Saul of Tarsus, the Unlikely Apostle

Acts 22:3-15
SS Lesson for 08/16/2026

Devotional Scripture: Acts 9:10-20

OUTLINE

LESSON BACKGROUND AND KEY VERSE

Background from the NIV Standard Lesson Commentary
Key Verses: Acts 22:14-15

MAJOR THEME ANALYSIS

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  - Trained in Judaism (Gal 1:14)
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COMMENTARY THOUGHTS FROM BOB DEFFINBAUGH
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Lesson Background and Key Verse

Background from the NIV Standard Lesson Commentary

In about AD 58, at the end of his third missionary journey, Paul returned to Jerusalem for the final time (Acts 21:17). The centerpiece of that third missionary trip was his lengthy ministry in Ephesus (19:1, 8-10; 20:31), a stay marked by no little controversy. His forebodings and those of others did not indicate that his visit to Jerusalem would be any less controversial—quite the opposite, in fact (20:17-38; 21:4, 10-14). But Paul made the trip anyway. Upon his arrival, Paul met with leaders of the Jerusalem church and reported on his ministry (Acts 21:17-19). Those leaders also warned Paul of the danger his presence posed (21:20-24). When that danger materialized, Paul was arrested on a false charge of defiling the temple (21:27). Had it not been for the presence of Roman troops to restore order, Paul probably would have been killed right then and there (21:30-36). After being rescued, Paul then surprisingly asked to address the mob that had just tried to kill him. The Roman commander gave permission (21:40-22:2), and that's where our lesson text opens.

Key Verses: Acts 22:14-15

14 Then he said, 'The God of our fathers has chosen you that you should know His will, and see the Just One, and hear the voice of His mouth. 15 For you will be His witness to all men of what you have seen and heard.

Major Theme Analysis

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

Unlikely Because of Past Actions (Acts 22:3-5)

3 "I am indeed a Jew, born in Tarsus of Cilicia, but brought up in this city at the feet of Gamaliel, taught according to the strictness of our fathers' law, and was zealous toward God as you all are today.
4 I persecuted this Way to the death, binding and delivering into prisons both men and women,
5 as also the high priest bears me witness, and all the council of the elders, from whom I also received letters to the brethren, and went to Damascus to bring in chains even those who were there to Jerusalem to be punished.

Past training (3)

Trained as a Pharisee (Acts 23:6)

6 Then Paul, knowing that some of them were Sadducees and the others Pharisees, called out in the Sanhedrin, "My brothers, I am a Pharisee, the son of a Pharisee. I stand on trial because of my hope in the resurrection of the dead."

Trained in Judaism (Gal 1:14)

14 I was advancing in Judaism beyond many Jews of my own age and was extremely zealous for the traditions of my fathers.

Trained as a legalistic Jew (Phil 3:4-6)

4 though I myself have reasons for such confidence. If anyone else thinks he has reasons to put confidence in the flesh, I have more: 5 circumcised on the eighth day, of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews; in regard to the law, a Pharisee; 6 as for zeal, persecuting the church; as for legalistic righteousness, faultless.

Trained as part of the tribe of Benjamin (Rom 11:1)

> 11 I ask then: Did God reject his people? By no means! I am an Israelite myself, a descendant of Abraham, from the tribe of Benjamin.

Past persecution (4)

Persecutions of imprisonment and hardships (Acts 20:23-24)

> 23 I only know that in every city the Holy Spirit warns me that prison and hardships are facing me. 24 However, I consider my life worth nothing to me, if only I may finish the race and complete the task the Lord Jesus has given me — the task of testifying to the gospel of God's grace.

Persecutions that put him on display and made him a spectacle (1 Cor 4:9-11)

> 9 For it seems to me that God has put us apostles on display at the end of the procession, like men condemned to die in the arena. We have been made a spectacle to the whole universe, to angels as well as to men. 10 We are fools for Christ, but you are so wise in Christ! We are weak, but you are strong! You are honored, we are dishonored! 11 To this very hour we go hungry and thirsty, we are in rags, we are brutally treated, we are homeless.

Persecutions of great pressure that made him fear for his life (2 Cor 1:8-11)

> 8 We do not want you to be uninformed, brothers, about the hardships we suffered in the province of Asia. We were under great pressure, far beyond our ability to endure, so that we despaired even of life. 9 Indeed, in our hearts we felt the sentence of death. But this happened that we might not rely on ourselves but on God, who raises the dead. 10 He has delivered us from such a deadly peril, and he will deliver us. On him we have set our hope that he will continue to deliver us, 11 as you help us by your prayers. Then many will give thanks on our behalf for the gracious favor granted us in answer to the prayers of many.

