

A Dynamic New Witness

Acts 9:19-31

SS Lesson for 10/11/2015

Devotional Scripture: Ps 18:20-31

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Introduction

Overview and Key Verse of the Lesson

The lesson explains how Saul became **A Dynamic New Witness**. The **study's aim** is to understand the special challenges faced by the apostle Paul in the earliest days of his ministry. The **study's application** is finding ways of helping new believers be accepted, grow and overcome barriers in their lives.

(Adapted from the NIV Standard Lesson Commentary)

Key Verse: Acts 9:20

Immediately he preached the Christ in the synagogues, that He is the Son of God.

Commentary from The Bible Knowledge Commentary

The three days without food or drink, in addition to the shock of his “exposure” to the resurrected Christ, left Saul weak. However, several things helped him regain **his strength**: his encounter with Ananias, his healing, his filling with the Spirit, his water baptism, and his **taking some food**. After only a few **days with the Christians in Damascus** Saul **began to preach in the synagogues that Jesus is the Son of God**. Preaching to Jews in their synagogues was also his strategy on his missionary journeys (the first journey—13:5, 14; 14:1; the second journey—17:2, 10, 17; 18:4; the third journey—18:19; 19:8). Acts 9:20 includes the only occurrence of the phrase “Son of God” in Acts. On the Damascus Road the first thing Saul learned was who Jesus is. The Jews **were astonished**. This response is understandable. The Greek verb *existanto* is literally, “they were beside themselves; they were struck out of their senses”; several other people had the same response to Jesus (Mark 2:12; 5:42; 6:51). This word is used in Acts five times (2:7; 8:13; 9:21; 10:45; 12:16). Saul’s intense persecution campaign had **raised havoc in Jerusalem** (cf. 8:3; 22:19; 26:11). **Saul** used his theological training to good advantage in pressing home the truth that the Lord **Jesus is the Messiah**. He had gone to **Damascus** to persecute the church; he ended up preaching Jesus. What a contrast! What grace! No wonder the Damascus **Jews** were **baffled** (*synechymnen*, “bewildered, confused,” from *syncheō*, used in the NT only in 2:6; 9:22; 21:27, 31). One of the themes in Acts, underscored in this paragraph, is the Jewish leaders’ opposition to the gospel. It is clear from 2 Corinthians 11:32-33 that this was a joint effort of the Jews and the governor under King Aretas (a Nabatean), though the Jews were the prime movers. Saul’s **followers**, aware that **the Jews conspired to kill him... lowered him in a basket** outside **the wall** since **the city gates** were guarded. Saul’s plans for persecuting Christians in Damascus took a strange turn; he had entered the city blind and left in a basket! Ironically *he* became the object of persecution. The reference to “followers” (*mathētai*, lit., “disciples”) shows that Saul was already having a fruitful ministry. He was a gifted leader. Luke in compressing the narrative omits Saul’s brief sojourn into Arabia, mentioned by Paul in Galatians 1:17. Probably this occurred between Acts 9:22 and 23. The purpose of Paul’s time in Arabia is unknown. Possibly he went there to evangelize, but the area was sparsely populated and it was Saul’s strategy to go to populous metropolitan centers. He may have left Damascus to reduce the church’s persecution. Or, more probably, he went to Arabia to meditate and study. **Saul** had left **Jerusalem** an inveterate enemy of Christianity to persecute the church **in Damascus**; but in God’s sovereign grace he joined the believers and preached the gospel in that very city. He joined the work in Jerusalem, but the believers there refused to trust him (cf. Ananias’ similar fear, v. 13). In Damascus Saul needed a friend, Ananias; in Jerusalem he needed another, **Barnabas**. He whose name means “Son of Encouragement” (4:36) proved to be that for Saul. Barnabas is seen in Acts on four other occasions. (a) 11:22-24; (b) 11:30; 12:25; (c) 13:1-2, 50; 14:12; (d) 15:2, 12, 22, 25, 37. The believers in Jerusalem, convinced by Barnabas that Saul had in fact been converted, allowed **Saul** to stay **with them**. In Damascus he **preached fearlessly in the name of Jesus**, and in **Jerusalem** he was **speaking boldly in the name of the Lord** (cf. comments on “boldly” in 4:31). **Saul talked and debated with the Grecian Jews**, thus continuing the work of Stephen (cf. 6:8-10). Evidently Saul’s debating ability proved to be too much for the Grecian Jews as they attempted to assassinate him. **The brothers** (cf. v. 17) at Jerusalem then escorted Saul **to Caesarea**, the seaport about

