

Saul of Tarsus, the Unlikely Apostle

Devotional Reading: Psalm 86:1–10

Background Scripture: Acts 7:58–8:3; 9:1–31; 22:3–15

Acts 22:3–15

³ “I am a Jew, born in Tarsus of Cilicia, but brought up in this city. I studied under Gamaliel and was thoroughly trained in the law of our ancestors. I was just as zealous for God as any of you are today. ⁴ I persecuted the followers of this Way to their death, arresting both men and women and throwing them into prison, ⁵ as the high priest and all the Council can themselves testify. I even obtained letters from them to their associates in Damascus, and went there to bring these people as prisoners to Jerusalem to be punished.

⁶ “About noon as I came near Damascus, suddenly a bright light from heaven flashed around me. ⁷ I fell to the ground and heard a voice say to me, ‘Saul! Saul! Why do you persecute me?’

⁸ “ ‘Who are you, Lord?’ I asked.

“ ‘I am Jesus of Nazareth, whom you are persecuting,’ he replied. ⁹ My companions saw the

light, but they did not understand the voice of him who was speaking to me.

¹⁰ “ ‘What shall I do, Lord?’ I asked.

“ ‘Get up,’ the Lord said, ‘and go into Damascus. There you will be told all that you have been assigned to do.’ ¹¹ My companions led me by the hand into Damascus, because the brilliance of the light had blinded me.

¹² “A man named Ananias came to see me. He was a devout observer of the law and highly respected by all the Jews living there. ¹³ He stood beside me and said, ‘Brother Saul, receive your sight!’ And at that very moment I was able to see him.

¹⁴ “Then he said: ‘The God of our ancestors has chosen you to know his will and to see the Righteous One and to hear words from his mouth. ¹⁵ You will be his witness to all people of what you have seen and heard.’ ”

Key Text

“Then [Ananias] said: ‘The God of our ancestors has chosen you to know his will and to see the Righteous One and to hear words from his mouth. You will be his witness to all people of what you have seen and heard.’ ”

—Acts 22:14–15

A. Fire for Good or Fire for Bad?

Early in 2024, my small town in the Texas Panhandle was among those affected by a series of wildfires that devastated over 1.2 million acres of land. This was not the first time our town had suffered severe damage from a wildfire. Thankfully, there were no fatalities, but the damage was substantial.

We know all too well the destructive capabilities of fire! It's not surprising, then, that fire is prime imagery for anger, wrath, and destruction. Even so, we continue to use fire in various ways—for warmth, cooking, incineration, and even for controlling other fires.

Our relationship with fire is complicated. We acknowledge it can be both helpful and harmful. So it is with the fiery disposition of *zeal*. It can ignite a passion for good or unleash a destructive force. Ultimately, it all depends on how and for what purpose zeal is used.

B. Lesson Context

In about AD 58, at the end of his third missionary journey, Paul returned to Jerusalem for the final time (Acts 21:17). The centerpiece of that third missionary trip was his lengthy ministry in Ephesus (19:1, 8–10; 20:31), a stay marked by no little controversy. His forebodings and those of others did not indicate that his visit to Jerusalem would be any less controversial—quite the opposite, in fact (20:17–38; 21:4, 10–14). But Paul made the trip anyway.

Upon his arrival, Paul met with leaders of the Jerusalem church and reported on his ministry (Acts 21:17–19). Those leaders also warned Paul of the danger his presence posed (21:20–24). When that danger materialized, Paul was arrested on a false charge of defiling the temple (21:27). Had it not been for the presence of Roman troops to restore order, Paul probably would have been killed right then and there (21:30–36). After being rescued, Paul then surprisingly asked to address the mob that had just tried to kill him. The Roman commander gave permission (21:40–22:2), and that's where our lesson text opens.

The Testimony of Faithful Witnesses

Unit 3: Faithful Witnesses Spread the Good News

Lessons 9–13

Lesson Aims

After participating in this lesson, each learner will be able to:

1. Retell Paul's encounter with Jesus and call as Christ's witness.
2. Compare the motivations for Paul's zeal before and after encountering Jesus.
3. Compose his or her own story of meeting Jesus and explain what personal weaknesses God has used for good.