Persecutions of insults (Heb 10:33-34)

> 33 Sometimes you were publicly exposed to insult and persecution; at other times you stood side by side with those who were so treated. 34 You sympathized with those in prison and joyfully accepted the confiscation of your property, because you knew that you yourselves had better and lasting possessions

Past objectives (5)

Objective to imprisoning those belonging to the Way (Acts 9:1-2)

> 1 Meanwhile, Saul was still breathing out murderous threats against the Lord's disciples. He went to the high priest 2 and asked him for letters to the synagogues in Damascus, so that if he found any there who belonged to the Way, whether men or women, he might take them as prisoners to Jerusalem.

Objective to harm the saints (Acts 9:13-14)

> 13 "Lord," Ananias answered, "I have heard many reports about this man and all the harm he has done to your saints in Jerusalem. 14 And he has come here with authority from the chief priests to arrest all who call on your name."

Objective to oppose the name of Jesus (Acts 26:9)

> 9 "I too was convinced that I ought to do all that was possible to oppose the name of Jesus of Nazareth.

Objective to destroy the church (Gal 1:13)

> 13 For you have heard of my previous way of life in Judaism, how intensely I persecuted the church of God and tried to destroy it.

Changed Because of Meeting Jesus (Acts 22:6-11)

6 "Now it happened, as I journeyed and came near Damascus at about noon, suddenly a great light from heaven
shone around me.
7 And I fell to the ground and heard a voice saying to me, 'Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting Me?'
8 So I answered, 'Who are You, Lord?' And He said to me, 'I am Jesus of Nazareth, whom you are persecuting.'
9 "And those who were with me indeed saw the light and were afraid, but they did not hear the voice of Him who
spoke to me.
10 So I said, 'What shall I do, Lord?' And the Lord said to me, 'Arise and go into Damascus, and there you will be
told all things which are appointed for you to do.'
11 And since I could not see for the glory of that light, being led by the hand of those who were with me, I came into
Damascus.

Meeting Jesus through questioning (6-7)

Questions about Jesus being the Son of God (Matt 4:3)

3 The tempter came to him and said, "If you are the Son of God, tell these stones to become bread."

Questions about Jesus' human origin (Mark 6:3)

3 Isn't this the carpenter? Isn't this Mary's son and the brother of James, Joseph, Judas and Simon? Aren't his sisters here with us?" And they took offense at him.

Questions about Jesus being the King of the Jews (Matt 27:11)

11 Meanwhile Jesus stood before the governor, and the governor asked him, "Are you the king of the Jews?" "Yes, it is as you say," Jesus replied.

Questions about Jesus being the Messiah (Matt 11:2-3)

2 When John heard in prison what Christ was doing, he sent his disciples 3 to ask him, "Are you the one who was to come, or should we expect someone else?"

Meeting Jesus by obtaining His Name (8-9)

A name where one is blessed who brings the gospel (Matt 21:9)

9 The crowds that went ahead of him and those that followed shouted, "Hosanna to the Son of David!" "Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord!" "Hosanna in the highest!"

A name that cancels condemnation (John 3:18)

18 Whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe stands condemned already because he has not believed in the name of God's one and only Son.

A name that has power present when believers are gathered (1 Cor 5:4)

4 When you are assembled in the name of our Lord Jesus and I am with you in spirit, and the power of our Lord Jesus is present,

A name that provides justification (1 Cor 6:11)

11 And that is what some of you were. But you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of our God.

Meeting Jesus and getting new directions (10-11)

Directions that comes through the indwelling Holy Spirit (1 Cor 2:14)

14 The man without the Spirit does not accept the things that come from the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him, and he cannot understand them, because they are spiritually discerned.

Directions that are provided through the understanding that Jesus gives (1 John 5:20)

> 20 We know also that the Son of God has come and has given us understanding, so that we may know him who is true. And we are in him who is true — even in his Son Jesus Christ. He is the true God and eternal life.

Directions through knowledge and wisdom (Col 1:9)

> 9 For this reason, since the day we heard about you, we have not stopped praying for you and asking God to fill you with the knowledge of his will through all spiritual wisdom and understanding.

Chosen With A New Commission (Acts 22:12-15)

12 "Then a certain Ananias, a devout man according to the law, having a good testimony with all the Jews who dwelt there,
13 came to me; and he stood and said to me, 'Brother Saul, receive your sight.' And at that same hour I looked up at him.
14 Then he said, 'The God of our fathers has chosen you that you should know His will, and see the Just One, and hear the voice of His mouth.
15 For you will be His witness to all men of what you have seen and heard.

