

OUR *Guide* FOR USE IN *the Protestant Reformed Sunday School*

Lesson 66

The Conversion of Saul

The Scripture Lesson

Acts 9:1-18

After the death of Stephen, Saul became the main persecutor of the church. He tried to force Christians to say that Jesus was not the Christ. If they refused to deny Jesus before men, then he would bind them, and carry them off to prison. And at their trial he would vote that they should be killed. Saul was determined to put down the name of Jesus by getting rid of Christians.

Many Christians fled out of Jerusalem in order to escape from Saul. They went to other cities to live, hoping that they would be safe. But Saul, with his police force, would follow them even to strange cities, to bring them back as prisoners to Jerusalem.

Some Christians went as far away as Damascus, which was 130 miles from Jerusalem. Saul went to the high priest and asked for letters from the Sanhedrin giving him the right to arrest Christians even in that faraway city.

But as Saul came near to Damascus, the Lord Himself stopped him. Suddenly there was a bright light, which flashed down from the sky. The light was brighter than the *sun!* So bright was it that Saul and all his men fell to the ground.

Then there was the sound of a voice from heaven. The voice said, "Saul, Saul, why

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persecutest thou me?" Saul wondered who that could be. He had been persecuting the followers of Jesus. Could it be that this was *Jesus*, speaking from heaven? So Saul asked, "Who art thou, Lord?" The answer came, "I am Jesus whom thou persecutest."

To the people of God, those words are a great comfort, for we know that, when the world harms *us*, it harms *Jesus*, our King. Jesus bears the suffering of the saints right along with them, and He will surely defend them.

But for Saul, those were terrible words. All along, he had fooled himself into believing that he was doing *right* by persecuting the followers of Jesus. Now he knows that *they* were right, and *he* was wrong. Jesus *did* arise from the dead and ascend into heaven. And he, Saul, had tried to destroy Christ's church. Surely, Saul deserved to be punished. And yet, the Lord had stopped him on the way. Could it be that the Lord would be gracious to him?

"Lord, what wilt thou have me to do?" Saul asked. And Jesus told him to arise and go to Damascus, for there one of Jesus' disciples would tell him what to do. But when Saul got up to do that, he found that he was blind.

His men, however, were there to help him. They had heard the sound of a voice ... but had not

heard what Jesus said. They had seen the light ... but they had not seen Jesus. They had not been made blind. So they took Saul by the hand and led him into the city.

In Damascus there was a disciple by the name of Ananias. The Lord came to him in a vision and told him to go to Saul and lay hands on him so that he might receive his sight. Ananias could hardly believe his ears. But the Lord assured Ananias that all would be well, for He had chosen Saul to be a preacher of the gospel.

So Ananias went. And when he laid hands on Saul, Saul's sight was restored and he was filled with the Holy Spirit. Then Ananias baptized him. Thus was the church's worst enemy changed by the grace of God into a true disciple of Christ.

The Beginning of Opposition to Saul

Acts 9:19-30

Very soon after that, Saul went to work, entering the synagogues of Damascus and preaching that Jesus is the Son of God. All who heard him were amazed. "Is not this he that destroyed them which called on this name in Jerusalem?" they asked. The answer is that it was indeed the same man, but by the grace of God he was changed. He was converted; he was filled with the Spirit of Christ; and now the name that he once despised is very precious to him.

Some people believed Saul. But there were also many who did not want to hear that Jesus is God's Son. Try as they may, they could not prove that Saul was wrong; so they decided to kill him. They were ready, you see, even to commit murder in order to silence his testimony about Jesus.

Somehow Saul found out about their plan, and he hid himself. The Jews therefore persuaded the governor to order some of his men to guard the gates of the city, to make sure that Saul did not slip out while they were yet looking for him. Now, they thought, they had him trapped.

But God provided a way of escape. Saul had a friend in the city who owned a house that was built right up against the wall. If one would look out of the upstairs window, he could look right over the wall. When night came, some disciples

took Saul, put him in a basket that was tied to a rope, and then let him down through the window to the ground outside the wall. So Saul was able to walk away from the city while the guards still vainly watched by the gates.

Saul then went to Jerusalem. There he hoped to see Peter, the leader of the apostles, and tell him about his own call to be an apostle. But when he got there, he found that the disciples were afraid of him. They were afraid that he was only *pretending* to be their friend, so he could learn who the Christians were, and then have them all killed.

A disciple by the name of Barnabas, however, came to Saul. He believed that Saul spoke the truth. He brought him to the apostles and told them how Jesus had appeared to Saul, and how Saul had, after that, preached Christ in the synagogues of Damascus. Then the apostles were convinced, and they received Saul as one of their own — as an apostle just as truly as they were, for he was called by the same Jesus who had called them.

