

# Saul of Tarsus, the Unlikely Apostle

Devotional Reading: Psalm 86:1–10

Background Scripture: Acts 7:58–8:3; 9:1–31; 22:3–15

Today's Scripture: Acts 22:3–15

## I. Recounting the Past Acts 22:3–5

**<sup>3</sup> “I am a Jew, born in Tarsus of Cilicia, but brought up in this city. I studied under Gamaliel and was thoroughly trained in the law of our ancestors. I was just as zealous for God as any of you are today. <sup>4</sup> I persecuted the followers of this Way to their death, arresting both men and women and throwing them into prison, <sup>5</sup> as the high priest and all the Council can themselves testify. I even obtained letters from them to their associates in Damascus, and went there to bring these people as prisoners to Jerusalem to be punished.**

3a. Paul's defense of his ministry includes an account of his own incredible transformation. Details of that experience occur three times in the book of Acts: here, in Acts 9:1–19, and in Acts 26:12–23.

He begins by describing his upbringing as a Diaspora Jew. The Greek word *diaspora* means “dispersed” or “scattered.” Having been born in a Roman province allowed Paul to gain Roman citizenship. *Tarsus*, the capital of *Cilicia*, located in present-day Turkey, is about 360 miles north of Jerusalem. First-century Tarsus was a major trading center that also became the site of many cults. The city

was thoroughly Greco-Roman, presenting numerous pressures for someone born a Jew. But Paul strongly implies that he had not been assimilated into that pagan environment, given that he had been *brought up in* Jerusalem.

Paul continues to present his credentials to establish his background as a faithful Jew. A posture of sitting at the feet of a teacher was common for Jewish disciples. In that light, one could hardly do better than having studied *under Gamaliel*. This man's wisdom and high regard among the people is seen in Acts 5:34–39.

3b. The rare phrase, *the law of our ancestors*, is used instead of the more common phrase, “the Law of Moses.” This phrasing seems intended to establish common ground with the crowd of Jews.

The word *zealous* conveys an image of a fiery and passionate commitment to a cause. Such a disposition could be understood positively (example: John 2:17) or negatively (example: Galatians 4:17).

4. Paul's address now recalls his participation in the stoning of Stephen (Acts 7:58–8:3). That event marked the beginning of Paul's persecution of the church.

*This Way* refers to the first-century movement of Jesus-followers. The designation aligns with Old Testament references to God's decreed path of life for the faithful (Psalm 16:11). It also complements

Jesus' description of himself as "the way" (John 14:6; compare Hebrews 10:20).

5. Since Paul once persecuted members of "The Way," the obvious question arises: Why is he now one of its most prominent proclaimers? He presents himself in terms that establish a common ground with an audience who wants to kill him, so what has changed? Paul answers by recalling the story first narrated in Acts 9.

Previously, Paul (as Saul) operated with the support of *the high priest*—most likely Caiaphas. Saul intended to carry out his persecutions against the Jewish followers of Jesus in Damascus. The fact that *Damascus* is over 130 miles away from *Jerusalem* highlights Saul's fanaticism at the time. Luke, the author of the book of Acts, does not specify how the gospel first came to Damascus. But a general clue is found in Acts 2:5, which notes that Jews from "every nation under heaven" gathered for the day of Pentecost. Another clue is in Acts 11:19, which states that after the persecution described in Acts 8, believers scattered "as far as Phoenicia." That region adjoins Syria, wherein the city of Damascus is located.

## II. Encountering the Lord Acts 22:6–11

**6** "About noon as I came near Damascus, suddenly a bright light from heaven flashed around me. **7** I fell to the ground and heard a voice say to me, 'Saul! Saul! Why do you persecute me?'"

**8** "Who are you, Lord?" I asked.

"I am Jesus of Nazareth, whom you are persecuting," he replied. **9** My companions saw the light, but they did not understand the voice of him who was speaking to me.

**10** "What shall I do, Lord?" I asked.

"Get up," the Lord said, "and go into Damascus. There you will be told all that you have been assigned to do."

**11** My companions led me by the hand

**into Damascus, because the brilliance of the light had blinded me.**

6. The only notable addition of detail here compared to Acts 9:3 is that Paul specifies that this happened *about noon*. This detail accentuates how brilliant the *light* must have been to be so perceptible at the brightest time of day.

7–8. The opening statement *Saul! Saul! Why do you persecute me*, as presented here and in Acts 9:4–5, baffled Saul. Having been overwhelmed by the light to the point that he found himself on *the ground*, all he could do was sputter out the question, *Who are you, Lord?* We should not think that Saul's use of the word *Lord* necessarily means that he recognized the voice as that of God. The underlying Greek is also used in contexts where it means "sir" (example: Matthew 27:63).

Saul's confusion likely deepened when the voice identified itself as *Jesus of Nazareth*. There is no record of Saul's ever having met Jesus prior to this encounter. As Saul's confidence in his zealous conduct began to melt away, the implication became clear: to persecute Christians is, in essence, to persecute Jesus himself. This stresses Jesus' identification with them.