Lesson Outline

Introduction

- A. Fire for Good or Fire for Bad?
- B. Lesson Context

I. Recounting the Past (Acts 22:3–5)

- A. Studied the Law (vv. 3)
- B. Persecuted Followers (vv. 4–5)

II. Encountering the Lord (Acts 22:6–11)

- A. Questions and Revelation (vv. 6–10a)
- B. Reply and Command (vv. 10b–11)

Tactical Flashlight

III. Commissioned for the Future (Acts 22:12–15)

- A. Renewed Sight (vv. 12–13)
- B. Chosen Witness (vv. 14–15)

Unlikely Witness

Conclusion

- A. Opened Eyes Open Other Eyes
- B. Prayer
- C. Thought to Remember

I. Recounting the Past

(Acts 22:3–5)

A. Studied the Law (v. 3)

3a. “I am a Jew, born in Tarsus of Cilicia, but brought up in this city. I studied under Gamaliel

Paul’s defense of his ministry includes an account of his own incredible transformation. Details of that experience occur three times in the book of Acts: here, in Acts 9:1–19, and in Acts 26:12–23.

He begins by describing his upbringing as a *Diaspora Jew*. The Greek word *diaspora* means “dispersed” or “scattered,” as it is found in John 7:35; James 1:1; and 1 Peter 1:1 (compare Deuteronomy 4:27). Having been born in a Roman province allowed Paul to gain Roman citizenship (compare Acts 22:27–28). *Tarsus*, the capital of *Cilicia*, located in present-day Turkey, is about 360 miles north of Jerusalem. First-century Tarsus was a major trading center that also became the site of many cults. The city was thoroughly Greco-Roman, presenting numerous pressures for someone born a Jew. But Paul strongly implies that he had not been assimilated into that pagan environment, given that he had been *brought up in Jerusalem*.

Paul continues to present his credentials to establish his background as a faithful Jew. A posture of sitting at the feet of a teacher was common for Jewish disciples (example: Luke 10:39). In that light, one could hardly do better than having studied *under Gamaliel*. This man’s wisdom and high regard among the people is seen in Acts 5:34–39.

What Do You Think?

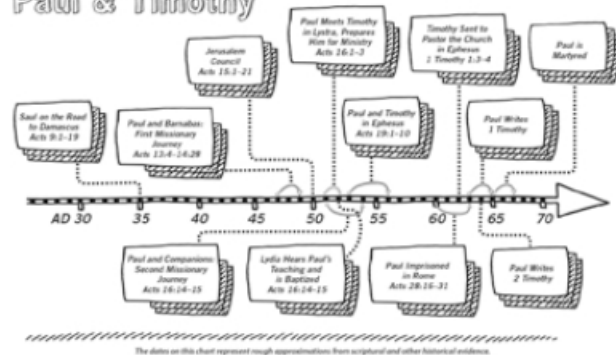
How does your background or life experience shape how you approach your faith today?

Digging Deeper

How has God used these experiences to prepare you for specific opportunities in your faith journey?

3b. “and was thoroughly trained in the law of our ancestors. I was just as zealous for God as any of you are today.

Chronology of Relationship: Paul & Timothy



Visual for Lessons 11 & 13. Display this visual as you review the ministries of Paul and Timothy in the first-century church.

The rare phrase, *the law of our ancestors*, is used instead of the more common phrase, “the Law of Moses” (compare Acts 28:23). This phrasing seems intended to establish common ground with the crowd of Jews.

The word *zealous* conveys an image of a fiery and passionate commitment to a cause. Such a disposition could be understood positively (example: John 2:17) or negatively (example: Galatians 4:17). The ancient world tended to associate the word with qualities worthy of emulation. Intertestamental Judaism associated the term with various religious heroes (examples: see the non-biblical 1 Maccabees 2:23–27, 50–58; the latter section includes a reference to the zeal of Phinehas in Numbers 25:5–13). As such, the term suggests a willingness to resort to violence to defend religious traditions, the holiness of God’s name, or both. Paul’s attitude toward the Scriptures and their application resembles what he says in Galatians 1:14 and Philippians 3:5–6.

B. Persecuted Followers (vv. 4–5)

4. “I persecuted the followers of this Way to their death, arresting both men and women and throwing them into prison,

Paul’s address now recalls his participation in the stoning of Stephen (Acts 7:58–8:3; see lesson 10). That event marked the beginning of Paul’s persecution of the church (8:1). His zeal in doing so is further noted in Acts 9:1–2, 14, 21; 26:10–

11; 1 Corinthians 15:9; Galatians 1:13–14; Philip-
pians 3:6; 1 Timothy 1:13).

This Way refers to the first-century movement of Jesus-followers (compare Acts 9:2; 19:9, 23; 22:4; 24:14, 22). The designation aligns with Old Testament references to God’s decreed path of life for the faithful (Psalm 16:11). It also complements Jesus’ description of himself as “the way” (John 14:6; compare Hebrews 10:20; see lesson 9).