Then Saul began to speak boldly in the name of Jesus. And soon the Grecian Jews laid plans to kill him. But Jesus appeared to Saul in a trance in the temple. He told him that he must leave Jerusalem, because the Jews there would not receive his testimony. "Depart," Jesus said, "for I will send thee far hence unto the Gentiles."

So Saul left. He went far away to his hometown, Tarsus. There he stayed for several years till it was time to go on his missionary journeys to the lands of the Gentiles.

MEMORY WORK

Group A

Acts 9:15 "But the Lord said unto him, Go thy way: for he is a chosen vessel unto me, to bear my name before the Gentiles, and kings, and the children of Israel."

Group B

Acts 9:16 "For I will shew him how great things he must suffer for my name's sake."

ACTIVITIES

This paper has been prepared in the hope that it will be used by students of all ages. The activities are designed so that the oldest will be challenged, and the youngest will find some of it within reach. Parents should encourage their children to attempt only what they can handle without frustration. For some that will be much, for others little.

DO YOU AGREE?

If you do, write Yes; if you do not, write No.

- ___ 1. According to Acts 26:11, Saul, before his conversion, tried as hard as he could to keep the Christians from blaspheming.
- ___ 2. When Saul went to Damascus, he carried letters from the Christians in Jerusalem to the saints in Damascus.
- ___ 3. Since the appearance of Jesus was intended only for Saul, his companions on the road to Damascus did not see the bright light from heaven.
- ___ 4. Jesus told Saul that it was He Himself who was being persecuted by Saul.
- ___ 5. When Saul asked what he should do, Jesus told him that he must preach the gospel to the Gentiles.
- ___ 6. After the appearance of Jesus, Saul discovered that he had been blinded by the glory of the light.
- ___ 7. In Damascus, Saul stayed first at the house of a disciple by the name of Ananias.
- ___ 8. The Lord appeared to Ananias and told him that it was his work to convert Saul of Tarsus and to teach him the truth of the gospel so that Saul could in turn preach it to the Gentiles.
- ___ 9. When Ananias told Saul that he had been sent in order that Saul might receive his sight, there fell from Saul's eyes something like scales.
- ___ 10. Saul soon began preaching in the synagogues that Jesus is the Son of God.
- ___ 11. When the unbelieving Jews saw that they could not argue against Saul, they determined to kill him.
- ___ 12. Saul escaped from the city of Damascus in a basket.

___ 13. When Saul returned to Jerusalem, he was welcomed with open arms by the disciples of Jesus.

___ 14. Even though the unbelieving Jews in Jerusalem threatened to kill him, Saul continued boldly to preach Christ in the temple.

QUESTIONS FOR YOUNGER READERS

1. Before he was converted, what did Saul want to do to the church? What did many Christians in Jerusalem do in order to escape from Saul?
2. Why did Saul travel to Damascus? What was it that made Saul and his men all fall down on the road near Damascus?
3. What did Saul hear the voice from heaven say? When Saul asked, "Who art thou, Lord?" what answer did he receive? Why would that answer frighten Saul at that time? Why is it a comfort to God's people?
4. What did Jesus tell Saul to do? Who helped Saul to follow Jesus' instruction?
5. What did Ananias think when the Lord appeared to him in a vision and told him to go and help Saul? What did Ananias do for Saul?
6. Why were the people in the synagogues of Damascus amazed when they heard Saul preaching that Jesus is the Son of God?
7. What did Saul's enemies decide to do? Who guarded the gates of the city? How did Saul escape?
8. Why were the Christians in Jerusalem afraid of Saul? How did Barnabas help him?
9. Why did the Grecians want to kill Saul? Who told Saul to leave Jerusalem? What did Jesus tell Saul his work was to be? Where did Saul go?

COMPLETING SENTENCES

1. Saul was yet _____ out threatenings and _____ against the _____ of the Lord (Acts 9:1). So fierce was his hatred of Christianity that, as he later recalled, he _____ this way unto the _____, binding and delivering into _____ both men and women (Acts 22:4). And when Christians were brought to trial, where they were condemned to _____, Saul was there and gave his _____ against them. Being _____ mad against them, he _____ them even unto _____ cities (Acts 26:10, 11).

2. Thus, though many Christians did find safety in flight from Jerusalem, Saul did his best to hunt them down. He went to the _____ and desired of him _____ to the leaders of the synagogues even in the faraway city of _____ authorizing him to bring Christians _____ unto Jerusalem (Acts 9:1, 2).