65 miles away by road, **and sent him** to his hometown, **Tarsus**. An ancient city, then over 4,000 years old, Tarsus was an intellectual city in the Roman Empire. (For a brief survey of significant events in Tarsus' history, see V. Gilbert Beers, *The Victor Handbook of Bible Knowledge*. Wheaton, Ill.: Scripture Press Publications, Victor Books, 1981, p. 555.) In the phrase **the church throughout Judea, Galilee, and Samaria** the word "church" is singular. Luke was obviously speaking of the universal church as it was dispersed in the Holy Land. So strong was Jewish antagonism to Saul and his ministry that after he left the area the church **enjoyed a time of peace**. The church was still confined to Jews, half-Jews (the Samaritans), and proselytes to Judaism who became Christians (with the one exception of the eunuch from Ethiopia, 8:26-40). But all was in readiness for the extension of the church to a new segment of the world's population.

With this third of seven progress reports on the spiritual and numerical growth of the church (cf. 2:47; 6:7; 12:24; 16:5; 19:20; 28:30-31), Luke brought this section of his book to a conclusion.

Lesson Introduction and Background

From the NIV Standard Lesson Commentary

When we are suspicious that someone will behave as badly as always, we may predict it by citing the proverb, "A leopard can't change his spots." Many who are familiar with this saying are perhaps unaware of its source: the prophet Jeremiah. Frustrated by the depravity of his people and predicting their imminent judgment, Jeremiah said that they had become so wicked that it would be no more possible for them to change their preference for evil than for a leopard to change its spots. So they might as well get ready for punishment (Jeremiah 13:23). Even so, God can change the spots that a leopard cannot! Likewise, God can change the heart of those who repent. This is one of the most distinct features of Christianity. God's grace is so magnificent and his love so powerful that even the most desperate sinner can turn to him and be forgiven. Put another way, the genius of the gospel lies in the foundational premise that even the most hardened sinner can be changed by God's power. The premier example of this principle is the subject of our lesson today: the apostle Paul, initially known as Saul. (Since he does not become known as Paul until Acts 13:9, the name Saul will usually be used in our lesson.) His life was one of radical conversion; the skeptical reactions to this unfortunately illustrate also the fact that people are not as forgiving as God is. The issue is not so much whether a leopard can change its spots as it is whether those spots can be changed—somehow, some way—by any outside intervention. When we don't believe that other people can be transformed, we make it difficult for God's grace to be effective in them. Fortunately for the world, God connected Saul with people who believed in him.

Today's lesson explores the beginning of the missionary career of the apostle Paul. He is rightly regarded as the Lord's point man in the expansion of the gospel outside the fold of historic Judaism. As seen in previous lessons, the church at first focused its evangelistic efforts on Jerusalem and the surrounding area. The success of these efforts, combined with lingering hostility toward Jesus himself, led the Jewish religious authorities to oppose the church and its message (see Acts 4:1-3, 13-21; 5:17, 18, 40). The situation became more oppressive, however, by an event that took place within four years of Jesus' death. While many Jewish Christians, including the apostles, regularly met and prayed at the temple (Acts 3:1; 5:12-14), others took the debate to synagogues that were frequented by Jews who had migrated to Jerusalem (6:9). The result was the martyrdom of Stephen (7:54-60). The Jewish authorities seemed concerned that the new teaching would get out of hand, so the high priest commissioned a zealous young Pharisee from Tarsus to take the lead in investigating the situation in Damascus, some 150 miles to the north of Jerusalem (9:1, 2; 26:12; compare 7:58; 8:1-3). Luke (the author of the book of Acts) tells us that Saul "began to destroy the church. Going from house to house, he dragged off both men and women and put them in prison" (Acts 8:3). The perpetrator himself admits that he "put many of the Lord's people in prison, and when they were put to death, I cast my vote against them" (26:10; compare 22:4). Other than that, we don't know much about Saul's investigative and interrogation tactics (compare 22:19).

