



11

Saul Is Converted

Key Theme

- Jesus will build His church.

Key Passages

- Acts 8:1–3, 9:1–33; 1 Timothy 1:13; 1 Corinthians 15:9; 2 Corinthians 5:17; Galatians 1:10–17

Objectives

Students will be able to:

- Describe Saul's conversion.
- Contrast Saul/Paul before and after his conversion.



Lesson Overview



Come On In

Write on the board, "Is one person's salvation more miraculous than another's?"



Studying God's Word

Jesus appeared to Saul in a bright light. When confronted with the truth of who Jesus is, Saul became a believer. His life changed from a persecutor to a preacher of the gospel of Jesus Christ, and he endured many trials for preaching truth by the grace of God.

- Study the Prepare to Share section.
- Go Before the Throne.



Activity: Testimony of Mercy

The students will examine some of the passages where Paul recounts his days as Saul and then consider their own testimonies of what God has done in their lives.

- Student Guides
- Testimony of Mercy Answer Key from the Resource DVD-ROM
- Pencils



Activity: Truth Be Told Review Game (Optional)

The students will review the lesson by playing a board game.

- Truth Be Told Game Board and Answer Key
- Game pieces for each team
- Truth Be Told Question and Number Cards
- Poster putty



Prepare to Share

SCRIPTURAL BACKGROUND

Prepare to teach by preparing your heart. Read the key passages listed above with this background.

All believers who heed the words of Jesus Christ to repent and believe in the gospel (Mark 1:15) become new creations in Christ Jesus—the old is gone and the new has come (2 Corinthians 5:17). Believers are born again to a living hope through the Resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead (1 Peter 1:3). How this happens in the hearts of each individual is a work of God. Each transformation is dramatic in that God seals the soul of the believer for eternity (Ephesians 1:13–14).

However, some circumstances that surround the conversion of each believer may not seem as dramatic as others. God redeems some at a very young age from a Christian family, others attend church all their lives, they live lives honoring to God, and then one day they understand the truth of the gospel as they repent and turn to Christ as Savior. Still others live lives of darkness, sin, and rebellion—and God reveals His truth to them suddenly and unexpectedly bringing them out of the darkness and into the light (John 8:12).

But there have been few conversion experiences that would top that of the Jew, Saul of Tarsus, who boasted of his confidence in his life and background. He had been circumcised according to Jewish law. He was a Hebrew of Hebrews, a descendant of Benjamin, of the house of Abraham—a true son of Israel. As a Pharisee, he was zealous for the Jewish law and openly and passionately persecuted the church—those who proclaimed Jesus as Lord (Philippians 3:4–6).

And yet, he was dramatically transformed into a new creation in Christ and then used by God to start numerous churches and write much of the New Testament. How did the Lord Jesus Christ get this murderous Pharisee's attention? It happened on the road to Damascus where Saul fully intended to find men and women of the Way (followers of Jesus) and bring them bound to Jerusalem for persecution and trial (Acts 9:1–2).

Jesus literally knocked Saul to the ground as he journeyed. He saw a bright light and heard a voice speaking to him, the Lord Jesus Himself, asking, "Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting Me?" (Acts 9:3–4). Saul was astonished and afraid—to the point of asking what the Lord would have him do. The Lord had something for him—and it would start in the city of Damascus, the very city he was headed to in order to further destroy the church and the people of Christ. But the Lord's plan was far different than Saul's plan. Saul had been struck down and humbled and was afraid. The Lord had made him blind, and Saul was helplessly led by the hand into the city (Acts 9:8).

The zealous Pharisee, Saul, had met the risen Christ who called him into ministry in a spectacular way. The Lord declared that Saul (whose name was changed to Paul following his conversion) was His chosen vessel, and he would bear the name of Christ to the Gentiles, to kings, and to the children of Israel (Acts 9:15). Jesus had plans for Saul, and Saul's heart was dramatically changed so that, "immediately he preached Christ in the synagogues, that He [Jesus] is the Son of God" (Acts 9:20)!

