

**Paul's Transformation – Persecutor and the shock of a lifetime:
Acts 7:54-8:3, 9:1-9**

Leader's reflection

(Quick note: Much has been made of Saul's different names in Scripture. However it is now widely recognised that he didn't changed his name from Saul to Paul on his conversion but when dealing with Jewish people would have been called Saul, and when dealing with Gentiles would have used the Roman version of his name, Paul.)

It is easy for us to forget just how feared Saul would have been by the early church. But fear would have been the primary response to hearing that Saul was out searching for you.

It is also easy to forget that for Saul, what he was doing would have been a religious act, part of his worship, a way of keeping the faith. To him, the followers of the Way (as early Christians were known), were blasphemers, heretics, and were warping and distorting the Hebraic faith. For Saul, saying that a man was God was against everything he believed in. God was beyond human, above people, and to say otherwise was to tell a lie about who God was.

So in chapter 7 of Acts we meet Saul for the first time, as the man who looked after the coats. It is significant that in a book about the early church our introduction to one of the most prominent leaders of that church is his agreement with the death of the first martyr of the faith. Verse 8 begins, 'Saul agreed with putting him to death.' Think about that for a moment. It is like reading in a history book that Martin Luther King attended a lynching, or that Churchill quite liked Hitler's speeches. It is a statement which should undermine everything that Saul later says and does. And yet because of that sentence, the glory that is given to God through the conversion of Saul is greater. This man was not an innocent bystander. He was not a member of the crowd. He was an active participant in the death of Stephen, whether he lifted a stone or not.

So in chapter 9, when we meet Saul again, we know the sort of man he is, we know



what he is capable of and the sort of action he will condone. And he is busy. He requests letters to the synagogues in Damascus, and in doing so borrows the authority of the High Priest, he is officially endorsed.

But his world is about to be turned upside down...

On the road there is a dazzling light, and a voice, "Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?"

Imagine how Saul must have felt. He had thought he was doing God's work, when in fact he had been persecuting and stifling the work of God in the world. The question makes it so very personal, "Why are you persecuting ME?". Not 'my followers,' not 'my church.' Jesus' question to Saul shows that Saul is personally standing in the way of, and actively working against, God.

As a man who studied scripture Saul knew full well the fate of people who stood in the way of God, and yet, this is not the end of Saul. In the words spoken to him next, the love, grace, and forgiveness at the heart of the Christian faith are shown. "Get up and go into the city, and you will be told what you must do.' This is not the end, there is another chance for Saul and we can only imagine the relief that he must have felt at that.

His blindness here is a fantastic analogy to the way that he has been living all his life. His eyes are open but he does not see. All his life he has studied scripture, argued and debated interpretations, had the work of God laid out before him, and yet he has been blind to the movement of God in the world.

What is next for Saul? We will explore that in the next session.



Aim	To see how it is God that changes us
Main points to cover	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Paul had set in stone what he thought God was like. 2. Paul's actions were an expression of his love for God, even if they were terribly misplaced. 3. Paul came to a crashing halt with his encounter with God, and it caused him to re-think everything he knew of who God was.
Focus On	How we need God to change us, we can't rely on finding the answer within ourselves

Activity ideas

Why did Paul act the way he did? Ask the young people to look at the story and see if they can work out what Paul's motivation was for his actions. Why did he hate the Christians so much? Have the young people read Exodus 20:1-7. Can they make the connection between that story and this? For Paul, the Christians were breaking all of these laws, because they were worshipping Jesus as God and creating an idol. Not only that, they were telling others about Jesus and causing them to worship Jesus. Paul was passionate about God, and wanted people to worship Him properly, and he believed that the Christians were stopping people doing this.

How bad was Saul? Have the young people read through the Acts reading and pick out the things that Saul did that they think were bad. These include: agreeing with the killing of Stephen, involvement in the persecution of Christians to the extent that the Church scatters from Jerusalem, pursuing the fleeing Christians to other cities with the intention of at least jailing them. Once the young people have done this, ask them to describe the sort of man Saul was.