Major Theme Analysis

(Scriptural Text from the New King James Version; cross-references from the NIV)

Saul Redeemed (Acts 9:19-22)

19 So when he had received food, he was strengthened. Then Saul spent some days with the disciples at Damascus.
20 Immediately he preached the Christ in the synagogues, that He is the Son of God.
21 Then all who heard were amazed, and said, "Is this not he who destroyed those who called on this name in Jerusalem, and has come here for that purpose, so that he might bring them bound to the chief priests?"
22 But Saul increased all the more in strength, and confounded the Jews who dwelt in Damascus, proving that this Jesus is the Christ.

Redeemed physically (19)

Physical strength through food (Acts 27:33-35)

33 Just before dawn Paul urged them all to eat. "For the last fourteen days," he said, "you have been in constant suspense and have gone without food — you haven't eaten anything. 34 Now I urge you to take some food. You need it to survive. Not one of you will lose a single hair from his head."

Physical strength through strength God provides (Ps 18:32)

32 It is God who arms me with strength and makes my way perfect.

Physical strength to do everything (Phil 4:13)

13 I can do everything through him who gives me strength.

Physical strength from the One who supplies all needs (2 Cor 9:10-11)

10 Now he who supplies seed to the sower and bread for food will also supply and increase your store of seed and will enlarge the harvest of your righteousness. 11 You will be made rich in every way so that you can be generous on every occasion, and through us your generosity will result in thanksgiving to God.

Redeemed spiritually (20-21)

Spiritual strength to protect us from Satan (2 Thess 3:3)

3 But the Lord is faithful, and he will strengthen and protect you from the evil one.

Spiritual strength to keep us blameless (1 Cor 1:8)

8 He will keep you strong to the end, so that you will be blameless on the day of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Spiritual strength that restores (1 Peter 5:10)

10 And the God of all grace, who called you to his eternal glory in Christ, after you have suffered a little while, will himself restore you and make you strong, firm and steadfast.

Spiritual strength through God's grace (2 Cor 12:9)

9 But he said to me, "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness." Therefore I will boast all the more gladly about my weaknesses, so that Christ's power may rest on me.

Saul Persecuted (Acts 9:23-25)

23 Now after many days were past, the Jews plotted to kill him.

24 But their plot became known to Saul. And they watched the gates day and night, to kill him.

25 Then the disciples took him by night and let him down through the wall in a large basket.

Plots planned (23-24)

Plots against the righteous (Ps 37:12)

12 The wicked plot against the righteous and gnash their teeth at them;

Plots of injustice (Ps 64:6)

6 They plot injustice and say, "We have devised a perfect plan!" Surely the mind and heart of man are cunning.

Plots of deception and evil (Prov 12:20)

20 There is deceit in the hearts of those who plot evil, but joy for those who promote peace.

Plots of iniquity and defrauding (Mic 2:1-2)

2 Woe to those who plan iniquity, to those who plot evil on their beds! At morning's light they carry it out because it is in their power to do it. 2 They covet fields and seize them, and houses, and take them. They defraud a man of his home, a fellowman of his inheritance.

Plots foiled through rescue (25)

Rescued through leadership (Prov 24:11)

11 Rescue those being led away to death; hold back those staggering toward slaughter.

Rescued through loosing the yokes of others (Isa 58:6-7)

6 "Is not this the kind of fasting I have chosen: to loose the chains of injustice and untie the cords of the yoke, to set the oppressed free and break every yoke? 7 Is it not to share your food with the hungry and to provide the poor wanderer with shelter — when you see the naked, to clothe him, and not to turn away from your own flesh and blood?"

Rescued through carrying other's burdens (Gal 6:2)

2 Carry each other's burdens, and in this way you will fulfill the law of Christ.

Rescued by snatching from the devil's fire (Jude 1:22-23)

22 Be merciful to those who doubt; 23 snatch others from the fire and save them; to others show mercy, mixed with fear-hating even the clothing stained by corrupted flesh.

Saul Helped (Acts 9:26-27)

26 And when Saul had come to Jerusalem, he tried to join the disciples; but they were all afraid of him, and did not believe that he was a disciple.