Saul was a new creation in Christ. This Hebrew of Hebrews, who had persecuted the Way by binding and then delivering both men and women to prison (Acts 22:4); this Saul who had held the clothes of the murderers as they dragged the very first martyr for Christ, Stephen, out of the city and stoned him because of his faith and love for Jesus (Acts 7:57–59); this man now suffered for His Lord through beatings, stonings, shipwrecks, peril, robbers, weariness, toil, sleeplessness, hunger, thirst, cold, nakedness, and many other things (2 Corinthians 11:25–27). The Lord Jesus Christ had made Paul a new creation. And after meeting the living Jesus, he would no longer boast except in the Cross of the Lord Jesus Christ (Galatians 6:14).

HISTORICAL/APOLOGETICS BACKGROUND

If anyone deserves to be punished and to pay for his sins, it would be a person who has persecuted believers, hunted them down, imprisoned them, assisted with their murder, and blasphemed the name of God. Right? That may be how we think sometimes, but the truth is that all of us have sinned and fall short of the glory of God (Romans 3:23). All sin is an affront to a holy God, no matter how small we think it may be, or how vile. The fact is, God's grace is greater than all our sin—than any sin. No sin is too vile that God cannot forgive it, and no sinner is so bad that God cannot redeem him.

We see this played out in the life of Saul of Tarsus. Saul was a fervently religious Jew who thought he was serving God by persecuting members of a new sect. They called themselves The Way (Acts 9:2, 19:9), and they claimed that their leader, who had been crucified for claiming to be God, had risen from the dead. Further, they were preaching that only by faith in this Man's name—Jesus—could anyone be saved. Saul would not believe the Man's "lies" and was zealously persecuting the followers of Jesus, even to the point of entering houses and dragging off men and women to prison (Acts 8:3).

It was in the context of Saul's ongoing, zealous persecution of the church that he encountered the risen Christ on the road to Damascus (Acts 9). After his vision of Jesus and sudden conversion, the blinded Saul was told to go into the city of Damascus and to wait for instructions. Several days

later, Jesus appeared to a disciple named Ananias and told him to go lay his hands on Saul so that he would receive his sight. Ananias responded as we might respond. He said something like, “What? You mean the Saul of Tarsus who has been persecuting the church and killing the saints?! You mean the guy who came here with the purpose of imprisoning believers?!” And Jesus replied to him, “Go, for he is a chosen vessel of Mine to bear My name before Gentiles, kings, and the children of Israel. For I will show him how many things he must suffer for My name’s sake” (Acts 9:15–16).

Years later, while writing to his young disciple Timothy, Saul, now renamed Paul, would recount his conversion experience:

And I thank Christ Jesus our Lord who has enabled me, because He counted me faithful, putting me into the ministry, although I was formerly a blasphemer, a persecutor, and an insolent man; but I obtained mercy because I did it ignorantly in unbelief. And the grace of our Lord was exceedingly abundant, with faith and love which are in Christ Jesus. This is a faithful saying and worthy of all acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, of whom I am chief. However, for this reason I obtained mercy, that in me first Jesus Christ might show all longsuffering, as a pattern to those who are going to believe on Him for everlasting life (1 Timothy 1:12–16).

The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ is “exceedingly abundant” toward sinners—all sinners. That was the reason Jesus came to earth, lived a perfect life, and then suffered and died—to save sinners. There is no sin too great that God cannot forgive, and no sinner so bad that God cannot change. God delights in taking persecutors and turning them into worshippers.

Paul said that he had obtained mercy that he might be an example of the great patience of Christ for those who would believe. And He serves as an example for all of us who do believe. If we think that God will not forgive us, or someone we know and love, for some sin, we can think of Paul. And remember that Jesus is all-forgiving; His death on the Cross is sufficient payment for ALL the sins of those who repent and turn to Him.

All sinners will be judged. As Paul told the Corinthians:

Do you not know that the unrighteous will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived. Neither fornicators, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor homosexuals, nor sodomites, nor thieves, nor covetous, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor extortioners will inherit the kingdom of God (1 Corinthians 6:9–10).

But, we can thank God that those who have repented of their sins and trusted in Christ—in His perfect life, His substitutionary death, and His powerful Resurrection—are forgiven, washed, cleansed, and made righteous because of what Jesus did on the Cross. Paul followed this bad news of judgment to the Corinthians with the good news of forgiveness.