3. The fact that Saul was able to bind Christians only if he had letters from the high priest makes it clear that the persecution remained an activity of the Sanhedrin, which, as the official representatives of Judaism, stood opposed to the cause of Christ in the world. No one, however, worked harder than Saul in trying to extinguish the name of Christ from the earth. He says himself that he had become more devoted to the Jews' _____ than many of his _____ in his own nation, being more _____ zealous of the _____ of the fathers (Gal. 1:14). After the most _____ sect of the Jews' religion, he said, he lived a _____. And he thought within himself that he _____ to do many things _____ to the name of Jesus of Nazareth (Acts 26:4, 5, 9).

4. Accompanied by a police force, and armed with signed documents from the Sanhedrin itself, Saul journeyed to Damascus. Suddenly, however, as he neared the city, there _____ round about him a _____ from heaven. And he _____ to the earth and heard a

_____ saying, Saul, Saul, why persecutest thou _____? (Acts 9:3, 4). According to Paul's own later accounts of his conversion, the bright light appeared at _____ and was _____ the brightness of the sun (Acts 26:13). Saul's companions also saw indeed the _____ and were _____ fallen to the earth (Acts 26:14). They heard the sound of a _____ (Acts 9:7), but evidently heard not the words of Him that _____ unto Saul (Acts 22:9). Further, Saul's companions saw no _____ (Acts 9:7). Saul, however, apparently did; for Barnabas later declared that Saul "had seen the _____ in the way" (Acts 9:27). It must be, therefore, that Saul saw, in the bright light, a momentary vision of the glorified Jesus.

5. Up until this moment Saul had been waging unrelenting war against the disciples of Jesus of Nazareth. Now there stands one in heavenly glory who identifies *Himself* as the object of Saul's persecution! "Who art thou, Lord?" Saul asks. The answer: "I am _____, whom thou _____. It is _____ for thee," Jesus continued, "to _____ against the pricks." ("Pricks" were sharp sticks [goads] used to prod oxen to walk faster. The oxen would kick back at the goad, only to hurt themselves the more. The proverbial expression, as applied by Jesus to Saul, was meant to illustrate that all of his efforts to crush the gospel, so far from accomplishing their purpose, served only to inflict injury on Saul himself.) Saul surely understood the figure. For he saw now that he had been fighting against God — a warfare that could only be *self* destructive. He saw too, however, that Christ had just pulled him out of a career that would otherwise have ended in hell. "Lord," he asks, "what wilt _____ have me to _____?" (Acts 9:5, 6).

6. To Saul's question Jesus answered simply, "Arise, and go into the _____ and it shall be _____ thee what thou must do" (Acts 9:6). But when Saul arose and opened his eyes he found that he had been struck blind by the _____ of that light (Acts 22:11). His companions therefore led him by the _____

and brought him into _____. Saul was however not enlightened immediately upon his arrival in the city. Three _____ he waited without _____, and during that time he neither did _____ nor _____ (Acts 9:8, 9). Thus did the Lord give Saul time to reflect on the fact that his whole system of legal righteousness, based as it was on a wrong interpretation of the Old Testament, was false and fatal, and that he had been graciously snatched as it were out of the fire, to serve some other purpose.

7. That purpose was to be revealed by a certain _____ at Damascus, named _____. The Lord appeared to him in a _____ and told him to arise and go into the street called _____ and inquire in the house of _____ for one called _____ of _____. Ananias could scarcely believe his ears. "Lord," he said, "I have heard by many of this man, how much _____ he hath done...." But the Lord assured him that he need not fear. "Go thy way; for he is a _____ vessel unto me, to _____ my _____." Not only that, the Lord said, "I will show him how _____ things he must _____ for my _____ sake" (Acts 9:10-16).

8. So Ananias went to Saul. And on entering the house, he put his _____ on him and said, "_____ Saul, the Lord ... hath sent me that thou mightest receive thy _____ and be filled with the _____." And immediately there fell from his eyes as it had been _____; and he received his sight _____ and arose and was _____. Such is the power of God's grace. A deadly enemy of Christ and the gospel ... now one of the brethren (Acts 9:17, 18).

9. Then was Saul _____ days with the _____ which were in Damascus. And _____ he preached _____ in the _____, that Jesus is the _____ of God. All that heard him were _____ (Acts 9:19-21). And truly that was amazing — not only that Saul now *wanted* to preach the

gospel, but also that he was *able* to do so. From whom had he *learned* it? Ananias and other disciples in Damascus surely gave him some instruction. But Paul later testified concerning the gospel that he preached, that he neither received it of _____, neither was he _____ it, but by the _____ of Jesus Christ (Gal. 1:11, 12). After his conversion, he said, he _____ not with flesh and blood, but went into _____ and returned again unto Damascus (Gal. 1:16, 17). Very likely it was during that time in Arabia that Saul received his knowledge of the gospel by direct revelation from Christ, thus qualifying him to be an apostle.