27 But Barnabas took him and brought him to the apostles. And he declared to them how he had seen the Lord on the road, and that He had spoken to him, and how he had preached boldly at Damascus in the name of Jesus.

Initial disbelief and fear (26)

Fear of man is not wise because what can man really do to us (Ps 56:11)

11 in God I trust; I will not be afraid. What can man do to me?

Disbelief because of what others may think (Gal 2:12)

12 Before certain men came from James, he used to eat with the Gentiles. But when they arrived, he began to draw back and separate himself from the Gentiles because he was afraid of those who belonged to the circumcision group.

Fear God, not man, because God can destroy the body and soul (Matt 10:28)

28 Do not be afraid of those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. Rather, be afraid of the One who can destroy both soul and body in hell.

Barnabas intercession (27)

Intercession because we have been commanded to do so (James 5:16)

16 Therefore confess your sins to each other and pray for each other so that you may be healed. The prayer of a righteous man is powerful and effective.

Intercession for inner strength for others (Eph 3:16-17)

16 I pray that out of his glorious riches he may strengthen you with power through his Spirit in your inner being, 17 so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith. And I pray that you, being rooted and established in love,

Intercession by bearing with one another in love (Eph 4:2)

2 Be completely humble and gentle; be patient, bearing with one another in love.

Intercession by bearing with one another through forgiveness (Col 3:13)

13 Bear with each other and forgive whatever grievances you may have against one another. Forgive as the Lord forgave you.

Saul's Bold Witness (Acts 9:28-31)

28 So he was with them at Jerusalem, coming in and going out.

29 And he spoke boldly in the name of the Lord Jesus and disputed against the Hellenists, but they attempted to kill him.

30 When the brethren found out, they brought him down to Caesarea and sent him out to Tarsus.

31 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.

Bold witness opportunities (28-30)

Opportunities to work while Jesus' light is available (John 12:35)

35 Then Jesus told them, "You are going to have the light just a little while longer. Walk while you have the light, before darkness overtakes you. The man who walks in the dark does not know where he is going.

Opportunities to work because the days are evil (Eph 5:15-16)

15 Be very careful, then, how you live — not as unwise but as wise, 16 making the most of every opportunity, because the days are evil.

Opportunities to work to make the most of every opportunity (Col 4:5)

5 Be wise in the way you act toward outsiders; make the most of every opportunity.

Opportunities to do good especially to other Christians (Gal 6:10)

10 Therefore, as we have opportunity, let us do good to all people, especially to those who belong to the family of believers.

Bold witness results (31)

Results in a peace that comes from having a Savior who overcame the world (John 16:33)

33 "I have told you these things, so that in me you may have peace. In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world."

Results in a peace and edification (Rom 14:19)

19 Let us therefore make every effort to do what leads to peace and to mutual edification.

Results in walking according to God's word (Ps 119:1-3)

119 Blessed are they whose ways are blameless, who walk according to the law of the Lord. 2 Blessed are they who keep his statutes and seek him with all their heart. 3 They do nothing wrong; they walk in his ways.

Results in walking in a manner worthy of the calling of God (Eph 4:1-3)

4 As a prisoner for the Lord, then, I urge you to live a life worthy of the calling you have received. 2 Be completely humble and gentle; be patient, bearing with one another in love. 3 Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace.

Conclusion and Other Thoughts

Commentary Thoughts from Bob Deffinbaugh

Having studied our text, we must now return to the questions which we raised at the beginning of this message:

1. Why is the conversion of Saul so important that it is repeated three times in Acts?
2. What is unique about this conversion account?
3. What does Saul's conversion have to do with people today?

We will begin by addressing the first two of these questions together.

(1) First of all, this is a dramatic conversion. I've heard many wonderful testimonies as to how our Lord has drawn an unbeliever to faith, but none can match the incredible sequence of events surrounding Saul's conversion. How many Christians can claim that they were saved as the result of a face-to-face confrontation with the risen Lord Jesus?

(2) *The conversion of Saul depicts the elements of conversion that are common to every believer. Consider, for example, the obvious fact that Saul was not seeking God but was actively opposing Him. Salvation is not the result of lost men seeking God, but of God seeking lost men:*

“No one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws him, and I will raise him up at the last day” (John 6:44, emphasis mine).