5. “as the high priest and all the Council can themselves testify. I even obtained letters from them to their associates in Damascus, and went there to bring these people as prisoners to Jerusalem to be punished.

Since Paul once persecuted members of “The Way,” the obvious question arises: Why is he now one of its most prominent proclaimers? He presents himself in terms that establish a common ground with an audience who wants to kill him, so what has changed? Paul answers by recalling the story first narrated in Acts 9.

Previously, Paul (as Saul) operated with the support of *the high priest*—most likely Caiaphas, who held that position until AD 36. Saul intended to carry out his persecutions against the Jewish followers of Jesus in Damascus (compare Acts 9:1–2). The fact that *Damascus* is over 130 miles away from *Jerusalem* highlights Saul’s fanaticism at the time. Luke, the author of the book of Acts, does not specify how the gospel first came to Damas-

cus. But a general clue is found in Acts 2:5, which notes that Jews from “every nation under heaven” gathered for the day of Pentecost. Another clue is in Acts 11:19, which states that after the persecution described in Acts 8, believers scattered “as far as Phoenicia.” That region adjoins Syria, wherein the city of Damascus is located.

II. Encountering the Lord

(Acts 22:6–11)

A. Questions and Revelation (vv. 6–10a)

6. “About noon as I came near Damascus, suddenly a bright light from heaven flashed around me.

The only notable addition of detail here compared to Acts 9:3 is that Paul specifies that this happened *about noon* (compare Acts 26:13). This detail accentuates how brilliant the *light* must have been to be so perceptible at the brightest time of day.

7–8. “I fell to the ground and heard a voice say to me, ‘Saul! Saul! Why do you persecute me?’ ‘Who are you, Lord?’ I asked. ‘I am Jesus of Nazareth, whom you are persecuting,’ he replied.

The opening statement *Saul! Saul! Why do you persecute me*, as presented here and in Acts 9:4–5, baffled Saul. Having been overwhelmed by the light to the point that he found himself on *the ground*, all he could do was sputter out the question, *Who are you, Lord?* We should not think that Saul’s use of the word *Lord* necessarily means that he recognized the voice as that of God. The underlying Greek is also used in contexts where it means “sir” (example: Matthew 27:63).

Saul’s confusion likely deepened when the voice identified itself as *Jesus of Nazareth*. There is no record of Saul’s ever having met Jesus prior to this encounter. As Saul’s self-assured confidence in his zealous conduct began to melt away, the implication became clear: to persecute Christians is, in essence, to persecute Jesus himself. This stresses Jesus’ identification with them.

This moment thus began a radical reshaping of everything Saul believed about God, who was at the center of his worldview. This reshaping is

How to Say It

Ananias	An-uh-nye-us.
Aramaic	Air-uh-may-ik.
Caiaphas	Kay-uh-fus or Kye-uh-fus.
Cilicia	Sih-lish-i-uh.
Diaspora	Dee-as-puh-ruh.
Ephesus	Ef-uh-sus.
Gamaliel	Guh-may-lih-ul or Guh-may-lee-al.
Maccabees	Mack-uh-bees.
Nazareth	Naz-uh-reth.
Phinehas	Fin-ee-us.
Tarsus	Tar-sus.
theophany	the-ah-fuh-nee.

reflected in texts such as 1 Corinthians 8:6, where Paul reworks traditional statements of faith, like those found in Deuteronomy 6:4, to include Jesus as both Lord and God. Ultimately, this encounter will also radically reshape how Saul lives, as he will transform from being a persecutor of the church into a chief proclaimer of its gospel in service to this Lord (1 Corinthians 15:9; Galatians 1:13–16, 23; 1 Timothy 1:13). Saul’s transformation began with his interaction on the road, but he would need a lengthy period of growth (Galatians 1:17–18).

9–10a. “My companions saw the light, but they did not understand the voice of him who was speaking to me. ‘What shall I do, Lord?’ I asked.

We need to keep in mind who Paul is addressing: a hostile crowd who wants him dead (Acts 21:40)! In response, he tailors his address to emphasize the Lord’s personal revelation to him and his obedient submission to the Lord’s will (compare Galatians 1:11–12).

What we see here in Acts 22:9 is similar to what we read in Acts 9:7, but with two notable variations. Acts 9:7 states that Saul’s traveling companions (1) saw nobody, although they (2) heard the sound. Yet here in Acts 22:9, Paul notes that the companions (1) *saw the light*, but they (2) did not *understand the voice*.

