His first, Lord Jesus, receive my spirit!, proclaims that Jesus is Judge and Savior. Stephen's second request, that God not charge his executioners with sin in this matter, illustrates the nonvindictive spirit of one who understands that his own sins have been forgiven by grace. Fell asleep is a common expression for death in the Bible (Jn 11:11; 1Co 11:30).

8:1. Events surrounding Stephen's testimony and murder led to severe persecution of the church in Jerusalem. All believers except the apostles were scattered to nearby regions. Hence the persecution helped spread the gospel to surrounding areas such as Judea and Samaria. The facts that the apostles were not the focus of the persecution and that it came about after Stephen's death suggest that the persecution focused primarily on Hellenistic Jewish Christians, although the entire church was affected.

8:3. Paul, or Saul, seems to have become lead persecutor. His reputation as a destructive force in Jerusalem (ravaging the church), and possibly elsewhere, seems to have preceded him to Damascus (9:13).

## ACTS 9:1-31

9:1-2. The narrative returns to Saul, or Paul. His anger with Jesus' followers continued unabated, to the point that he was threatening to murder them. Paul later acknowledged his zeal in persecuting Christians (Php 3:6), and this is how he was known by others (e.g., Ananias, Ac 9:13). That Saul was authorized to travel to Damascus with warrants from the high priest to imprison people of the Way (a common name for early Christians; 19:9,23; 22:4) indicates his high standing among Jewish religious leaders. He planned to bring them back to Jerusalem since this city was the center of Judaism.

9:3-4. Nearing Damascus and no doubt thinking that his acts there would help halt the spread of Christianity, Saul instead saw a light from heaven that changed his life and, eventually, world history.

9:5. It is doubtful that Saul immediately recognized the voice as that of Jesus. His use of Lord was probably honorific (equivalent to "sir") rather than recognition of divinity. Hence the voice said, I am Jesus.

9:6. Saul was not told at this point what his mission or purpose was. That was reserved for when he encountered Ananias later in the city of Damascus. This stepwise introduction to his future kept him from

being overwhelmed all at once with the changes Jesus had initiated in his life, and it also allowed the Christians in Damascus to meet and accept the one whom they feared.

9:7. This is the first of three accounts of Saul's conversion that appear in the book of Acts (Acts 22:6-11; 26:12-18). Here it appears that Saul's traveling companions heard a noise but did not recognize the words that were spoken. The comments, it seems, were intended only for Saul.

9:10. We are not told how Ananias came to be a Christian. A possible scenario is that he or someone he knew had been in Jerusalem at Pentecost. There they would have seen and heard wondrous signs as God sent the Holy Spirit, and possibly accepted the message preached by the apostles. The pilgrims would then have taken their newfound faith back to Damascus, establishing the church that Saul now came to persecute.

9:13-14. Ananias's fear of Saul was such that he dared to question God's judgment. Saul's reputation as an enemy of the church was well earned, built as it was on the testimony of many people.

9:15-16. God revealed His purpose for Saul to Ananias first. This ensured that Saul would have a support network in place once he learned of his new purpose in life. Otherwise, imagine Saul coming to Ananias and delivering the news. Ananias would have scoffed, assuming he let Saul close enough to speak.

9:17-18. The ordering of events in Saul's conversion may have been altered from the standard pattern so that baptism rather than the filling of the Holy Spirit was the final event. The process may have been extended over several days rather than occurring all at once. But the result was the same: Saul became a follower of Jesus Christ.

9:19-20. Saul stayed in Damascus for some days, likely becoming oriented to basic Christianity even as he began proclaiming Jesus in the synagogues. He gave priority to the synagogues throughout his ministry, starting there before being forced to take the message elsewhere.

9:21-22. Understandably, the initial response to Saul was skeptical amazement, but as he grew more capable he was able to confound unbelieving Jews, proving that Jesus is the Messiah. Apparently, he was able to explain the messianic connections between the OT and Jesus so clearly that the Jews in Damascus could not refute him.

9:23-25. After many days pictures Saul dutifully preaching Jesus as Messiah for long enough to become the uppermost enemy of unbelieving Jews in Damascus. He had come to help their struggle against the growing Christian movement, but now he had become the chief cause of its growth. Thus they conspired to kill him. Unable to leave via the city gates, Saul escaped in a most undignified but effective manner: he was placed in a large basket and shoved through an opening in the wall (lit "through the wall").

9:26-27. Among believers in Jerusalem, Saul's reputation as a persecutor of the church was unchanged. Either news had not come from Damascus, or else the disciples in Jerusalem took a "wait and see" attitude. Perhaps they even suspected his conversion was just a ruse to infiltrate the fledgling Christian movement and destroy it from within. Barnabas was convinced of the genuineness of Saul's conversion, apparently because he had talked to him.

9:28-30. Saul... conversed and debated with the Hellenistic Jews, some of whom may have been involved with him in Stephen's stoning (7:57-60). A Hellenistic Jew himself, Paul had been born in Tarsus and spoke Greek as his primary language. Seeing one of their own, a former persecutor of the church no less, argue on behalf of Christianity was more than they could bear. They attempted to kill Saul, with the result that he was whisked away to his hometown.

9:31. This verse marks a significant point in the development of the early church. The church, having been forced by persecution to scatter outward from Jerusalem, was at peace in Judea, Galilee, and Samaria. This set the church up for a second stage of growth, which would see the gospel boldly taken outside Israel.