“You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you to go and bear fruit, fruit that remains, so that whatever you ask the Father in my name he will give you” (John 15:16, emphasis mine).

9 What then? Are we better off? Certainly not, for we have already charged that Jews and Greeks alike are all under sin, 10 just as it is written:

“There is no one righteous,
not even one,
11 there is no one who understands,
there is no one who seeks God.
12 All have turned away,
together they have become worthless;
there is no one who shows kindness, not even one”
(Romans 3:9-12, emphasis mine).

1 And although you were dead in your transgressions and sins, 2 in which you formerly lived according to this world’s present path, according to the ruler of the kingdom of the air, the ruler of the spirit that is now energizing the sons of disobedience, 3 among whom all of us also formerly lived out our lives in the cravings of our flesh, indulging the desires of the flesh and the mind, and were by nature children of wrath even as the rest... 4 But God, being rich in mercy, because of his great love with which he loved us, 5 even though we were dead in transgressions, made us alive together with Christ – by grace you are saved! – 6 and he raised us up with him and seated us with him in the heavenly realms in Christ Jesus, 7 to demonstrate in the coming ages the surpassing wealth of his grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus. 8 For by grace you are saved through faith, and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God; 9 it is not from works, so that no one can boast (Ephesians 2:1-9).

Saul’s salvation was not the result of his religious striving, but the result of being sought and subdued by the saving grace of God:

1 Finally, my brothers and sisters, rejoice in the Lord! To write this again is no trouble to me, and it is a safeguard for you. 2 Beware of the dogs, beware of the evil workers, beware of those who mutilate the flesh! 3 For we are the circumcision, the ones who worship by the Spirit of God, exult in Christ Jesus, and do not rely on human credentials 4 – though mine too are significant. If someone thinks he has good reasons to put confidence in human credentials, I have more: 5 I was circumcised on the eighth day, from the people of Israel and the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews. I lived according to the law as a Pharisee. 6 In my zeal for God I persecuted the church. According to the righteousness stipulated in the law I was blameless. 7 But these assets I have come to regard as liabilities because of Christ. 8 More than that, I now regard all things as liabilities compared to the far greater value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whom I have suffered the loss of all things – indeed, I regard them as dung! – that I may gain Christ, 9 and be found in him, not because I have my own righteousness derived from the law, but because I have the righteousness that comes by way of Christ’s faithfulness – a righteousness from God that is in fact based on Christ’s faithfulness (Philippians 3:1-9).

Saul’s conversion was not the result of his seeking or striving; instead, it was the sovereign work of God, so that He might display His wondrous mercy and grace:

12 I am grateful to the one who has strengthened me, Christ Jesus our Lord, because he considered me faithful in putting me into ministry, 13 even though I was formerly a blasphemer and a persecutor, and an arrogant

man. But I was treated with mercy because I acted ignorantly in unbelief, 14 and our Lord's grace was abundant, bringing faith and love in Christ Jesus. 15 This saying is trustworthy and deserves full acceptance: "Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners" – and I am the worst of them! 16 But here is why I was treated with mercy: so that in me as the worst, Christ Jesus could demonstrate his utmost patience, as an example for those who are going to believe in him for eternal life. 17 Now to the eternal king, immortal, invisible, the only God, be honor and glory forever and ever! Amen (1 Timothy 1:12-17).

Saul's conversion, like that of every believer, is a dramatic change of mind with regard to the person and work of Jesus of Nazareth. Salvation is all about Jesus:

Jesus replied, "I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me" (John 14:6).

10 (The one who believes in the Son of God has the testimony in himself; the one who does not believe God has made him a liar, because he has not believed in the testimony that God has testified concerning his Son.) 11 And this is the testimony: God has given us eternal life, and this life is in his Son. 12 The one who has the Son has this eternal life; the one who does not have the Son of God does not have this eternal life (1 John 5:10-12).

Saul was confronted by our Lord Jesus. He learned that his opposition to the church was ultimately opposition to Jesus. He learned that Jesus was God, and that He had been raised from the dead. He was convinced that Jesus was the promised Messiah, God's only provision for eternal life. That is what every person must acknowledge who comes to saving faith:

8 But what does it say? "The word is near you, in your mouth and in your heart" (that is, the word of faith that we preach), 9 because if you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. 10 For with the heart one believes and thus has righteousness and with the mouth one confesses and thus has salvation (Romans 10:8-10).