The first difference could simply mean that although able to perceive the light, the companions could not see the person at the center of it. That is hardly surprising if the light was so bright as to be distinguishable from the sun at noon (see commentary on Acts 22:6, above).

The other difference may be explainable in several ways. One way is by examining the differing meanings of the verb translated *understand* as contexts change. In some contexts, the underlying Greek word simply means “to hear” (example: Mark 6:20); in other contexts, the verb takes the more specific meaning of “comprehended” or “understood” (example: 8:18).

The second way is by examining the word translated *voice* in Acts 9:7. It could have the more general meaning of “sound” (example: 1 Corinthians 14:7); if that idea applies here, it suggests that

the companions heard an unidentifiable sound rather than comprehensible voice. Third, and less likely, is the possibility that they perceived someone addressing Saul in a language they could not understand. Acts 26:14 says it was Aramaic (compare Acts 21:40–22:1).

What Do You Think?

Are you in a season of asking God, “What shall I do, Lord”? Why, or why not?

Digging Deeper

What steps will you take to be better attentive to God’s call on your life?

B. Reply and Command (vv. 10b–11)

10b–11. “ ‘Get up,’ the Lord said, ‘and go into Damascus. There you will be told all that you have been assigned to do.’ My companions led me by the hand into Damascus, because the brilliance of the light had blinded me.

The first part of this text reflects Jesus’ words in Acts 9:6 and 26:16, but with a subtle twist. Acts 9:6 states what Saul “must do,” while the passage before us states what Saul was *assigned to do*. That same chapter elaborates on his appointment: he is to witness to God’s “name to the Gentiles and their kings and to the people of Israel” (Acts 9:15).

Perhaps Paul opted not to speak of his mission to Gentiles because of the anti-Gentile sentiments present in his hostile audience (Acts 21:27–29; compare 21:19). This seems particularly likely given the crowd’s reaction a few verses later (22:21–22).

What Do You Think?

Have you experienced moments where you felt spiritually “blind” before understanding the truth? Explain.

Digging Deeper

How has God revealed himself to you in ways that changed your perspective or direction?

Tactical Flashlight

I was in the market for a nonlethal self-defense tool and decided to purchase pepper spray. How-

ever, I soon encountered some issues. As I came to find out, pepper spray is considered a “weapon” in certain settings, which means it’s prohibited in some places. Additionally, the canisters can lose pressure over time, and I didn’t want to do periodic test firings.

But then, I came across a self-defense expert on YouTube who suggested a solution that aligned better with my needs: a tactical flashlight. Such a flashlight can emit a powerful beam of light, temporarily blinding and disorienting an attacker. I bought one with a strobe-light feature for increased effect.

Having tried it on myself, I can attest to its extreme brightness. Even so, I know just enough about “lumens” and “lux” to realize that the sun at noon is much brighter—but how much less so than that of the light that blinded Saul, knocking him to the ground! But that’s what it took for Jesus to get his attention. How much does it take for Jesus to get yours? —R. L. N.

III. Commissioned for the Future

(Acts 22:12–15)

A. Renewed Sight (vv. 12–13)

12. “A man named Ananias came to see me. He was a devout observer of the law and highly respected by all the Jews living there.”

Acts 9:10–17 provides a more detailed account of the actions and attitude of *Ananias*. He is designated as “a disciple,” marking him as a follower of Jesus. It’s important to note that this *Ananias* should not be confused with men of the same name mentioned in Acts 5:1–11; 23:1–5; or 24:1. To describe him as *a devout observer of the law* who is *highly respected by all the Jews* suggests that Paul aims to reassure the crowd that a Jew who is above reproach could testify truthfully about Paul’s claims.

13. “He stood beside me and said, ‘Brother Saul, receive your sight!’ And at that very moment I was able to see him.”

The content of this verse is a condensed version of Acts 9:17–18. Here, as in 9:17, Ananias reveals a willingness to refer to *Saul* as *brother* because of

the Lord’s revelation to Ananias. This is despite Ananias’s initial consternation about Saul as a persecutor of Christians.

What Do You Think?

Who has been an “Ananias” in your life—someone you respect who God has used to guide or encourage your faith?

Digging Deeper

How can you be that person for someone else?

B. Chosen Witness (vv. 14–15)

14. “Then he said: ‘The God of our ancestors has chosen you to know his will and to see the Righteous One and to hear words from his mouth.’

