

## Unit 4, Lesson 28: A persecutor converted

Memory Verse: “Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me? It is hard for you to kick against the goads.” (Acts 26:14)

Luke provides us with a chapter's worth of side stories before he gets to the event he foreshadowed when he told about Saul's role in Stephen's murder. He tells the story of Simon the sorcerer, who tried to buy the power of the Holy Spirit. When Peter rebuked him for it, he repented.

Then he tells the story of Philip (another of the seven) and the Ethiopian treasurer. He was a Jewish convert and had come to Jerusalem to worship. When Philip came up to him he was reading from the scroll of Isaiah, and had reached the part we call Isaiah 53. This was a great opportunity for Philip to tell this man about Jesus. Before the day was out Philip had baptized this man. Then the Holy Spirit took Philip away.

Because of the persecution that broke out with the murder of Stephen, the followers of Jesus had fled Jerusalem for places all over Judah and Samaria. Some went even further away. In his zeal for Judaism, Saul got permission to travel to Damascus to arrest members of “the Way” (Acts 9:2) and take them back to Jerusalem for punishment.

Saul was acting as an enemy of God and God's people. But Jesus had taught his followers to love their enemies and do good to those who mistreated them. God was about to demonstrate that he lived by the same standard he had set for his followers. He didn't see Saul as a permanent enemy, but as a zealous person who could do much good if he would change sides. And God saw that he would change.

As he [Saul] neared Damascus on his journey, suddenly a light from heaven flashed around him. He fell to the ground and heard a voice say to him, “Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?”

“Who are you Lord?” Saul asked.

“I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting,” he replied. “Now get up and go into the city, and you will be told what you must do.” (Acts 9:3-6)

Luke tells us that the men with Saul heard the sound, but they didn't see anyone like Saul did. When they saw that Saul was blind they led him into the city. We don't know what they did after that. Did they stay with Saul, or did they leave him there and return to Jerusalem? Did they know Saul had changed sides and report this in Jerusalem? Luke doesn't tell us.

Meanwhile, God had a tall order for one of Jesus' followers in Damascus. His name was Ananias (not the same one, obviously). God came to him in a vision and told him to go lay his hands on a man named Saul to restore his sight. Ananias had understandable concerns, for he knew about Saul. But when God assured him that Saul had changed, Ananias obeyed.

He went to the place named in the vision, found Saul, and laid his hands on him. “Immediately something like scales fell from Saul's eyes, and he could see again.” (Acts 9:18) Luke says Saul got up and was baptized. Ananias probably did this, though we don't know for sure.

Right away Saul began to preach. Having been a devout Jew he already knew the Old Testament well

and he was able to prove to Jews that Jesus was the Messiah for whom they had waited so long. He was so effective, that a group of Jews conspired to kill him. Paul learned of this, and his followers lowered him from the city wall in a basket so he could escape.

He went to Jerusalem, but the followers of Jesus there were reluctant to accept him as a disciple. Barnabas believed in Saul and brought him to the apostles. He continued to preach while there, and eventually got sent to Tarsus when there was another plot to kill him.

Years later he would write about this experience in his letter to the churches of Galatia.

But when God, who set me apart from birth and called me by his grace, was pleased to reveal his Son in me so that I might preach him among the Gentiles, I did not consult any man, nor did I go to Jerusalem to see those who were apostles before I was, but I went immediately into Arabia and later returned to Damascus.

Then after three years, I went up to Jerusalem to get acquainted with Peter and stayed with him fifteen days. I saw none of the other apostles—only James the Lord's brother. (Galatians 1:15-19)

At first glance these two accounts seem to contradict each other. But there are two possibilities for harmonizing them. Both involve the three years being left out of Luke's account. One is that the three years were part of the “many days” in Acts 9:23, since Paul says he returned to Damascus. The other possibility is that the three years fell between verses 25 and 26, between when Saul was let down from the wall in a basket and when he appeared in Jerusalem.

Then the church throughout Judea, Galilee and Samaria enjoyed a time of peace. It was strengthened, and encouraged by the Holy Spirit, it grew in numbers, living in the fear of the Lord. (Acts 9:31)

The conversion of Saul demonstrates God's amazing love. In treating an enemy kindly God gained a most potent ally. Saul already had a strong background in scripture and was able to use this knowledge on behalf of Jesus as soon as he was converted. His zeal and focus, which had been used to oppose the followers of Jesus, now helped spread the message that Jesus fulfilled Old Testament prophecy.

This is the power of enemy love as taught by Jesus. Saul himself would advocate the principle using an Old Testament quotation (see Romans 12:17-21).

Possible thought papers:

1. Imagine you are Ananias in this story. Write about your thoughts when you see a vision telling you to go help the man who had come to your city to arrest you.
2. The memory verse comes from Paul's account of this story to King Agrippa. Compare the two accounts. How are they different? Why might different details be included?
3. Write an outline for one of Saul's “sermons” in Damascus. What Old Testament texts might he have used?