Commissioned with new sight (12-13)

A new sight through the Holy Spirit (Acts 9:17)

> 17 Then Ananias went to the house and entered it. Placing his hands on Saul, he said, "Brother Saul, the Lord-Jesus, who appeared to you on the road as you were coming here - has sent me so that you may see again and be filled with the Holy Spirit."

A new sight that must have faith (2 Cor 5:7)

> 7 We live by faith, not by sight.

A new sight to bring the gospel (Luke 4:18)

> 18 "The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to release the oppressed,

Commissioned by being chosen (14)

Chosen to bear fruit (John 15:15-16)

> 15 I no longer call you servants, because a servant does not know his master's business. Instead, I have called you friends, for everything that I learned from my Father I have made known to you. 16 You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you to go and bear fruit — fruit that will last. Then the Father will give you whatever you ask in my name.

Chosen by grace (Rom 11:5)

> 5 So too, at the present time there is a remnant chosen by grace.

Chosen to receive an inheritance (Eph 1:11)

> 11 In him we were also chosen, having been predestined according to the plan of him who works out everything in conformity with the purpose of his will,

Chosen to be a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God (1 Peter 2:9-10)

> 9 But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light. 10 Once you were not a people, but now you are the people of God; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy.

Commissioned to be a witness (15)

Witness because Jesus commanded it (Matt 28:18-20)

> 18 Then Jesus came to them and said, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. 19 Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, 20 and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age."

Witness through the power of the Holy Spirit (Acts 1:8)

> 8 But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth."

Witness through teaching (2 Tim 2:2)

> 2 And the things you have heard me say in the presence of many witnesses entrust to reliable men who will also be qualified to teach others.

Witness about what God has done for us (Ps 66:16)

> 16 Come and listen, all you who fear God; let me tell you what he has done for me.

Conclusion and Other Thoughts

Commentary Thoughts from Bob Deffinbaugh

The Nature of Paul's Defense

Paul's speech, made from the steps leading upward to the Roman barracks, is not the first—nor is it the last—account of Paul's conversion on the road to Damascus. But Paul's account of his conversion here is unique in several ways. First, this is the first time in Acts that Paul has given an account of his conversion. This account in chapter 22 is a "first person" ("I") account. Luke's account in chapter 9 was a "third person" ("he") account. Several things stand out in this report of his conversion. We shall see these by comparing this account with that of the defense of Stephen in Acts 6 and 7, and by comparing Paul's words here in chapter 22 with the other two accounts of his conversion in Acts (chapters 9 and 26).

First, then, let us compare Paul's defense here with that of Stephen in Acts 6 and 7. Look at the early verses in Luke's account of Stephen's arrest, of the charges against him, and of his line of defense:

The accusations made here against Stephen by some of the Hellenistic Jews are very similar to those charges made against Paul:

27 And when the seven days were almost over, the Jews from Asia, upon seeing him in the temple, {began} to stir up all the multitude and laid hands on him, 28 crying out, "Men of Israel, come to our aid! This is the man who preaches to all men everywhere against our people, and the Law, and this place; and besides he has even brought Greeks into the temple and has defiled this holy place" (Acts 21:27-28).

While the stoning of Stephen took place nearly 25 years earlier, the charges against Paul and Stephen were remarkably similar. The charge that Paul defiled the temple is but one of many charges. Paul, like Stephen, was accused of speaking against the Jews, the Law, and the temple. (Paul, of course, was present at the trial and execution of Stephen.)

The "defenses" of Stephen and Paul were very different, even if the charges were the same. Stephen immediately turned to the Old Testament; Paul turned back to his experience on the road to Damascus. Stephen emphasized the great gap between himself and the Jews of his day, and between Israel and her God, as being identical to the gap between the Israelites and God, and between Israel and the prophets, all through her history. Paul's defense sought to establish the strong similarity between his beliefs and practices as an unbeliever, and that of his opponents, the zealous Pharisees, who persecuted Christians. Paul's defense, as recorded in Acts 22, is just that—a defense. Stephen's "defense," as recorded in Acts 6 and 7 is not a defense at all, but an indictment of these Jews as being rebellious and "stiff-necked," just as their forefathers had been.

