

# Paul: Apostle to the Gentiles



## SABBATH AFTERNOON

**Read for This Week's Study:** *Acts 6:9–15, 9:1–9, 1 Sam. 16:7, Matt. 7:1, Acts 11:19–21, 15:1–5.*

**Memory Text:** “When they heard these things they became silent; and they glorified God, saying, ‘Then God has also granted to the Gentiles repentance to life’” (*Acts 11:18, NKJV*).

It's not that hard to understand Saul of Tarsus (also known as the apostle Paul after his conversion) and why he did what he did. As a devout Jew who was taught all his life about the importance of the law and about the soon-coming political redemption of Israel, the idea of the long-awaited Messiah being ignominiously executed like the worst of criminals was just too much for him to tolerate.

No wonder, then, he was convinced that the followers of Jesus were being disloyal to the torah and, thus, hindering God's plan for Israel. Their claims that the crucified Jesus was the Messiah and that He had risen from the dead were, he believed, rank apostasy. There could be no tolerance for such nonsense or for anyone who refused to give up those notions. Saul was determined to be God's agent in ridding Israel of these beliefs. Hence, he first appears in the pages of Scripture as a violent persecutor of his fellow Jews, those who believed that Jesus was the Messiah.

God, however, had far different plans for Saul, plans that he never could have anticipated for himself: not only was this Jew going to preach Jesus as the Messiah, he was going to do it among the Gentiles!

\* Study this week's lesson to prepare for Sabbath, July 1.

## Persecutor of Christians

Saul of Tarsus first appears in Acts in his involvement in the stoning of Stephen (*Acts 7:58*) and then in connection with the more wide-scale persecution that broke out in Jerusalem (*Acts 8:1–5*). Peter, Stephen, Philip, and Paul play a significant role in the book of Acts because they were involved in events that led to the spread of the Christian faith beyond the Jewish world. Stephen is of particular significance because his preaching and martyrdom appear to have had a profound influence on Saul of Tarsus.

Stephen was a Greek-speaking Jew, and one of the original seven deacons (*Acts 6:3–6*). According to Acts, a group of foreign Jews who had come to live in Jerusalem (*Acts 6:9*) entered into a dispute with Stephen over the content of his preaching about Jesus. It is possible, maybe even likely, that Saul of Tarsus was involved in these debates.

**Read** Acts 6:9–15. What charges were brought against Stephen? Of what do these charges remind you? (See also *Matt. 26:59–61*.)

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The fierce hostility toward Stephen’s preaching appears to have resulted from two different things. On the one hand, Stephen drew the ire of his opponents by not placing primary importance on the Jewish law and the temple, which had become the focal point of Judaism and were treasured symbols of religious and national identity. But Stephen did more than merely downplay these two treasured icons; he vigorously proclaimed that Jesus, the crucified and risen Messiah, was the true center of the Jewish faith.

No wonder, then, that he angered the Pharisee Saul (*Phil. 3:3–6*), whose zeal against the early Christians indicates that he probably belonged to a strict and militant wing of the Pharisees, one full of revolutionary fervor. Saul saw that the great prophetic promises of God’s kingdom had not yet been fulfilled (*Daniel 2, Zech. 8:23, Isaiah 40–55*), and he probably believed it was his task to help God bring that day about—which could be done by cleansing Israel of religious corruption, including the idea that this Jesus was the Messiah.

**Convinced that he was right, Saul was willing to put those whom he thought wrong to death. While we need zeal and fervor for what we believe, how do we learn to temper our zeal with the realization that, at times, we just might be wrong?**

## Saul's Conversion

**“And he said, ‘Who are You, Lord?’ Then the Lord said, ‘I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting. It is hard for you to kick against the goads’ ”** (*Acts 9:5, NKJV*).

Although Saul's persecution of the early church begins rather inconspicuously (as he only holds the coats of Stephen's executioners), it quickly intensifies (see *Acts 8:1–3; 9:1, 2, 13, 14, 21; 22:3–5*). Several of the words Luke uses to describe Saul paint a picture of a wild, ferocious beast or a pillaging soldier bent on the destruction of his opponent. The word translated “ravaging” in *Acts 8:3 (ESV)*, for example, is used in the Greek translation of the Old Testament (*Ps. 80:13*) to describe the uncontrolled and destructive behavior of a wild boar. Saul's crusade against the Christians was clearly not a half-hearted matter of convenience; it was a deliberate and sustained plan to exterminate the Christian faith.