9–10a. We need to keep in mind who Paul is addressing: a hostile crowd who wants him dead! In response, he tailors his address to emphasize the Lord's personal revelation to him and his obedient submission to the Lord's will.

What we see here in Acts 22:9 is similar to what we read in Acts 9:7, but with two notable variations. Acts 9:7 states that Saul's traveling companions (1) saw nobody, although they (2) heard the sound. Yet here in Acts 22:9, Paul notes that the companions (1) *saw the light*, but they (2) did not *understand the voice*.

The first difference could simply mean that although able to perceive the light,

the companions could not see the person at the center of it.

The other difference may be explainable in several ways. One way is by examining the differing meanings of the verb translated *understand* as contexts change. In some contexts, the underlying Greek word simply means “to hear” (example: Mark 6:20); in other contexts, the verb takes the more specific meaning of “comprehended” or “understood” (example: 8:18).

10b–11. The first part of this text reflects Jesus’ words in Acts 9:6 and 26:16, but with a subtle twist. Acts 9:6 states what Saul “must do,” while the passage before us states what Saul was *assigned to do*. That same chapter elaborates on his appointment: he is to witness to God’s “name to the Gentiles and their kings and to the people of Israel” (Acts 9:15).

### III. Commissioned for the Future Acts 22:12–15

<sup>12</sup> **“A man named Ananias came to see me. He was a devout observer of the law and highly respected by all the Jews living there. <sup>13</sup> He stood beside me and said, ‘Brother Saul, receive your sight!’ And at that very moment I was able to see him.**

<sup>14</sup> **“Then he said: ‘The God of our ancestors has chosen you to know his will and to see the Righteous One and to hear words from his mouth. <sup>15</sup> You will be his witness to all people of what you have seen and heard.’”**

12. Acts 9:10–17 provides a more detailed account of the actions and attitude of *Ananias*. He is designated as “a disciple,” marking him as a follower of Jesus. To describe him as *a devout observer of the law* who is *highly respected by all the Jews* suggests that Paul aims to reassure the crowd that a Jew who is above reproach could testify truthfully about Paul’s claims.

13. The content of this verse is a condensed version of Acts 9:17–18. Here, as in 9:17, Ananias reveals a willingness to refer to *Saul* as *brother* because of the Lord’s revelation to Ananias. This is despite Ananias’s initial consternation about Saul as a persecutor of Christians.

14. This is not precisely paralleled in Acts 9 since that account does not feature as much dialogue between Ananias and Saul. But it does correspond with what the Lord declares in Acts 9:15.

A particularly significant aspect of Ananias’s dialogue that makes this point is referring to God as the *God of our ancestors*. This phrase, or a form of it, appears elsewhere in the book of Acts (Acts 5:30; 24:14). Its formulation has significant parallels in the Old Testament (examples: Deuteronomy 26:7; 1 Chronicles 12:17; 29:18). Ananias gives a power promise of God’s fidelity as he connects Old Testament statements with the revelation of God in Christ Jesus.

This title, *Righteous One*, appears only twice in the New Testament, both in Acts (here and in Acts 7:52; compare 3:14). This designation highlights Jesus’ innocence and divine vindication. But it also signals his fulfillment of prophetic hopes about God’s “righteous and just” one.

15. The commission Paul receives to be Jesus’ *witness to all people* is a mark of his becoming a disciple of Jesus. But more specifically, in the context of Acts, it also marks him as participating in the commission bestowed on the apostles. This is further stressed by reference to what he has *seen and heard*. That phrase conveys the personal experience of the speaker. For the Lord’s purposes in making Paul an apostle to the nations, he needed Paul to be a witness of the risen Jesus. And so Paul experienced Christ firsthand when God interrupted his trip to Damascus.

# Involvement Learning

## Saul of Tarsus, the Unlikely Apostle

### Into the Lesson

Write down three factual statements about yourself: one strength; one weakness; and one neutral, uncontrollable factor, such as their place of birth or family background.

Strength: \_\_\_\_\_

Weakness: \_\_\_\_\_

Neutral: \_\_\_\_\_

It may be easier for us to understand how God might use our strengths, but what about our weaknesses or the factors we have no control over? Today's study will "introduce" us to Paul and his mission for God.

### Into the Word

Read Acts 22:3–5 and write down the pros and cons of Paul's qualifications for ministry within a first-century synagogue and church. Use this information to determine whether Paul

*First-century Synagogue*

Pros: \_\_\_\_\_

Cons: \_\_\_\_\_

*First-century Church*

Pros: \_\_\_\_\_

Cons: \_\_\_\_\_

Would Paul have been a suitable candidate for leadership in either group?

Read Acts 9:10–19; 22:12–15. How do you think Ananias felt about what the Lord asked him to do? Why?

### Key Text

"Then [Ananias] said: 'The God of our ancestors has chosen you to know his will and to see the Righteous One and to hear words from his mouth. You will be his witness to all people of what you have seen and heard.'"  
—Acts 22:14–15

### Into Life

Every believer has a story of meeting Jesus! Write down a brief version of your own story of meeting Jesus and how God used personal weaknesses for good.

### Thought to Remember

Let God use you for his purposes.