There is very little duplication in these two accounts: the accusations against Stephen, and his defense; and the accusations against Paul and his defense. The strong similarity comes in the charges and conduct of the Jews who oppose both, who would falsely accuse these saints, and try to make their executions look legal (as they had done with Jesus before this), and if they could not make their case, to illegally kill these men anyway.

Second, let us compare Paul's account of his conversion here, with the other accounts recorded in Acts chapters 9 and 26, especially with an eye to those elements in this account which are emphatic or unique.[481]

The first point of emphasis in this account is the language which Paul chose to communicate his defense. When Paul spoke to the Roman commander, he surprise him by speaking in Greek (21:37). This not only served to impress the commander, but to convince him that Paul was no Egyptian (21:38). **But when Paul spoke in his own defense to the howling Jewish mob, he did not speak to them in Greek, but rather in Hebrew.** Doing this significantly reduced the number of those who could understand what he was saying.

In the first place, this kept the Roman commander and his troops from knowing what Paul was saying. How distressed he must have been at this! At the time the first disturbance broke out, the commander was not present, and he was completely foiled in his attempt to piece together what had happened. Perhaps he reasoned that if he allowed Paul to speak to the crowd he would understand what the problem was, and thus he could deal more effectively with this crowd and with Paul. What a shock it must have been to grant Paul permission to speak in this very delicate and explosive situation, and then to discover that he was addressing the crowd in Hebrew—a language he could not understand. I can see him turning to one of his men and asking, "Do you know what he is saying?" How he must have watched Paul, his "body language," and the response of the crowd, in an attempt to monitor the situation. How shocked he must have been to see this crowd, initially silenced by Paul's speaking, and then suddenly exploding into an even more violent mood.

More importantly, speaking to this crowd in Hebrew excluded the Hellenistic Jews, the very ones who had taken the initiative in the arrest and stoning of Stephen years before, and who had also taken the initiative in Paul's arrest now. The ability to read and speak in Hebrew (or Aramaic) set the "native Hebrew" apart from the "Hellenistic Jew." If you asked a "native Hebrew" about this (and he were honest) he would tell you this set him above the "Hellenistic Jew."[482] When Paul spoke to this crowd, then, he spoke only to the native Jerusalemite, but he excluded the Hellenistic Jews. The question we should seek to answer is, "Why?" Why address only one part of this crowd, when speaking to them in Greek would have enabled virtually all present to hear Paul's testimony? Would it not be better for more to hear the gospel than few?

I believe that Paul wanted to specifically address the "native Hebrew" Jews of Jerusalem because he had a special understanding of them, and because his past beliefs and behavior was virtually identical with their belief and actions toward him. He could understand them because he was just like them. And his conversion should be pertinent to them because they are like he was, before Jesus saved him. If God could convert Saul, as He had done years before and as Paul would describe here, then He could also change these men. Furthermore, this was perhaps Paul's last visit to Jerusalem, perhaps his last opportunity to present these Jews (for whom he had such a heart) the gospel, the way of salvation. And if Paul could convince these Jews, who were the dominant religious leaders in this city, the opposition of the Hellenistic Jews would fizzle and fad away. The Hellenistic Jews had called upon these men, these, "men of Israel" for their aid. Without their aid, Hellenistic opposition would not have enough strength to do away with Paul.

When Paul gestured (did the chains hinder him?), indicating his intention to address the crowd, a hush fell over them. When they realized that he was speaking in Hebrew, an even greater hush resulted (22:2). Those who were Hellenistic Jews were perhaps silenced by their lack of knowing this language, which, in the eyes of some, would be a shame and reproach. Those who were native Hebrews must have realized that this message was just for them, and so they listened more intently.

To sum up the first significant emphasis here in this account, **Paul's defense was one that was directed to the "native Hebrews" and kept from the Romans and the "Hellenistic Jews."** This was a selective message for a select group.

Second, as pointed out earlier, Paul's defense here is vastly different than Stephen's earlier defense. Stephen spoke from the Old Testament Scriptures and the history of Israel; Paul spoke from his own conversion experience. Stephen placed himself among the prophets, and distinct from the "stiff-necked" Jews of his day; Paul identified himself with the Pharisaical Jews,[483] showing that he was just like them. Stephen did not defend himself, but indict his accusers; Paul defended himself as being a faithful Jew, and as true to the Scriptures and his calling.

