

The Beginning

April 9, 2023

Lesson Summary

Main Passages

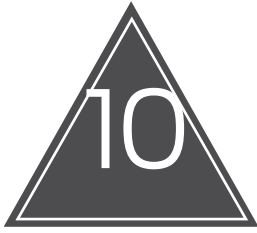
Acts 9:1-12

Session Outline

1. The Backstory (Acts 9:1-2)
2. Meeting Jesus (Acts 9:3-6)
3. Transformation and Healing (Acts 9:7-12)

Theological Theme

Jesus is the way to healing and salvation. He can do the impossible even with people who seem beyond reaching.



Leader Guide

The Beginning

Introduction

Makeovers are popular. Whether the makeover is for a person, yard, swimming pool, house, or something else, people like to see something go from terrible to terrific. In any kind of makeover situation, there is always a moment of deciding that change is necessary.

There are numerous television shows dedicated to taking the worst of the worst houses and transforming them into beautiful, sought-after spaces that wow the viewers. Although the timeline of transformation is condensed to fit into the time frame for television, in reality, those transformations take quite a bit more time and energy than is depicted. Often the makeovers that yield the most impressive results are the ones that start out the worst. The broken down, unwanted, and even condemned places can be the most rewarding to transform. It takes experts to work the miraculous on these houses.

- ❓ What type of makeover show do you like? Why?
- ❓ What is the most significant makeover you have ever seen or experienced?
- ❓ Why do you think transformation shows are so popular?

Session Summary

During a time of great persecution, Christ followers were on guard for people like Saul. He zealously sought out believers and punished them for their faith. He was well known and traveled around to bring wrath and destruction on those who trusted in Jesus. On one such trip to seek out Christians, Saul was blinded by an intense light in an unexpected encounter with Jesus. He was brought to his knees both physically and spiritually.

Having been incapacitated, Saul followed instructions from the Lord to go to Ananias where he received Christian community, teaching, and healing. Saul was transformed from a person who hated Christians into one of the most dedicated and passionate believers of all time. The world was never the same because of the encounter he had with Jesus. The story of Saul (also known as Paul) is confirmation that no one is beyond the reach of Christ and His ability to transform.


1. The Backstory (Acts 9:1-2)

At the start of Acts 9, Christians were facing extreme persecution. One of the leaders of this movement of persecution was Saul. He was described as a person that dragged men and women who followed Christ out of their houses and threw them into prison or worse. He had a reputation of bringing havoc to the church and sought to expand his attacks to Damascus.

When you read the adjectives used to describe Saul, you get a picture of what kind of man he was. He hated anyone who followed Jesus. There was nothing about Saul that would endear him to Christians. They avoided Saul and feared for their lives when he was around.

 What does the description of Saul say to you about the kind of man he was?

Saul acted with great authority in the region. He was not a vigilante out to attack Christians, rather Saul persecuted followers of Jesus under direct authority of the highest religious offices. He asked for and received letters of authorization that gave him the power and resources to accomplish His goal of working against Christ followers.

 Why does it matter that Saul acted on authority from religious leaders in that day?

The mention of Saul searching for people of “the Way” references the church of that day. Christians were often referred to as “the Way” in early writings. This name for Christians carries the idea of being more than a religious thought or set of beliefs. This name implies that to be a Christ follower means a way of daily living and not just a set of opinions or doctrines.

Paul's Conversion

Paul's conversion is related three times in Acts, here and in two speeches of Paul; before a Jewish crowd in the temple yard (22:3–21), and in his address to King Agrippa (26:2–23). There are minor differences between the three accounts, mainly due to the different audiences to whom they were addressed.

The fact that Saul was going to Damascus, a city about six days travel from Jerusalem, is a reminder that the church was spreading and growing. In response, those who hated Christianity and planned persecution of believers had to broaden their own efforts. Think about the kind of hate that one must feel in order to travel 150 miles away just to find people and persecute them for believing in Jesus. Saul had a backstory he freely shared throughout Scripture after his transformation, and every detail we learn about who he was before Jesus makes the rest of his story even more incredible and inspiring. Details of Paul's background can be found in Philippians 3:2-6.



Application: What in your backstory/life can be used to inspire or encourage others to place their faith in Jesus?

2. Meeting Jesus (Acts 9:3-6)

As Saul journeyed to Damascus intent on his plans, he was blinded by an exceedingly bright light. In another Scripture reference, Paul wrote that the light was “brighter than the sun” (Acts 26:13). Saul was confronted by his sin in a unique way. Later, he would refer to himself as the worst of sinners, who actively worked against the people of God (see Acts 26; 1 Timothy 1:15). Saul was wholeheartedly against the church of Jesus, but God gathered his attention in a way he could not ignore. Whatever the reason God chose this way to get Saul's attention, the result was dramatic and powerful.

When the light blinded Saul, he knew it was something supernatural and was astonished. He fell to the ground in response, not necessarily in reverence or submission but as a survival instinct. This event was used to bring Saul to his knees both physically and spiritually as evidenced by the rest of the story.