This is not precisely paralleled in Acts 9 since that account does not feature as much dialogue between Ananias and Saul. But it does correspond with what the Lord declares in Acts 9:15. While Luke, the author of Acts, might have wanted to cut down on repetition in chapter 9, Paul needs to include this dialogue from Ananias because his testimony supports Paul’s claims.

A particularly significant aspect of Ananias’s dialogue that makes this point is referring to God as the *God of our ancestors*. This phrase, or a form of it, appears elsewhere in the book of Acts (Acts 5:30; 24:14). Its formulation has significant parallels in the Old Testament (examples: Deuteronomy 26:7; 1 Chronicles 12:17; 29:18). Ananias gives a power promise of God’s fidelity as he connects Old Testament statements with the revelation of God in Christ Jesus. When Saul hears Ananias speak of *the Righteous One*, Saul may recall that Stephen spoke of “the Righteous One” (Jesus) in Acts 7:52 (compare 3:14).

This title, *Righteous One*, appears only twice in the New Testament, both in Acts (here and in Acts 7:52; compare 3:14). This designation highlights Jesus’ innocence and divine vindication. But it also signals his fulfillment of prophetic hopes about God’s “righteous and just” one (the Hebrew and Greek terms can be translated either way).

Acts 3:13–14 shows a connection to Isaiah

53:11 by referring to Jesus as God's servant, making this description resonate with the idea of God's righteous and just servant. It is also possible that the portrayal evokes broader hopes of God's chosen ruler—a just one sent to Jerusalem (Jeremiah 23:5–6; 33:15; Zechariah 9:9).

Unlikely Witness

One of the most memorable books I read as a teenager was *The Cross and the Switchblade*. It tells the story of Nicky Cruz, a notorious gang leader in New York City. His life seemed destined for crime, violence, and destruction. However, an encounter with evangelist David Wilkerson led to a profound transformation: Cruz surrendered his life to Christ. This dramatic change ignited a passion for sharing the gospel, and Cruz became an influential evangelist who continues to reach the very gangs with which he once identified.

What grips me most about this story is how unlikely it was for Cruz to become an evangelist. But his is not the only such account. The apostle Peter, impulsive and impetuous, denied Jesus three times, yet was appointed as a leader of the first-century church. The apostle Paul, a persecutor of Christians, became one of their greatest advocates. These two examples demonstrate God's ability to work through imperfect people, using their unique experiences to advance his kingdom.

Few people today, if any, will experience a "selection process" as Paul did. Most of the time, God will wait patiently for a volunteer—perhaps finding none (compare Ezekiel 22:30). When the need is obvious, will you be the one? —N. V.

15. "You will be his witness to all people of what you have seen and heard."

The commission Paul receives to be Jesus' *witness to all people* is a mark of his becoming a disciple of Jesus. But more specifically, in the context of Acts, it also marks him as participating in the commission bestowed on the apostles (Acts 1:8, 22; 2:32; 13:31). This is further stressed by reference to what he has *seen and heard*. That phrase conveys the personal experience of the speaker (compare Luke 7:22; Acts 4:20; 1 John 1:1, 3). For the Lord's purposes in making Paul an apostle to

the nations, he needed Paul to be a witness of the risen Jesus. And so Paul experienced Christ firsthand when God interrupted his trip to Damascus.

What Do You Think?

What does it mean to be a witness for God in your own context?

Digging Deeper

How can your personal experiences, the things you have "seen and heard," be a powerful tool for evangelism?

Conclusion

A. Opened Eyes Can Open Other Eyes

It is vital to remember that whenever we read accounts of God's appearing to people, such stories are never the end goal in and of themselves. Such an appearance (called a *theophany*) happens in order to certify something or someone as being of God.

Today, we have the completed witness of the New Testament to guide us. We don't need a theophany, like the one Paul received, to motivate us toward our duty to witness—the New Testament itself is intended to encourage us! God calls his people to align their lives with his path revealed through his Word. Through this alignment, God's Spirit transforms our lives to serve God. As a result, we become agents of the gospel in the world.

Paul's encounter with the risen Jesus was the first step in incorporating him into Christ's body—the church. Our individual stories are part of this larger narrative. Like Paul, who began his extensive work after this encounter, part of glorifying God is edifying others. Let us reflect on our personal life stories in light of what God has done for us so that we may edify others and glorify him.

B. Prayer

God of our ancestors in the faith, help us meld our stories into yours! Guide and empower us to be witnesses so that others may know your salvation. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.

C. Thought to Remember

Let God use you for his purposes.