And such were some of you. But you were washed, but you were sanctified, but you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus and by the Spirit of our God (1 Corinthians 6:11).

There is no sin we might commit that is so great that it is beyond the reach of God’s forgiveness in Jesus Christ. And there is no person who is so wicked that the grace of God may not touch His heart to convert him. No! Jesus is exceedingly abundant in grace. He died that men could be forgiven. As the writer of this hymn so elegantly wrote:

Marvelous grace of our loving Lord,
Grace that exceeds our sin and our guilt!
Yonder on Calvary’s mount outpoured,
There where the blood of the Lamb was spilt.

Grace, grace, God’s grace,
Grace that will pardon and cleanse within;
Grace, grace, God’s grace,
Grace that is greater than all our sin!

For more information on this topic, see the Online Resource Page.



BEFORE THE THRONE

Jesus, you are glorious! The incredible way you reached down to Saul the Pharisee and used him for your glory reveals your grace and mercy. Saul’s life of faith after his conversion is an example for me. He willingly suffered in order to preach the name of his Lord. Circumstances didn’t deter him from a life of faith. He kept his eyes on the eternal. Lord, I pray for such faith. Even little things distract me and cause me to feel sorry for myself. Grow in me, Holy Spirit, a heart joyfully surrendered to your will—one that is content in suffering. And may my students learn from Paul. Give them an understanding of what it means to be a new creation in Christ, that they would live their lives unashamedly surrendered to you and your Word, no matter the sacrifice.

Review

As we have been looking at the persecution of the early church, we have seen how that persecution actually brought about the spread of the gospel. What man meant for evil, God used for good. We were introduced to Saul last week, and today we are going to focus on Saul's conversion. Jesus told His

disciples that He would build His church, and the actions of a zealous, young Jew who thought he was doing the work of God was not going to stop those plans.

To remind us of what we heard last week, listen as I read Acts 8:1–3.
Read the passage for the students.



► Write on the board, "Is one person's salvation more miraculous than another's?"



Studying God's Word

READ THE WORD

Now let's read Acts 9:1–9 together. As we read, we will be referring to Saul as the main subject of the passage, but remember that this is the same man who wrote most of the New Testament—the Apostle Paul. Saul was his name as a Hebrew; Paul was his name as a citizen of Rome. It is not until Acts 13 that Luke shifts from using Saul to using Paul. *Have someone read the passage aloud.*

EXAMINE THE WORD

Observe the Text

- ? **Where have we seen Saul before?** *He was consenting to Stephen's stoning and throwing Christians in Jerusalem into prison.*
- ? **Who was Saul threatening?** *He was threatening the disciples of the Lord, the Christians.*
- ? **How are Saul's threats described?** *He was breathing threats and murder against them. This gives the imagery that every breath Saul took was focused on threatening and murdering the Christians.*
- ? **Who gave Saul permission to pursue the Christians?** *The high priest.*
- ? **Where was Saul going to look for the Christians?** *Damascus, in Syria.*
- ? **What form did his credentials take?** *A letter to the Jewish leaders in the synagogue at Damascus.*
- ? **What label is given to the Christians?** *They are called members of the Way. This is likely drawn from Jesus's identification as the only way to the Father and the Christians' call for all to follow Christ as the Way.*
- ? **What did Saul plan to do with the Christians?** *He intended to bring them back bound (chained) to Jerusalem.*