10. The more Saul preached, the more he increased in _____. He _____ the Jews who dwelt at Damascus, _____ that Jesus is very _____ (Acts 9:22). The wicked Jews, finding themselves no match for Saul in debate, took counsel to _____ him. Their laying _____ was, however, known of _____, who must then have gone into hiding. His enemies therefore watched the gates _____ and _____ in order to prevent his escape. But Saul's friends took him by _____ and let him down by the _____ in a _____ (Acts 9:22-25).

11. Coming to Jerusalem, Saul tried to _____ himself to the _____. He discovered, however, that they were all _____ of him, believing that he was only *pretending* to be a disciple, in order better to learn who the disciples were so that he could then arrest them (Acts 9:26).

12. It was _____ who first became convinced of the reality of Saul's conversion. He brought him to the _____ and _____ to them how Saul had seen the _____ in the way. After that, Saul was with the apostles _____ in and _____ out at Jerusalem. They treated him, in other words, not simply as a brother in the Lord, but as a fellow apostle (Acts 9:27, 28).

13. Saul began very soon to speak _____ in the name of the Lord Jesus in Jerusalem, and _____ with the Grecians. Not surprisingly, the Grecians went about to _____ him (Acts 9:29). While Saul was praying in the _____, he fell into a trance, and the Lord Himself appeared to warn him to make _____ and get _____ out of Jerusalem. Disappointed, Saul suggested that his unique experiences made him best fit to witness in Jerusalem, for they _____ that I _____ and beat in every synagogue them that _____ on Jesus. But the Lord repeated His instruction that Saul must depart, and then added, “for I will _____ thee far hence unto the _____.” Thus did Saul learn what was to be his special place in the work of the kingdom, namely, that he would be the apostle to the Gentiles (Acts 22:17-21).

14. When the brethren knew of the threat to Saul’s life, they brought him down to _____ and sent him forth to _____ (Acts 9:30).

QUESTIONS TO THINK ABOUT

1. In Acts 26:11 Paul admits to having tried to compel Christians to blaspheme. What did he mean by that?
2. Read Acts 9:1, 2. What do you think, was the persecution of Christians a private enterprise of Saul, or was it an official activity of the Sanhedrin itself?
3. Think about Paul’s activity before his conversion and after his conversion. What would you say was the temperament of this man — that is, what kind of a person was he?
4. Acts 9:7 says that Saul’s companions heard a voice from heaven. Acts 22:9 says that they heard not the voice. Can you explain these statements in such a way that they do not conflict? Do you suppose that the men heard Saul talking to Jesus?
5. Why was it important that Saul’s attendants see and hear something of what happened on the road to Damascus?

6. Jesus was in heaven, Saul on earth. How can Jesus then identify *Himself* as the object of Saul’s persecution? How is that of comfort to God’s people?

7. In talking to Saul, Jesus used the figure of “kicking against the pricks.” Can you explain how that figure applied to Saul?

8. What similarities do you see between our conversion and Saul’s?

9. Why, do you suppose, did the Lord make Saul wait three days in Damascus before the arrival of Ananias?

10. Saul surely learned something about the Christian faith from Ananias and other disciples in Damascus and later from Peter in Jerusalem. In his epistle to the Galatians, however, Paul expressly *denied* that his knowledge of the gospel had been taught him by men (Gal. 1:11, 12, 15-17). Consider, however, that neither Stephen nor Philip were taught directly by Christ. And certainly none of the preachers in the church after them were taught by direct revelation. Why then was it important for *Paul’s* work that it be clearly understood that the gospel he preached came directly from Christ?

11. According to II Corinthians 11:32, it was not just the unbelieving Jews in Damascus who tried to apprehend (capture) Saul, but also the governor of the city, who provided a garrison of soldiers to guard the gates. How, do you think, did the Gentile governor become involved in this matter of the Jews’ religion?

12. After Barnabas persuaded the apostles that Saul’s conversion was real, Saul continued for a time with the apostles “coming in and going out at Jerusalem” (Acts 9:27, 28). What does that tell us about the accepted status, or position, of Saul already at that point?

13. Read Acts 22:17-21. Do you catch the sense of Saul’s argument that he should remain in Jerusalem despite the opposition he faced there? Jesus, however, could simply declare that “they will not receive thy testimony concerning me.” Read also the words of Jesus in John 10:26. What do these two passages tell us concerning the source of faith?

14. Read Galatians 2:7. When did Saul learn that the “gospel of the uncircumcision” was committed to him?