We need God to change us: A lot of the time when we talk about God changing us we know how we would like that to happen. We know the things we aren't happy with and so we ask God to change those things. This is different though, because Paul was happy with who he was and what he was doing. It wasn't until God pointed out to him how wrong he was that he realised what he was doing was bad. Explain to the young people that Paul needed to hear from God to be able to change, because if he hadn't he would have gone on happily persecuting Christians for years. Ask them to spend some time listening to God for the things He wants us to do differently, but that we might be blind to. Give the young people some paper and pens to write things down, and if you feel it is appropriate put on a quiet worship song to help them focus. After they have done this spend some time explaining that God doesn't want us to go away and try really hard at these things by ourselves, but wants to help us to change. Pray to finish the session after asking if the young people have any questions.

**Paul's Transformation: The tables have turned:
Acts 9:10-22, 2 Corinthians 11:24-27**

Leader's reflection

In our reading of Acts 9 we should not lose sight of the bravery and selflessness it took on the part of Ananias to go to Saul when it was asked of him. As we saw in the previous session, Saul was not afraid of using violence on those who he saw himself opposing, and it is a short leap from there to suspecting lying and subterfuge to bring the believers out of hiding. And yet, Ananias responded, he went to Saul, though not before questioning what he had heard God Say to him.

His greeting to Saul should serve as a challenge to all of us: "Brother Saul", think about what that means. Ananias did not go as an unwilling, reticent follower, but with open arms. In this we can see him ready to follow Jesus' teaching in Matthew 5:44, he goes to love his enemy and to literally 'pray for those who persecute you.'

As a result of this prayer, scales fall from Saul's eyes and he can see again. This is a rare piece of description, and signifies not only the physical sight that Saul now has, but also that his view of God is now clearer than it has ever been before.

And what is his response to all this? He is baptised, and spends time with the disciples. Can you imagine the conversation that must have taken place between the disciples and Ananias for this to happen? "Sorry, who have you brought to see us? Could you repeat that please?"

Not only that, but Saul immediately begins to proclaim Jesus in the Synagogues and this is where we see the tables turn on Saul completely.

The man who endorsed the stoning of Stephen, who sought authority from the High Priest to continue his persecution, who 'breathed out threats of murder against the disciples', discovers there is a plot to have him killed. This was the start of a long period of time in Saul's life when he was in danger because of the transformation that had taken place in him. The risk of physical danger from those who disagreed with



him, along with the simple risks involved in traveling long distances at the time, are made clear in his letter to the Corinthians as he lists all the things that have happened to him in his pursuit of making the Gospel known to as many people as he possibly could.

Saul turned from having worldly power, to having none. His life after Damascus was never the same yet throughout all his writing there is never any hint that he would have had it any other way. He has lost all and gained all, and his movement from persecutor to persecuted shows us that there is no one beyond the grace of God, and no one that cannot be used to further the work of God on earth.

Aim

To be inspired by Paul's transformation

Main points to cover

1. Paul was transformed by his experience.
2. He was met with love and compassion by the Church.
3. Nothing was ever the same for him after this.

Focus On

Paul believed that he was doing God's work before and after his encounter, but what looked different about it?



Activity ideas

What about Ananias? Ask the young people to read the Acts 9 reading thinking about Ananias. What must he have thought? How must he have felt? Have them write down words they would use to describe Ananias. Should we be more impressed with him or Paul in this story?

What is different? Before and after his 'conversion' Paul believed in the same God, but what is the difference. Split the young people into two groups and have one look at the reading from last week, and the other the reading from this week. Come back together and ask them to feedback. Explain that Paul still believed in the same God, so what was different? After his experience, Paul's view of God was shaped by Jesus. Ask the young people if they can list values that describe Paul before and after, and explain that this change is because of Jesus.

Loss of power: Another key difference between Paul before and after his conversion is that he had gone from having power, to having none. Instead now the people who had the power were after him. Ask the young people to read Philippians 3:8-10, and ask them what that says about this aspect of Paul. Does he regret his choice or is it worth it. Explore with the young people some of the difficult choices they have to make, both in their everyday lives and in bigger decisions about their future. How does Paul help us think about those decisions and does it help us make more difficult choices