Acts 9:1–9

- ? **Was Saul only concerned with some or all of the Christians?** *The phrase “whether men or women” indicates a broad intent to arrest as many as he could.*
- ? **When did this event take place?** *It happened as Saul was heading toward Damascus, near Damascus.*
- ? **What did Saul see?** *A light shone around him.*
- ? **Where did this light come from?** *It was from heaven.*
- ? **What happened to Saul as he saw the light?** *He fell to the ground and heard a voice.*
- ? **What did the voice say?** *“Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting Me?”*
- ? **Did Saul recognize the voice?** *There seems to be some confusion as Saul asks who is talking, but also says “Lord.” This could have been a general use of the word, referring to someone important.*
- ? **Who was actually speaking?** *Jesus.*
- ? **How could Jesus say Saul was persecuting Him?** *While Jesus was not on the earth, His disciples were. Jesus is very strongly identifying with His disciples to the point that persecuting them was the same as persecuting Him.*
- ? **What does the phrase “kick against the goads” mean?** *A goad was a sharp stick used to prod cattle along or placed on a cart to deter the animals from kicking back at the cart.*
- ? **How does that phrase apply to Saul’s actions?** *Saul was fighting against the truth.*
- ? **How did Saul respond to Jesus?** *He asked what he was to do in an apparently submissive way.*
- ? **What did Jesus command Saul to do?** *He was to go into the city and wait for instructions.*
- ? **How did Saul get to Damascus since he was blind?** *The men who were with him, who heard the voice but did not see Jesus, led him by the hand into Damascus.*
- ? **What did Saul do once he was there?** *He waited for three days, while blind, without eating or drinking anything.*
- ? **In Acts 26:9–18, Saul/Paul recounts his experience on the road to Damascus to King Agrippa. What does this passage add to our understanding of chapter 9?** *This section affirms the persecution Saul was committing, adding that some of the Christians had been stoned for their faith (v. 10). Further, Saul describes the appearance at midday and gives more detail about what Jesus told him he was to do.*
- ? **What is interesting about the phrase in verse 18 in light of Saul’s circumstances?** *Saul was blinded as Jesus said this to him, so telling him that he would preach and minister so that the people’s eyes would be opened, turning them from the darkness of sin to the light of forgiveness, is ironic.*

Acts 26:9–18

Discover the Truth

If there ever was a radical encounter with the resurrected Jesus, this was it. Whether Saul was traveling by foot or horse, the Lord appeared and overwhelmed him with His glorious light. Saul fell to the ground. This was a demonstration of absolute authority.

SOVEREIGN

OMNIPOTENT

- ? **What attributes of God were displayed in Jesus's acts in interrupting Saul's journey?** *Refer to the Attributes of God Poster. Jesus was demonstrating His sovereignty and omnipotence in shining a blinding light during midday and blinding Saul. This is especially apparent in His command to Saul and Saul's obedience.*

Saul had intended to fight against Jesus and His disciples, but God's will is always greater than man's will. Jesus had ordained for Saul to follow Him, and Saul submitted to God's will under the extreme circumstances. Saul had been struck blind and given a command from the Creator and Savior, and he obeyed the command. But was Saul just reacting to the circumstances, or had he been changed in the way Peter and John had been?



READ THE WORD

Acts 9:10–30

Let's continue with the passage and look at what happened to Saul. Will someone please read Acts 9:10–30. *Have someone read the passage aloud.*

EXAMINE THE WORD

Observe the Text

- ? **How did Jesus communicate with Ananias?** *He talked to him in a vision.*
- ? **How did Ananias respond to the voice in the vision?** *He immediately submitted, saying, "Here I am, Lord."*
- ? **What did Jesus command Ananias to do?** *He was to go to Strait Street, find Saul of Tarsus, and lay his hands on Saul so he could receive his sight.*
- ? **What was Saul doing at that time?** *He was praying.*
- ? **Was Saul expecting Ananias?** *Yes, he had received a vision of Ananias coming to him.*
- ? **How did Ananias respond to Jesus's command?** *He did not want to do it.*
- ? **Why was Ananias hesitant?** *He had heard about Saul's persecution of the believers in Jerusalem and his intent in Damascus.*
- ? **How did Jesus respond?** *He told Ananias to go!*
- ? **What does Jesus reveal about Saul's future?** *Saul would be a witness for Jesus before many people.*
- ? **What would Saul's witnessing involve?** *He would suffer many things for the name of Jesus.*
- ? **How did Ananias refer to Saul?** *He called him "Brother Saul."*
- ? **What two things did Ananias do for Saul in the name of Jesus?** *Saul's sight was restored, and he received the Holy Spirit.*
- ? **What physical sign marked the end of Saul's blindness?** *Something like scales fell from his eyes.*

