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July 27, 2024

CALLING: ACTS 9:3-16

Jesus reveals Himself as the risen Messiah.

FACILITATOR 2

Focus Attention

Begin the group time by sharing your testimony of how you can to faith in Christ. (See the attached page with helps for developing your testimony). After sharing your testimony explain that every person who comes to faith in Christ has a personal testimony. Some are dramatic stories of life change some are less dramatic. Regardless of the degree of change, every salvation story is a story of someone moving from death to life and from sin to righteousness.

Introduce the Passage and Transition: Today we are going to study Acts chapter 9 and learn the dramatic story of Saul's conversion. For the previous two weeks, we have looked at the ministry of two Hellenistic Christians: Stephen and Philip. The church selected these two men to minister to Hellenistic widows in Jerusalem. Both of their ministries expanded to include more than widow's ministry. Stephen began ministering to Hellenistic Jews in the city. His work led to his martyrdom and increased persecution of the church. The persecution led to an exodus of Christians from the city. As part of this exodus, Philip's ministry expanded to Samaria and then to the individualized ministry to the Ethiopian official. While Luke diverted from the persecution to tell the story of The Ethiopian official in chapter 8, chapter 9 brings the story back to the persecution faced by the early church. Acts 9:1-2 tells us "Now Saul was still breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord. He went to the high priest ² and requested letters from him to the synagogues in Damascus, so that if he found any men or women who belonged to the Way, he might bring them as prisoners to Jerusalem."

We were first introduced to Saul in conjunction with Stephen's death (7:58) and the growing persecution that followed (8:1) At that point in the narrative, we are not exactly sure to what degree Saul was leading the persecution. Some say he was the mastermind behind Stephen's death. Nevertheless, by Acts 9:1 Saul has clearly taken on a leadership role in the efforts to destroy the church and kill those who followed Jesus. He has requested extradition orders from the religious leaders in Jerusalem and embarked on a 6-day 175-mile journey to Damascus. Let's see what happens as he nears the city.

FACILITATOR 1

1. SAUL CONFRONTED (ACTS 9:3-4)

Read or have someone read Acts 9:3-4

J. Cardinell, 2024

Notes:

This is the Aim of the lesson. It drives our discussion and should be the point we drive home throughout the lesson.

This Lesson was created using:

- *Explore the Bible Leader Guide* (ETB LG)
- *Explore the Bible Personal Study Guide* (ETB PSG)
- *New American Commentary: Acts* (NAC)
- *Holman New Testament Commentary: Acts* (HNTC)
- *Preaching the Word: Acts* (Preaching)
- *Exalting Christ in Acts* (Exalting)
- *Unstoppable Gospel*, Gregg Matte

TEACHERS NOT: If you have someone in your group who recently went on a mission trip that required them so share their personal testimony you can begin with your group time with them sharing their testimony instead of you.

"Only the spilling of more blood will satisfy his obsessive hatred of Christians. He wants to liquidate every vestige of Christianity." (Exalting, 133)

Lloyd John Ogilvie writes, "Threatening and slaughter had come to be the very breath that Saul breathed, like a warhorse who sniffed the smell of battle." (Preaching, 126)

TEACHERS NOTE: If you use the ETB Leader Pack you can point out Jerusalem and Damascus on the map included in the pack.

Explain: The events in this passage are not just life-changing for Saul. The decision by God to reach out to this man and change his life had implications for many believers in the city of Damascus, thousands who would later be part of Paul’s missionary work, and millions today who read his letters. This encounter on the road to Damascus is one of the most important events in human history. In this passage, we first see that Christ Identifies with His Church.

Christ Identifies with His Church: In verse 4, Jesus does not ask why Saul is persecuting His *followers*. Instead, He asks, “Why are you persecuting me?” One writer notes that “Anyone who persecutes the church must answer to God for that. The Lord is our defender, and He feels every one of our wounds.” (Unstoppable, 165) The believers in Damascus and around the region might have been fearful of those persecuting them. While they might have trusted the Lord, they might not have understood the full extent to which the Lord Jesus felt their pain. Jesus makes it clear in His question to Saul that any persecution against the church and its individual members is persecution against the Lord Himself.