**Look** at the three descriptions of Saul's conversion (*Acts 9:1–18, 22:6–21, and 26:12–19*). **What role did the grace of God have in this experience? In other words, how much did Saul deserve the goodness that the Lord showed toward him?**

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Saul's conversion, from a human perspective, must have seemed impossible (hence the skepticism that many expressed when they first heard about it).

The only thing Saul deserved was punishment, but God extended grace to this fervent Jew instead. It is important to note, however, that Saul's conversion did not happen in a vacuum, nor was it forced.

Saul was no atheist. He was a religious man, though gravely mistaken in his understanding of God. Jesus' words to Saul, “ ‘It is hard for you to kick against the goads’ ” (*Acts 26:14, ESV*), indicate that the Spirit had been convicting Saul. In the ancient world, a “goad” was a stick with a sharp point used to prod oxen whenever they resisted plowing. Saul had resisted God's prodding for some time, but finally on his way to Damascus, through a miraculous encounter with the risen Jesus, Saul chose to fight no longer.

**Think back about your own conversion experience. Maybe it wasn't as dramatic as Saul's, but in what similar ways were you the recipient of God's grace? Why is it important never to forget what we have been given in Christ?**

## Saul in Damascus

During Saul's encounter with Jesus, he was blinded and instructed to go to the house of a man named Judas to wait for another man, Ananias. No doubt Saul's physical blindness was a powerful reminder of the greater spiritual blindness that led him to persecute the followers of Jesus.

The appearance of Jesus to Saul on the Damascus road changed everything. Where Saul had thought he had been so right, he had been dead wrong. Rather than working for God, he had been working against Him. Saul entered Damascus a different man than the proud and zealous Pharisee who had left Jerusalem. Instead of eating and drinking, Saul spent his first three days in Damascus in fasting and prayer as he reflected on all that had happened.

Read Acts 9:10–14. Imagine what must have been going on in the mind of Ananias: not only was Saul, the persecutor, now a believer in Jesus, he was also Paul, God's chosen apostle to take the gospel to the Gentile world (*see Acts 26:16–18*).

No wonder Ananias was a little confused. If the church in Jerusalem was hesitant to accept Paul some three years *after* his conversion (*Acts 9:26–30*), one can imagine what questions and concerns filled the hearts of the believers in Damascus only days after the event!

Notice, too, that Ananias was given a vision by the Lord telling him the surprising and unexpected news about Saul of Tarsus; anything less than a vision might not have convinced him that what he was told about Saul was true—that the enemy of the Jewish believers had now become one of them.

Saul had left Jerusalem with the authority and commission of the chief priests to root out the Christian faith (*Acts 26:12*); God had, however, a vastly different commission for Saul, one that rested on far greater authority. Saul was to take the gospel to the Gentile world, an idea that must have been even more shocking to Ananias and the other Jewish believers than was the conversion of Saul himself.

Where Saul had sought to curtail the spread of the Christian faith, now God would use him to spread it far beyond anything that Jewish believers ever would have imagined.

**Read 1 Samuel 16:7, Matthew 7:1, and 1 Corinthians 4:5. What is the message of these texts in regard to why we must be careful in how we view the spiritual experience of other people? What mistakes have you made in your judgments about others, and what have you learned from those mistakes?**

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## The Gospel Goes to the Gentiles

**Where** was the first Gentile church established? What events caused the believers to go there? (*Acts 11:19–21, 26*). What does that remind you of from Old Testament times? (*See Daniel 2*.)

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The persecution that broke out in Jerusalem after Stephen's death caused a number of Jewish believers to flee three hundred miles north to Antioch. As capital of the Roman province of Syria, Antioch was third only to Rome and Alexandria in significance. Its population, estimated at five hundred thousand, was extremely cosmopolitan, making it an ideal location not only for a Gentile church but as the starting base for the worldwide mission of the early church.

**What** occurred in Antioch that resulted in Barnabas's visit to the city and his subsequent decision to invite Paul to join him there? What kind of picture is presented of the church there? (*Acts 11:20–26*).

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Constructing a chronology of Paul's life is difficult, but it appears that some five years passed between his post-conversion visit to Jerusalem (*Acts 9:26–30*) and the invitation by Barnabas to join him in Antioch. What was Paul doing all those years? It is hard to say for sure. But based on his comments in Galatians 1:21, he may have been preaching the gospel in the regions of Syria and Cilicia. Some have suggested that it was perhaps during this time that he was disinherited by his family (*Phil. 3:8*) and suffered a number of the hardships he describes in 2 Corinthians 11:23–28. However, the church in Antioch blossomed under the guidance of the Spirit. The description in Acts 13:1 indicates that the cosmopolitan nature of the city was soon reflected in the ethnic and cultural diversity of the church itself. (Barnabas was from Cyprus, Lucius from Cyrene, Paul from Cilicia, Simon presumably from Africa, and many of the Gentiles were converts, too.) Thus, the Spirit now sought to take the gospel to even more Gentiles by using Antioch as the base for missionary activities far beyond Syria and Judea.