My point in all this is that while Saul's conversion was spectacular, it was not really unique. It served to dramatically illustrate what happens whenever anyone is drawn to faith in the Lord Jesus.

(3) Saul's conversion is a strong message and object lesson to unbelieving Jews (as well as to unbelieving Gentiles). Paul's account of his conversion in Acts confronts unbelieving Jews with the gospel, the same message which they must embrace if they are to enter into the blessings promised to Abraham and his descendants. Paul was as Jewish as one could get, and yet he was not saved. His Jewish zeal did not and could not save him. He would later write:

9:30 What shall we say then? – that the Gentiles who did not pursue righteousness obtained it, that is, a righteousness that is by faith, 31 but Israel even though pursuing a law of righteousness did not attain it. 32 Why not? Because they pursued it not by faith but (as if it were possible) by works. They stumbled over the stumbling stone, 33 just as it is written, "Look, I am laying in Zion a stone that will cause people to stumble and a rock that will make them fall, yet the one who believes in him will not be put to shame."

10:1 Brothers and sisters, my heart's desire and prayer to God on behalf of my fellow Israelites is for their salvation. 2 For I can testify that they are zealous for God, but their zeal is not in line with the truth. 3 For ignoring the righteousness that comes from God, and seeking instead to establish their own righteousness, they did not submit to God's righteousness. 4 For Christ is the end of the law, with the result that there is righteousness for everyone who believes. 5 For Moses writes about the righteousness that is by the law: "The one who does these things will live by them." 6 But the righteousness that is by faith says: "Do not say in your heart, 'Who will ascend into heaven?'" (that is, to bring Christ down) 7 or "Who will descend into the abyss?" (that is, to bring Christ up from the dead). 8 But what does it say? "The word is near you, in your mouth and in your heart" (that is, the word of faith that we preach), 9 because if you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. 10 For with the heart one believes and thus has righteousness and with the mouth one confesses and thus has salvation. 11 For the

scripture says, “Everyone who believes in him will not be put to shame.” 12 For there is no distinction between the Jew and the Greek, for the same Lord is Lord of all, who richly blesses all who call on him.

The only true Jew is the Jew who embraces Jesus as the Messiah, by faith receiving the salvation He accomplished at Calvary:

“For I tell you, unless your righteousness goes beyond that of the experts in the law and the Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven” (Matthew 5:20).

13 For the promise to Abraham or to his descendants that he would inherit the world was not fulfilled through the law, but through the righteousness that comes by faith. 14 **For if they become heirs by the law, faith is empty and the promise is nullified.** 15 For the law brings wrath, because where there is no law there is no transgression either. 16 **For this reason it is by faith so that it may be by grace, with the result that the promise may be certain to all the descendants – not only to those who are under the law, but also to those who have the faith of Abraham, who is the father of us all** 17 (as it is written, “I have made you the father of many nations”). He is our father in the presence of God whom he believed – the God who makes the dead alive and summons the things that do not yet exist as though they already do. 18 Against hope Abraham believed in hope with the result that he became the father of many nations according to the pronouncement, “so will your descendants be.” 19 Without being weak in faith, he considered his own body as dead (because he was about one hundred years old) and the deadness of Sarah’s womb. 20 He did not waver in unbelief about the promise of God but was strengthened in faith, giving glory to God. 21 He was fully convinced that what God promised he was also able to do. 22 So indeed it was credited to Abraham as righteousness. 23 **But the statement it was credited to him was not written only for Abraham’s sake, 24 but also for our sake, to whom it will be credited, those who believe in the one who raised Jesus our Lord from the dead. 25 He was given over because of our transgressions and was raised for the sake of our justification** (Romans 4:13-25, emphasis mine).

(4) Saul’s conversion is the basis of his apostleship. You will remember that when the apostles chose a replacement for Judas, they required that this person must have seen the risen Lord (Acts 1:21-22). Saul’s conversion experience on the road to Damascus was his encounter with the risen Lord:

7 Then **he appeared to James, then to all the apostles.** 8 Last of all, as though to one born at the wrong time, **he appeared to me also.** 9 For I am the least of the apostles, unworthy to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God. 10 But by the grace of God I am what I am, and his grace to me has not been in vain. In fact, I worked harder than all of them – yet not I, but the grace of God with me. 11 Whether then it was I or they, this is the way we preach and this is the way you believed (1 Corinthians 15:7-11, emphasis mine).