Jesus stopped Paul in a way he could not ignore. What are some ways people might ignore God's work in the world today?


When Saul fell to his knees, he heard a voice speaking to him and recognized an authority above himself. This is seen by the way Saul answered when his name was called. Remember, Saul was a Jew and acted on religious authority, so he thought he was doing God's work in persecuting Christians. In this moment, Jesus made it clear that He was the ultimate authority Saul had to answer to.



How would this situation have been disorienting for Paul, spiritually as well as physically? When have you experienced a time that God got your attention?


Saul's story is a strong reminder that people can believe they are working for God but miss the main point. Imagine how Saul felt when he heard Jesus's voice and was forced to recognize that Jesus was who His followers claimed. Jesus did not accuse Saul of torturing His people. Jesus asked Saul why he was persecuting Him. Our Savior takes it personally when His people are mistreated for His name's sake.

Saul's response to Jesus set the stage for the rest of his life. He asked, "Who are you, Lord?" (v. 5). While not stated directly, we see in Saul's actions that he was also open to what Jesus was calling Him to do. These are the right questions to ask and can give guidance for living as Saul demonstrated moving forward. In that moment, with fear and trembling, Saul was ready to hear what Jesus had to say. In Saul's darkest moment, Jesus showed him compassion by stopping him in his tracks and calling him to another way. Saul did not get the plan for the rest of his life—only the next step. Often believers are given only the next step from the Lord, not the whole plan at once. Think about how obeying Jesus one step at a time is valuable in establishing faith and trust in Him.


 Application: What next step is God calling you to obey Him in today? How will you respond? Discuss with your gender based group of 3-5 this week.

3. Transformation and Healing (Acts 9:7-12)

After this stunning encounter with Jesus, Saul stood up but couldn't see. His companions who had heard the voice but saw no one were stunned. They had witnessed their leader, a powerful and fierce man, brought to his knees and incapacitated by the very One he worked against each day. Their only response was to lead Saul by the hand into the city as Jesus instructed.

 Think about how Saul's companions might have been impacted by this encounter. What does this say about why it is important to share the work God has done in our lives with others?

For three days nothing happened. Saul did not eat or drink. Picture him sitting and replaying in his mind all that he had experienced. Was he thinking about all the things he had gotten wrong in his life? Was he going over in his mind how he could have missed Jesus prior to the blinding light? These three days would have allowed a time of quiet reflection and introspection.

 For three days, Saul had to wait. Share about a time you had to wait on the next step from God.

Think about a time when you've had to sit and wait on God. Like Saul, you likely were praying, seeking the Lord, and asking for direction. According to what the Lord said to Ananias, Saul spent time praying as preparation for Ananias to arrive with more direction. If Saul had encountered Ananias prior to the Damascus Road experience, Ananias would have been persecuted and thrown into prison for his faith. That man was the one God sent to help Saul.

Ananias was an ordinary man. He was not the leader of the church of Damascus or someone who necessarily stood out in a significant way, he is described as a disciple. When God called Ananias's name, he simply replied, "Here I am, Lord." How might we be used daily if this was the posture of our hearts? God didn't have to involve anyone else in Saul's story and conversion, but He chose to. God invites His people to join in His work and as a result, we are blessed.

Note that God told Ananias about Saul's vision and gave him specific instructions. Saul was known as the great persecutor of Christians, and yet God was asking a Christian to go and minister to Saul in faith. This was a bold move and potentially life threatening, so the specific details were helpful in affirming Ananias along the way. He could be assured that he heard correctly, and God was guiding him every step of the way. Ananias trusted and obeyed, which positioned him to be part of one of the greatest conversion stories of all time.



Application: How is He calling you to step out in faith for the sake of a gospel conversation with another person this week?

Conclusion

There is no one beyond the reach of God's love, and all believers have a story to tell that can make a difference. Saul's backstory is a picture of what it means a man who was drastically against God and deceived about how he was living. He believed he was working for God when he was attacking God by attacking His people. Though Saul was working against Jesus at every turn, Jesus pursued Saul and met him on the road to Damascus.

Through a blinding light, Saul was brought to his knees physically and spiritually. When Saul asked who had stopped him, he learned that Jesus takes the persecution of His people personally. After three days of Saul being blind and humbled, God sent an ordinary believer to share the truth with him. Although this was a dangerous assignment, Ananias willingly trusted and obeyed the Lord and was able to be part of Saul's transformation from persecutor of Christians to leader of Christians. Nothing is impossible with God.

- ❓ How has your backstory been helpful in sharing Jesus with lost people?
- ❓ What did Jesus do to get your attention and help you see your need for Him?
- ❓ Where is God calling you to step out in faith for Him, as Ananias did? How might you start a gospel conversation by sharing the story of Saul/Paul with another person this week?

Prayer of Response

Thank the Lord for pursuing you even when you were not looking for Him. Ask for sensitive eyes to see who needs to hear your story so that you can invite them to know Jesus.