- ? **What did Saul do next?** *He was baptized.*
- ? **How would you describe what had happened to Saul?** *He had been born again, receiving the filling of the Holy Spirit and participating in baptism.*
- ? **Who did Saul stay with?** *He stayed with the disciples in Damascus, the very people he had come to arrest.*
- ? **What does this say about the unity of the Holy Spirit?** *There was instant unity between Saul and the other disciples even though he had intended to arrest and possibly kill them.*
- ? **What did Saul do that demonstrated the conversion he had undergone?** *He went to the synagogue and preached that Jesus was the Son of God and the Messiah.*
- ? **What response did this elicit in the Jews in Damascus?** *They were amazed since they knew this was the man who had come to destroy the Christians in Damascus just as he had done in Jerusalem.*
- ? **Were the Jews in Damascus able to prove Saul wrong?** *They could not refute Saul's explanation that Jesus is the Christ.*
- ? **What did this lead the Jews to do?** *They plotted to kill Saul, watching the city gates to capture him.*
- ? **How did Saul escape this threat?** *He was let over the city wall by the other disciples at night.*
- ? **Where did Saul go?** *To Jerusalem.*
- ? **How did the disciples in Jerusalem respond to Saul?** *They were all afraid of him and did not believe he had really been converted.*
- ? **Who was willing to accept Saul as a fellow disciple of Christ?** *Barnabas.*
- ? **When he was brought to the apostles, what did Saul explain to them?** *He explained how Jesus had appeared to him on the road and how he had preached Jesus boldly in Damascus.*
- ? **Did the apostles receive him?** *Yes. He "was with them" and was "coming in and going out" among the disciples in Jerusalem.*
- ? **What did Saul do to demonstrate his sincerity?** *He spoke boldly of Christ, disputing with the Hellenistic Jews.*
- ? **Who else had disputed with the Hellenists (Jews from the dispersion)?** *Stephen—Acts 6:9.*
- ? **How does the response of the Hellenists compare to their response toward Stephen?** *They tried to kill Saul, just as they did Stephen.*
- ? **How did Saul avoid being killed by them?** *He was escorted to Caesarea, a seaport, by the disciples to go away to his home town of Tarsus.*
- ? **What does 2 Corinthians 5:16–19 add to our understanding of Saul's conversion?** *This passage reminds us of the radical transformation that happens as Christians become a new creation and the old things pass away. In response to being reconciled to God, Saul boldly called others to the same reconciliation.*

2 Corinthians 5:16–19

Discover the Truth

And here is how this scene in Acts 9 ends: “Then the churches throughout all Judea, Galilee, and Samaria had peace and were edified. And walking in the fear of the Lord and in the comfort of the Holy Spirit, they were multiplied” (Acts 9:31).

Whether he wanted to or not, Saul had been chosen by Jesus to spread His name and to suffer many things. Within the first city where he was preaching, they wanted to kill him. He went to be with the other disciples in Jerusalem, and they wanted nothing to do with him. Even after he was accepted by them, the Hellenists wanted to kill him for preaching Christ in a powerful and irrefutable way.

A man who had been a murderer was now preaching eternal life and joining those he once sought to kill. Saul had been a source of the spread of the gospel through his persecution of the Christians in Jerusalem, and now he was spreading that gospel with his own lips and at the peril of his own life. What a radical change—a heart of stone being turned into a heart of flesh—guided by the indwelling Spirit of God.



Testimony of Mercy

MATERIALS

- Testimony of Mercy Answer Key
- Student Guides
- Pencils

INSTRUCTIONS

In your Student Guide you will find the Testimony of Mercy activity. You are going to look at some of the later accounts where the “new Saul” tells us about the “old Saul”—the man he used to be—and what God had

done for him. Then there are some questions for you to consider. We will talk about what you found in a few minutes. *Have the students work in small groups to complete the activity.*

CONNECT TO THE TRUTH

We cannot help but be amazed at God saving a man like Saul, but we also must remember why it was so amazing. *Use the Testimony of Mercy answer key to discuss the answers to the questions.*





Truth Be Told Review Game (Optional)

MATERIALS

- Truth Be Told Game Board
- Truth Be Told Question Cards
- Truth Be Told Question Answer Key
- Truth Be Told Number Cards (or game spinner or dice)
- Buttons or other small items as game pieces for each team
- Poster putty

INSTRUCTIONS

Divide your class into teams. Teams will take turns drawing a Truth Be Told Question Card. Team members will take turns answering the questions. They will quickly determine an answer and give it. If they are correct, they will draw a Truth Be Told Number Card and move that number of spaces on the game board. As play proceeds, follow the directions on the game board. Alternate between teams as long as time permits.