Second, we see that **Christ Identifies His People**. God called Saul by name and God called Saul to salvation. While the prompting of the Holy Spirit in the lives of people today might not be as dramatic as Jesus’ call to Saul, we can know that God still calls out to those far from Him. Sometimes in life, we tend to write people off. We might give up on them and think that the Lord will not or cannot save them. Saul’s conversion shows us that no one is too far gone. The Lord wants to save all people and can save even the vilest of people. Luke tells us that Saul intended to imprison and murder those who followed Jesus. If there was ever anyone in history that others might have written off as possibly convert to Christ, it was Saul.

FACILITATOR 2

Pray: Ask the group to think of one person in their life who is far from the Lord, either a believer who has drifted or someone who has not yet come to faith. Ask them to spend a few moments in silent prayer for that person. Conclude the silent prayer time by vocalizing a prayer for those people and ask the Lord to send someone who can share the good news of salvation with them.

Summarize and Transition: If we consider Saul for a moment, we will see that he was a devout man who did not know that his relationship with the Lord was lacking. Many people in our world today do not know that their relationship with the Lord is lacking. Saul was not going to listen with an open mind to the Apostle Peter’s sermon. He was not one to listen to the words spoken by Stephen. Saul needed the Lord to hit him with a bright light and knock him to the ground. We can encounter such people today. A parent or grandparent can talk until they are blue in the face. Some work colleagues will not listen to anything we have to say about the gospel. They don’t know what they need and refuse to listen. Sometimes the Lord will

Notes:

“In John 16:2, Jesus says, ‘A time is coming when anyone who kills you will think he is offering service to God.’” (Unstoppable, 162)

“Its importance [of this event] for Luke is evidenced by the fact that he told the story in some detail three times in Acts—here in 9:1–30, then in Paul’s speech before a Jewish crowd in the temple area (22:3–21), and finally in Paul’s defense before the Jewish King Agrippa (26:2–23).” (NAC, 231)

Warren Wiersbe writes, “The conversion of Saul of Tarsus, the leading persecutor of the Christians, was perhaps the greatest event in church history after the coming of the Spirit at Pentecost.” (Unstoppable, 162)

“The conversion of Saul of Tarsus is actually one of the most important events—aside from Jesus’ resurrection—in the history of the world.” (Exalting, 132-133)

TEACHERS NOTE If you have a person in your group who acts as your Prayer Coordinator or someone you are trying to put in that position ask them to lead the concluding prayer.

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act in these people's lives in a special way to *wake them up* and open their eyes to the Truth of the gospel. As we will see, after the Lord acts in their lives they will need believers to come alongside them. That is going to happen to Saul but first, the Lord has a few more things to say to him. Let's look at that.

FACILITATOR 1

2. JESUS IDENTIFIED (ACTS 9:5-9)

Read (or have someone read) Acts 9:5-9

Explain: In this passage, Luke recounts the interaction between Paul and the Lord. Elsewhere in the book of Acts, Luke recounts Paul's own telling of the events. In essence, the retellings recorded in Acts 22 and Acts 26 are Paul giving his testimony to a mob in Jerusalem and to King Agrippa. When giving his testimony he reveals more about the event and sometimes compresses the events to get his point across. We learn from Paul that the events on the Damascus Road took place at noon. The bright light was brighter than the noonday sun. Paul, a man with a clear vision of God and the followers of Jesus, was suddenly blinded by the truth of the gospel and it changed his life. The event changed his perception of God and it changed his perception of reality.

Ask: What does verse 5 tell us Saul asks after he fell to the ground. (He asked, "Who are you, Lord?")

Explain: Some argue that Paul's question could be interpreted as meaning "Who are you, sir?" However, others argue that Saul means Lord as *Lord*, not as a polite sir. Paul was a very devout and learned man. He had spent his life learning about the God of Israel. He was smart and spiritual enough to know that a blinding light and a voice from the heavens were indicative of a visitation from the Lord. He heard God's voice, but Daniel Im recently said, "There was something off about [the voice]. Like he did not quite recognize it, is this God? Is it." (*The One Thing* Podcast, Episode 360: Discipleship Pathways)

FACILITATOR 2

Apply: Many people we encounter will be spiritual. They will have an idea of what God "sounds like." Some of the people we encounter might have grown up in church. They might even be devoted to a spirituality akin to but not quite Christianity. When they hear the voice of Jesus or learn about the gospel of Jesus it might sound familiar, but something might seem off because it does not align with their idea of God. They might not quite recognize it. They do not recognize Jesus because their view of God does not align with the reality of Jesus. That is what Paul is dealing with. His understanding of God requires rule-keeping and results in murder. Unbelievers who grew up in church might view God as an austere, demanding God. They might view God as a distant,

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unapproachable deity. The opposite might be true of those who are spiritually minded but know little of the Christian God. They might view God as an all-loving benevolence that requires nothing of people. Regardless of the form their misunderstanding takes, when the truth of Jesus is presented or they hear the call of the Holy Spirit their ears might perk up, but the reality of Jesus might not align with their expectation.