It is important to note that in his conversion experience, Saul not only saw the risen Lord, he was given a very specific commission. You might call it Saul’s “Great Commission” (Acts 9:15-16; Acts 22:12-15; Acts 26:15-18).

(5) Saul’s conversion is yet another witness to the fact of the resurrection of the Lord Jesus. Jesus spoke to Saul, and he spoke to Jesus. Jesus was (and is) alive; His body was not decaying in a Jerusalem tomb (see Acts 2:24-36). Those with Saul could testify that something unusual, even supernatural, took place, but they were not privileged to see all that he saw. They did not see the risen Lord Jesus.

(6) The conversion of Saul is a turning point in the Book of Acts and in the history of the church. Things would never be the same after Saul came to faith. In Acts, Saul (Paul) is the key figure in the evangelization of the Gentiles. In the epistles, Paul is the key New Testament author to explain God’s purpose for the evangelization of the Gentiles (see, for example, Romans 9-11; Ephesians 2:11-22).

(7) Saul’s conversion is a key to understanding Paul’s theology in the New Testament. F.F. Bruce has written:

“Few of Saul’s distinctive insights into the significance of the gospel cannot be traced back to the Damascus-road event, or to the outworking of that event in his life and thought.”

Paul writes not only from a deep and profound knowledge of God’s grace, but also from a deep and profound experience of God’s grace. When you read Paul’s teaching on divine election (see [Ephesians 1](#) or [Romans 9](#)), or the miracle of being transported out of death and into eternal life ([Ephesians 2:1-10](#)), you can see how his conversion illustrates these truths.

Saul’s conversion is a watershed event in the New Testament. No wonder we find three different accounts of his conversion in the Book of Acts. One can hardly overestimate the impact Paul has had on Christianity.

The final question which I raised at the beginning of this lesson is this: “How does Saul’s conversion relate to evangelism today?” Let me suggest some ways in which Saul’s conversion in our text should impact Christians today.

Saul’s conversion should serve to greatly encourage Christians today to evangelize. What an encouragement for us to pray for the salvation of the lost! To press this even further, our text should prompt us to diligently pray for those who seem least likely to be saved. Would you not admit that many of us have a certain number of people whom we consider “least likely to be saved”? It may be a relative, an associate at work, or a friend to whom we have witnessed over a long period of time, but seemingly in vain. Paul was hopelessly lost. He not only rejected Christ, he actively opposed Him. But God intercepted Saul and stopped him in his tracks, dramatically saving him and radically transforming his life. God can do that to anyone. The more impossible a particular person’s salvation appears to be, the greater the glory that goes to God when that person is saved. Ultimately, it is not our logic or our persuasiveness that saves men, but God’s Spirit who drives the truth of the Word home, convicting sinners of their sin, and opening their darkened eyes to see the truth in Jesus:

8 “And when he comes, he will prove the world wrong concerning sin and righteousness and judgment – 9 concerning sin, because they do not believe in me; 10 concerning righteousness, because I am going to the Father and you will see me no longer; 11 and concerning judgment, because the ruler of this world has been condemned” ([John 16:8-11](#)).

Salvation is “**of the Lord**” (see [Jonah 2:9](#); [Psalm 3:8](#)). It is ultimately His doing. We do not have to move men’s hearts or to out-argue them. We need only petition the God who finds no pleasure in the destruction of the lost, but delights in the salvation of lost sinners.

1 First of all, then, I urge that requests, prayers, intercessions, and thanks be offered on behalf of all people, 2 even for kings and all who are in authority, that we may lead a peaceful and quiet life in all godliness and dignity. 3 Such prayer for all is good and welcomed before God our Savior, 4 since he wants all people to be saved and to come to a knowledge of the truth ([1 Timothy 2:1-4](#)).

The Lord is not slow concerning his promise, as some regard slowness, but is being patient toward you, because he does not wish for any to perish but for all to come to repentance ([2 Peter 3:9](#)).