We are going to review now by playing “Truth Be Told.” I’ll put you into teams. Teams will take turns picking a question card

and answering the question. If the answer is correct, you will draw a number card and move your game piece that many spaces. All directions on the board must be followed. Return the used cards to the stacks. *Answers to the questions are provided on the Truth Be Told Question Answer Key on the Resource DVD-ROM.*

CONNECT TO THE TRUTH

That was a fun review of this exciting lesson about Paul’s conversion on the road to Damascus. *Congratulate the winning team.*

Paul persecuted Christians until Jesus appeared to him in a bright light. When Paul met Jesus, everything changed for him. He became a believer and a preacher of the gospel. He suffered greatly for his new faith. But because of God’s grace, he was able to live a new life in Jesus.



Applying God’s Word

WHAT YOU HEARD IN THE WORD

Paul is certainly an amazing trophy of God’s mercy and grace toward sinners, but so is each person who responds to the gospel in repentance and faith. We can be thankful that God was pleased to give us the account of Saul’s conversion because it highlights the radical nature of grace. It reminds us that salvation belongs to the Lord and that He is able to bring about salvation in even the vilest of sinners. Just as Saul would have read in the book of Ezekiel, God replaced his heart of stone with a heart of flesh. God put His Spirit in Saul and caused him to walk in a way that pleased God.

While Saul’s transformation might seem more radical than most on the outside, God has done, and will do, the very same for all who trust in Christ. When we sing about the amazing grace God has given us, we can identify with Paul’s physical blindness in our spiritual blindness—we once were blind, but now we see.

GOD'S WORD IN THE REAL WORLD

- ? As you think about Saul's conversion, what impresses you most? *Discuss various answers.*
- ? Some Christians speak of Jesus as a gentleman who politely knocks on the door of the unbeliever's heart asking for permission to come in. How does this idea compare to Jesus's interaction with Saul on the road to Damascus? *The interaction with Saul sounds nothing like what many Christians teach in this area. While there is nothing wrong with an appeal to look to Christ because of His mercy and kindness, that is not the pattern we see in Scripture. As we have seen already in the book of Acts, the pattern is a call to repent and submit to Christ and obey Him.*
- ? Has your attitude toward sharing your testimony changed in light of our discussion today? *Discuss various answers.*
- ? What are some possible "venues" in your life where you could share your testimony? *Discuss various answers.*
- ? Many people detest the idea that God would pardon a murderer or rapist and allow them to be with Him in heaven, but they think that they are good enough to get to heaven. How can you help someone who has this objection to understand what the Bible teaches about salvation? *This person obviously has a misunderstanding of the sinfulness of sin. They fail to understand that even the smallest of sins is worthy of eternal punishment since it is a sin against an infinitely holy God. We need to help them understand that their sin is not compared to the sins of others, but to the perfect righteousness of God. Further, they are failing to grasp the radical nature of God's grace and mercy shown in saving sinners.*
- ? In all honesty, do you struggle with the idea of God extending grace to someone like Saul? Could Hitler have been forgiven by God? Why do you deserve to be forgiven? *Discuss this question with openness and encourage the students to be real about their doubts. Seek to address their doubts rather than denying them. Remind the students of God's holiness, His prerogative as Creator to define right and wrong, and His free will to offer His grace and mercy to whomever He pleases (Romans 9:18; Ephesians 1:3–14; Titus 3:1–7).*



MEMORY VERSE

Romans 1:16–17 For I am not ashamed of the gospel of Christ, for it is the power of God to salvation for everyone who believes, for the Jew first and also for the Greek. For in it the righteousness of God is revealed from faith to faith; as it is written, "The just shall live by faith."



GROUP PRAYER TIME

Be sure to pray with your class before you dismiss them.

- Thank God for His amazing grace and mercy in saving sinners.
- Praise God for His justice and holiness.
- Ask God for boldness in sharing with others how He has saved us.