Imagine Paul's shock when Jesus answers his question and reveals that the God he has served his entire life is really Jesus of Nazareth (Acts 22:8) His perspective of God is rocked and changed. Imagine the shock of someone today who learns that God is a God who requires adherence to the rules of holiness, but He is also a God who makes holiness possible. He is a God who not only makes us holy but also enables us, through His Spirit, to live holy lives. Imagine the shock of a person who thinks God is unapproachable when he or she discovers that God welcomes us to "approach the throne of grace with boldness, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in time of need." (Hebrews 4:16)

Activity: Take a moment and ask your group to consider their personal testimony. What misconception of God did they have before coming to faith in Jesus that has been corrected through knowing him or through studying His Word?

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Explain: Learning about the Lord and clarifying our misunderstandings can be a helpful part of our testimony of faith. We should not pretend like we we have always had it all figured out. Admitting that God teaches us and changes us can encourage others to open up to the gospel message. Paul's encounter with the Lord changed his perception of the Lord and thereby his perception of reality.

Ask: What does verse seven tell us about his companions? (they heard the sound but saw nothing.)

Apply: While the events relayed by Luke are specific to this one event, the experience of the companions can reveal something to us. When God speaks in a crowd sometimes He is not heard by the masses. Every Sunday in churches around the world the gospel is presented to large groups of people. Those large groups might consist of believers and inevitably they are filled with unbelievers. Yet, when the gospel is presented before a large group of people some will hear the Lord's voice and respond and others will hear the noise but receive no vision. We should never equate success in sharing the gospel by the numerical response we receive. In Acts 9, God revealed Himself to one man. God does the work of revealing himself when we present the gospel. If He wants to reveal Himself to one person and not ten that is His decision.

Transition: After the question and answer period, God told Saul to enter the city the wait for further instructions. The once boastful, murderous man now enters the city led by the

Notes:

"It would be hard to imagine how these words must have struck Paul. They were a complete refutation of all he had been. (NAC, 233)

"Saul's worldview got demolished." (Exalting, 134)

"The Lord imparted to his newly-chosen one a new faith, a new interpretation of the Old Testament, a new perspective on divine redemption, a new identification with the followers of the Way, and a new mission for this life." (HNTC, 139)

"No longer on a tirade, he was now led like a toddler." (Unstoppable, 164)

"Rather, the picture is of Paul in his brokenness and helplessness. The radiance of his vision had blinded him. Reduced to total powerlessness, he had to be led by others into the city." (NAC, 235)

hand like a toddler. The man who once knew all the answers and acted with assurance would now sit blinded and dumbfounded unable to eat or drink for three days. We do not know what he was thinking or praying during this time, but it is clear that he came to some sort of conclusion about the person of Jesus because God is going to act in someone else's life to bring Paul further along in his faith journey.

3. PURPOSE GIVEN (ACTS 9:10-16)

Read (or have someone read) Acts 9:10-16

Explain: God yet again speaks to a man. When He spoke to Saul, the response was one of confusion. When He speaks to Ananias, the response was one of compliance. Like Abraham, Jacob, Moses, Samuel, and Isaiah he responded by saying, "Here I am. What do you need." (c.f. *Explore the Bible Leaders* Podcast, Session 10 August 4) We do not know anything about this man named Ananias because he is only mentioned in relation to this event. All we know is that he was a disciple and "a devout man according to the law, who had a good reputation with all the Jews living there." (Acts 22:12)

Ask: What does God tell Ananias to do? (Go to the house of Judas and speak to Saul.)

FACILITATOR 2

Discuss: How would you have reacted if God told you to go, alone, to speak to the man who had come to murder you and your friends?