Third, the most unique part of Paul's account of his conversion is to be found in verses 17-21, which is found nowhere else in the Scriptures. Luke's account of Paul's conversion in chapter 9 is similar to Paul's version in many ways, but when it comes to Paul's temple "vision," recorded only in 22:17-21, this is truly unique. Luke tells us of Paul's witness in Damascus, of the plot of the Hellenistic Jews to kill him, and of Paul's escape by being lowered through an opening in the wall of the city, in a basket (9:19-25). Luke then goes on to describe the difficulty (not unlike the difficulty he described with Ananias above) which Paul had in associating with the apostles in Jerusalem, of the intervention of Barnabas, of Paul's acceptance, and ministry in the synagogues. And then we are told of the plot of the Jerusalem Jews to kill him, and of Paul's escape with the help of the brethren (9:26-30).

Nothing is said in Acts 9, however, of Paul's temple vision, of which he speaks here in chapter 22, before this crowd. Some would no doubt think of it as a contradiction to what was said in chapter 9. How could Luke say that the brethren learned of a plot to kill Paul and helped him escape, while Paul speaks of a temple vision? The answer is really quite simple: It took a vision from God to make Paul responsive to the appeal of his brethren to leave Jerusalem. He was convinced that the people would listen to him, since he was "one of them" before, but the Lord told him this was not to be the case. Thus, when divinely instructed of the futility of evangelizing his peers, Paul left Jerusalem, knowing that he was being sent to the Gentiles.

Paul's report of this vision is the last thing which he spoke before the crowd erupted, and his words here are obviously the cause of the explosive reaction. What was it that he said here, which was so offensive, so provocative? These words, in verse 22, provide us with they key:

And they listened to him up to this statement, and {then} they raised their voices and said, "Away with such a fellow from the earth, for he should not be allowed to live!"

What, then, is the statement which proved to be so upsetting? For a long time, I have been of the opinion that it was this: "'Go! For I will send you far away to the Gentiles'" (Acts 22:21).

This is partly true, but it is only a partial statement. In verses 17-21, Paul speaks of his vision as a dialogue, not a monologue. The first words are spoken by the Lord, interrupted, as it were by a protest from Paul. Then, after Paul's interruption, the Lord speaks again. If we are to understand fully what it is that upset the Jews so badly, we must see the entire statement which the Lord made to Paul. So allow me to edit out Paul's rebuttal:

"'Make haste, and get out of Jerusalem quickly, because they will not accept your testimony about Me … Go! For I will send you far away to the Gentiles.'"

It was not just the fact that God had commanded Paul to go to the Gentiles with the gospel. That was bad enough. It is what made the Jews of Nazareth so upset with Jesus—mad enough to kill Him (Luke 4:23-30). But the words of the Lord to Paul went beyond this. The command to "go to the Gentiles" was linked with a parallel command to "forsake the Jews in Jerusalem, who would not believe the gospel." It was distressing enough for a Jew to think of God's blessings being shared with the Gentiles (Jonah, for example, illustrates this), but this statement, quoted by Paul and made by the Lord, goes to the limit, by saying that God's blessings will be taken from Jerusalem and sent to he Gentiles.

This, of course, is exactly what Paul describes in Romans 9-11, but it was the most horrifying thought a Jew could ever entertain. And this was the match which ignited the gasoline fumes of mob anger there in Jerusalem. Paul was telling his peers that the time of their blessings was coming to an end, due to their unbelief, and that times of blessings were coming to the Gentiles. If the nation Israel would not believe and obey and take the "light to the Gentiles" God would use their unbelief as an instrument to proclaim the "light to the Gentiles." God's purposes would not be frustrated by Jewish unbelief and disobedience. But the times of refreshing for which every devout Jew looked forward were to be postponed to a later time, a time after the Gentiles had heard the good news of the Gospel.

(Adapted from URL:https://bible.org/seriespage/33-paul%E2%80%99s-defense-jews-jerusalem-acts-2126%E2%80%942229)

Concluding Thoughts from the NIV Standard Lesson Commentary

It is vital to remember that whenever we read accounts of God's appearing to people, such stories are never the end goal in and of themselves. Such an appearance (called a theophany) happens in order to certify something or someone as being of God. Today, we have the completed witness of the New Testament to guide us. We don't need a theophany, like the one Paul received, to motivate us toward our duty to witness—the New Testament itself is intended to encourage us! God calls his people to align their lives with his path revealed through his Word. Through this alignment, God's Spirit transforms our lives to serve God. As a result, we become agents of the gospel in the world. Paul's encounter with the risen Jesus was the first step in incorporating him into Christ's body—the church. Our individual stories are part of this larger narrative. Like Paul, who began his extensive work after this encounter, part of glorifying God is edifying others. Let us reflect on our personal life stories in light of what God has done for us so that we may edify others and glorify him.