**Read again Acts 11:19–26. What can we learn from the church at Antioch, a very culturally and ethnically diverse church, that could help churches today emulate the good that existed there?**

## Conflict Within the Church

Of course, nothing human is perfect, and it wasn't long before trouble began within the early community of faith.

For starters, not everyone was pleased with the entry of Gentile believers into the early church. The disagreement was not over the concept of a Gentile mission but over the basis on which Gentiles should be allowed to join. Some felt that faith in Jesus alone was not sufficient as the defining mark of the Christian; faith, they argued, must be supplemented with circumcision and obedience to the law of Moses. To be a true Christian, they asserted, Gentiles needed to be circumcised. (We can, in Acts 10:1–11:18, see the extent of the division between Jews and Gentiles through Peter's experience with Cornelius and the reaction that followed.)

The official visits from Jerusalem, which monitored Philip's work among the Samaritans (*Acts 8:14*) and the work with Gentiles in Antioch (*Acts 11:22*), may suggest some concern about the inclusion of non-Jews in the Christian community. Yet, the reaction to Peter's baptism of Cornelius, an uncircumcised Roman soldier, is a clear example of the disagreement that existed on the Gentile question among the earlier believers. The inclusion of an occasional Gentile such as Cornelius may have made some feel uncomfortable, but Paul's intentional efforts to open wide the doors of the church for Gentiles on the basis of faith in Jesus alone resulted in deliberate attempts by some to undermine Paul's ministry.

**How** did certain believers from Judea try to counteract Paul's work with Gentile Christians in Antioch? *Acts 15:1–5*.

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Although the Jerusalem Council ultimately sided with Paul on the issue of circumcision in Acts 15, the opposition to Paul's ministry continued. About seven years later, during Paul's final visit to Jerusalem, many were still suspicious about Paul's gospel. In fact, when Paul visited the temple, he nearly lost his life when Jews from Asia cried out, "Men of Israel, help: This is the man, that teacheth all men every where against the people, and the law, and this place" (*Acts 21:28; see also 21:20, 21*).

**Put yourself in the position of these Jewish believers who were concerned about Paul's teaching. Why do their concern and opposition make some sense? What can we learn from this about how our own preconceived ideas, as well as our cultural (and even religious) notions, can lead us astray? How can we learn to protect ourselves from making the same kind of errors, no matter how well-intentioned we are?**

**Further Thought:** For the relationship between personal conversion and the church, read Ellen G. White, “Individual Independence,” pp. 430–434, in *Testimonies for the Church*, vol. 3. For a helpful map of the early life of Paul and commentary on his conversion, see *The SDA Bible Commentary*, vol. 6, pp. 226–234.

“Paul had formerly been known as a zealous defender of the Jewish religion and an untiring persecutor of the followers of Jesus. Courageous, independent, persevering, his talents and training would have enabled him to serve in almost any capacity. He could reason with extraordinary clearness, and by his withering sarcasm could place an opponent in no enviable light. And now the Jews saw this young man of unusual promise united with those whom he formerly persecuted, and fearlessly preaching in the name of Jesus.

“A general slain in battle is lost to his army, but his death gives no additional strength to the enemy. But when a man of prominence joins the opposing force, not only are his services lost, but those to whom he joins himself gain a decided advantage. Saul of Tarsus, on his way to Damascus, might easily have been struck dead by the Lord, and much strength would have been withdrawn from the persecuting power. But God in His providence not only spared Saul’s life, but converted him, thus transferring a champion from the side of the enemy to the side of Christ. An eloquent speaker and a severe critic, Paul, with his stern purpose and undaunted courage, possessed the very qualifications needed in the early church.”—Ellen G. White, *The Acts of the Apostles*, p. 124.

### Discussion Questions:

- ① What lesson can we learn from the fact that some of Paul’s harshest opponents were fellow Jews who believed in Jesus?
- ② How can we stand up for matters of religious principle and, at the same time, make sure that we are not fighting against God?

**Summary:** Saul’s encounter with the risen Jesus on the Damascus road was the defining moment in his life and in the history of the early church. With it, God changed the one-time persecutor of the church and made him His chosen apostle to bring the gospel to the Gentile world. Paul’s inclusion of Gentiles in the church by faith alone, however, proved a difficult concept for some within the church to accept—a powerful example of how preconceptions and prejudice can hinder our mission.