We must pray much more for the salvation of the lost, and then ask that He will use us as He draws sinners to faith.

The account of the conversion of Saul is a great text for those who have not yet come to faith in the Lord Jesus. We read that Saul came face-to-face with Jesus of Nazareth. Someday every unbeliever will come face-to-face with Jesus as their Judge ([Acts 10:42-43](#); [Acts 17:30-31](#)).

And just as people are appointed to die once, and then to face judgment ([Hebrews 9:27](#)).

3 For the time that has passed was sufficient for you to do what the non-Christians desire. You lived then in debauchery, evil desires, drunkenness, carousing, drinking bouts, and wanton idolatries. 4 So they are astonished when you do not rush with them into the same flood of wickedness, and they vilify you. 5 **They will**

face a reckoning before Jesus Christ who stands ready to judge the living and the dead (1 Peter 4:3-5, emphasis mine).

When He returns to this earth, our Lord will judge those who have persecuted His saints (2 Thessalonians 1:3-10).

The difference is that when Saul stood before our Lord, it was so that he might be saved from judgment. When men stand before our Lord at His second coming, there will no longer be an opportunity for salvation, but only for judgment (2 Thessalonians 2:7-12).

Do not wait until it is too late, my friend. Trust in Jesus today. In this way – and this way only – you will find the forgiveness of your sins and the gift of eternal life.

1 Now because we are fellow workers, we also urge you not to receive the grace of God in vain. 2 For he says, “I heard you at the acceptable time, and in the day of salvation I helped you.” Look, now is the acceptable time; look, now is the day of salvation! (2 Corinthians 6:1-2)

If you think you are too good to need salvation, remember that Saul was zealous for his religious faith, but he was terribly lost and in need of salvation. Being good, apart from God, is really being bad. If you think you are too wicked to be saved, once again think of Saul, who tells us that he was the “**chief of sinners**”:

15 This saying is trustworthy and deserves full acceptance: “Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners” – and I am the worst of them! 16 But here is why I was treated with mercy: so that in me as the worst, Christ Jesus could demonstrate his utmost patience, as an example for those who are going to believe in him for eternal life (1 Timothy 1:15-16).

When God saved Saul, He saved the worst of sinners, so that every other sinner would know God’s offer of salvation applies to him. Trust Him today.

(Adapted from URL: <https://bible.org/seriespage/14-salvation-saul-acts-91-31>)

Concluding Thoughts from the NIV Standard Lesson Commentary

The depth of Saul’s repentance—the extent to which this leopard had his spots changed—is indicated by a small detail in today’s text that is easily overlooked. Acts 9:29 indicates that Saul, after returning to Jerusalem and being accepted by the church, began to preach to Greek-speaking Jews—those who probably had moved to Jerusalem from elsewhere in the Roman Empire. At one level, Saul’s selection of them as his target audience only makes sense: as a native of Tarsus and himself fluent in Greek (Acts 21:37), he naturally may have felt drawn to Jews of similar background. A closer look, however, suggests a deeper motive. Saul first appears in Acts at the stoning of Stephen, who was killed after he had preached to Jews from Greek-speaking areas (Acts 6:8-14). Stephen had worked among those from Cilicia (6:9), the Roman province in which Tarsus, Saul’s hometown, was located. This fact can explain his own involvement in Stephen’s death (8:1) and the urgency of his desire to stamp out what he saw as heresy (8:3). If this is the case, then Acts 9:29 may be telling us that Saul not only changed his outlook on Christ but also continued Stephen’s work among his (Saul’s) fellow expatriates as he tried to undo his earlier damage. By returning to the scene of his earlier crime against Christ, Saul’s conversion was truly complete.

Practical Points from the Bible Expositor and Illuminator

1. An obedient response to Jesus’ commands is a sign of true conversion (Acts 9:18)
2. People who were recently against Christ can have a strong influence when they switch to defending Christ (vss. 19-22)
3. When the wicked want to kill a person for honoring Christ, it is reliable evidence of his conversion (Acts 9:23; cf. Matt. 5:10-12)

4. To go from harassing Christians to suffering as one is evidence of an encounter with Jesus (Acts 9:24-25)
5. One may evangelize the crowd he used to run with, but he can encourage the church too (vss. 26-31)