Apply: Ananias clarifies the command to go speak to the murderer. God confirms the command with a reply to go. Knowing Ananias' reasonable response God explains that Saul will be used by God. When we receive a clear command from God to speak to someone about the gospel we should respond with assured obedience. God might tell us to speak to a person who does not like us. God might prompt us to speak to someone who has expressed animosity to the gospel. These might be nerve-racking experiences, but God desires to use all sorts of people for His purposes. Our disobedience will not get in the way of God's plan, but our obedience will allow us to participate in the great work of salvation.

FACILITATOR 1

Ask: What does God say He has planned for Saul? (To missions and suffering)

Explain: God revealed to Ananias the call He would lay on Saul's life. First, he was to be God's witness to the "Gentiles, kings, and Israelites." He did this, but Paul later recorded that chief among these callings was his ministry to the Gentiles (Romans 1:5) God then revealed to Ananias that Paul would suffer for the name of Christ. "This certainly happened to Paul. He endorsed the death of Stephen, then imitated him. He hated Stephen's preaching of Christ in the synagogues, then he devoted his life to doing it himself. He stood with the Pharisees who rejected Stephen's message,

Notes:

"Ananias probably knew some young women who had been widowed by Saul. Perhaps some of his friends had been orphaned by Saul's bloodbath or had been killed themselves." (Preaching 131)

"The one who once was the church's most vehement persecutor would now be the one who would willingly accept persecution for the sake of the name (cf. 5:41)" (NAC, 237)

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then he stood against the Pharisees and repeated it. And some time after Stephen was stoned to death, Paul was stoned and left for dead (see Acts 14:19; 2 Cor. 11:25). Church tradition says he died as a martyr, just as Stephen had done.” (Unstoppable, 156)

FACILITATOR 2

Apply: Sometimes in life, we can be intimidated by the word “calling.” We often apply it to ministers or missionaries. In reality, we are all called by God to be about His work. That work begins with the call to Christlikeness. In Romans 8:29-30, Paul explains that we are called “to be conformed to the image of” Christ. When we hear this, our minds immediately think about holy and righteous living. That is certainly a part of being conformed to Christ’s image (I Thess 4:7). However, if we really consider the life and heart of Christ, we will realize that the call to conformity includes a life of ministry and service to others. The calling of a minister or a missionary is a call to do ministry *as their job*. Every believer is called to do ministry not *as their job*, but *at their job* and among their friends. While some who sit in our small groups and our sanctuaries might be called to enter full-time vocational ministry, every one of us is called to full-time ministry in our vocation.

Discuss: What is one thing group members can do this week that will be a ministry to someone else? (Encourage the group to think of some practical actions they can take this week that will reflect Christ’s heart and His commission to go make disciples.)

FACILITATOR 1

Summarize and Transition: First, God tapped Saul with the call to belief and then to ministry. Then God called Ananias to step up to the plate and go to Saul. Both men had an option, and both of them responded appropriately.

CONCLUDE

The Explore the Bible Lesson concludes with God’s instruction to Ananias to go to Saul. However, the story does not conclude with the instruction. Ananias goes to visit the newly converted Saul and utters some of the most encouraging words in the Bible.

Read Acts 9:17: ¹⁷ Ananias went and entered the house. He placed his hands on him and said, “Brother Saul, the Lord Jesus, who appeared to you on the road you were traveling, has sent me so that you may regain your sight and be filled with the Holy Spirit.”

Paul had fasted and prayed for three days in response to the life-changing meeting with Jesus. The first thing he hears from Ananias is the word “brother.” Surely this was an affirmation and encouragement to Paul during this time. It can remind us that new believers need encouragement as they move forward into a new life with Christ.

Conclude Encourage your group to develop a short testimony this week using the attached page. Also encourage them think of ways they can intentionally encourage new believers in their faith.

This guide to developing your testimony was developed by our pastor and is used by our international mission teams to help people prepare the trip. It is a good outline to use at home and abroad.

Your testimony consists of three simple parts:

1. What was your life like before you met Christ? Even if you met Jesus at an early age and had not much experience in life, you were a sinner and had to come to that realization. Turning away from sin and turning to Jesus is a common thread in every Christian's story.
2. How did you come to learn of Christ and meet Him? Share the story of who told you about Jesus or who led you to trust in Christ.
3. What has your life been like since following Christ? You may talk about how you were baptized after you trusted Christ and then how you got involved in a church family. You also may tell of the difference Christ has made and does make in your life.