Additional Resources

- *Acts* by Patrick Schreiner
- *Acts* by R. Kent Hughes
- *Acts* by D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones

Disciples Multiplying Disciples



DxD This Week

Call to Action

Invite people to follow Jesus.

Maybe plan a social/cookout and invite friends and neighbors. Let Easter be a discussion starter. Share about new clothes, hats, Easter eggs, then discuss the real reason for Easter.

Questions to Guide Your Group's Discussion

1. What does this passage say?
2. What did this passage mean to its original audience?
3. What does this passage tell us about God?
4. What does this passage tell us about man?
5. What does this passage demand of me?
6. How does this passage change the way I relate to people? (*How can you use this information this week at work or with friends and neighbors?*)
7. How does this passage prompt me to pray to God?

*Adapted from Seven Arrows by Matt Rogers pastor of The Church at Cherrydale, Greenville, SC

For Next Week

Session Title

- Partnership

Main Passages

- Acts 9:26-27; 11:19-25

Session Outline

1. An Unlikely Ally (Acts 9:26-27)
2. New Opportunities (Acts 11:19-24)
3. Partners with Purpose (Acts 11:25-26)

Memorize

“Falling to the ground, he heard a voice saying to him, ‘Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?’” - Acts 9:4

Historical Context of Acts

Purpose

The book of Acts emphasizes the work of God through the Holy Spirit in the lives of people who devoted themselves to Jesus Christ, especially Paul as he led the Gentile missionary endeavor. It is no exaggeration to say that the Christian church was built through the dynamic power of the Spirit working through chosen vessels. Another important concept is the radial spread of the gospel from Jews to Gentiles, from Jerusalem to Judea, from Samaria and on to the rest of the world (1:8). Thus Christianity transformed from being a sect within Judaism to a world religion that eventually gained acceptance everywhere, even in the heart of the pagan Roman Empire: Rome itself.

Author

The book of Acts is formally anonymous. The traditional view is that the author was the same person who wrote the Gospel of Luke—Luke the physician and traveling companion of Paul (Col 4:14; 2Tm 4:11; Phm 24). As early as the second century AD, church leaders such as Irenaeus wrote that Luke was the author of Acts. Irenaeus based his view on the “we” passages in Acts, five sections where the author changes from the third person (“he/she” and “they”) to first-person plural (“we”) as he narrates the action (16:10–17; 20:5–15; 21:1–18; 27:1–29; 28:1–16). Irenaeus and many scholars since his time have interpreted these passages to mean that the author of Acts was one of the eyewitness companions of Paul. Luke fits this description better than any other candidate, especially given the similar themes between the Gospel of Luke and the book of Acts.

Setting

The date of composition of the book of Acts is to a large extent directly tied to the issue of authorship. A number of scholars have argued that Acts should be dated to the early 60s (at the time of Paul’s imprisonment). Acts closes with Paul still in prison in Rome (28:30–31). Although it is possible that Luke wrote at a later date, a time when Paul had been released, it is more plausible to think that he completed this book while Paul was still in prison. Otherwise he would have ended the book by telling about Paul’s release.

Special Features

The book of Acts provides a glimpse into the first three decades of the early church (ca AD 30–63) as it spread and multiplied after the ascension of Jesus Christ. It is not a detailed or comprehensive history. Rather, it focuses on the role played by apostles such as Peter, who ministered primarily to Jews, and Paul, the apostle to the Gentiles.

Extended Commentary

Acts 9:1-12

9:1 The narrative returns to Saul (see 8:3), or Paul. His anger with Jesus's 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).

9:2 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 (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.

9:8–9 This must have been a humiliating experience for proud 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 they 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.

9:11–14 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.¹

References

1. M. David Sills, “Opportunities and Challenges in Global Missions,” in *CSB Study Bible: Notes*, ed. Edwin A. Blum and Trevin Wax (Nashville, TN: Holman Bible Publishers, 2017), 1733.

Author Bio

Patrick Schreiner (Acts)

Patrick Schreiner (PhD, The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary) is associate professor of New Testament and biblical theology at Midwestern Baptist Theological Seminary in Kansas City, Missouri. He is the author of *The Kingdom of God and the Glory of the Cross*; *Matthew, Disciple and Scribe*; *The Ascension of Christ*; and *The Visual Word*.

R. Kent Hughes (Acts)

R. Kent Hughes (DMin, Trinity Evangelical Divinity School) is senior pastor emeritus of College Church in Wheaton, Illinois, and former professor of practical theology at Westminster Theological Seminary in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. Hughes is also a founder of the Charles Simeon Trust, which conducts expository preaching conferences throughout North America and worldwide. He serves as the series editor for the *Preaching the Word* commentary series and is the author or coauthor of many books. He and his wife, Barbara, live in Wyncote, Pennsylvania, and have four children and an ever-increasing number of grandchildren.

D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones (Acts)

Martyn Lloyd-Jones (1899–1981), minister of Westminster Chapel in London for thirty years, was one of the foremost preachers of his day. His many books have brought profound spiritual encouragement to millions around the world.