

Acts 9:1-31

Belief And Big Changes

Learning Objectives

- Recognize that God can call and use anyone, no matter how we might perceive them.
- Acknowledge that becoming a believer doesn't make you perfect, but it means you seek to follow and obey God.

Pray for your time together today.

? Share an example of a person (either someone you know or a celebrity) who did a highly-visible 180° turn in their lifestyle or beliefs. Do you believe it was authentic? Why?

Read Out Loud: Acts 9:1-19a (NIV)

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. ³ As he neared Damascus on his journey, suddenly a light from heaven flashed around him. ⁴ He fell to the ground and heard a voice say to him, "Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?"

⁵ "Who are you, Lord?" Saul asked.

"I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting," he replied. ⁶ "Now get up and go into the city, and you will be told what you must do."

⁷ The men traveling with Saul stood there speechless; they heard the sound but did not see anyone. ⁸ Saul got up from the ground, but when he opened his eyes he could see nothing. So they led him by the hand into Damascus. ⁹ For three days he was blind, and did not eat or drink anything.

¹⁰ In Damascus there was a disciple named Ananias. The Lord called to him in a vision, "Ananias!"

"Yes, Lord," he answered.

¹¹ The Lord told him, "Go to the house of Judas on Straight Street and ask for a man from Tarsus named Saul, for he is praying. ¹² In a vision he has seen a man named Ananias come and place his hands on him to restore his sight."

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

¹⁵ But the Lord said to Ananias, "Go! This man is my chosen instrument to proclaim my name to the Gentiles and their kings and to the people of Israel. ¹⁶ I will show him how much he must suffer for my name."

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." ¹⁸ Immediately, something like scales fell from Saul's eyes,

and he could see again. He got up and was baptized,¹⁹ and after taking some food, he regained his strength.

Leaders' Note: Verse 16 may spark a conversation on the character of God. Is He being vindictive here? Does He wish suffering on Saul? It's more likely that God is giving Saul a glimpse of what the path of discipleship will look like for him. In his writings, Saul (Paul) describes the difficult life of an apostle (1 Corinthians 4) and outlines his personal sufferings (2 Corinthians 11).

? What comes to mind when you hear the phrase, "breathing out murderous threats?" (vs. 1)
Possible Answers: It's a very violent and aggressive phrase. In context, it's clear that Saul wanted very personally to bring about the death of the people who chose to follow Christ.

? In verse 4, Jesus asks Saul, "Why are you persecuting me?" Why would Jesus say "me" instead of "my people?"

Possible Answers: Saul hated the believers for following Jesus, not for who they were as individuals. Jesus is alive and personally involved in the lives of believers. He is the true object of the persecution. Jesus is the big picture, even when humans can only see their own suffering.

Power Play

Saul (Paul) specifically asks the religious leaders in Jerusalem for the authority to arrest Christians in Damascus. This would legitimize his actions and put pressure on the synagogues to participate instead of staying neutral, as well as pressuring Jews to ostracize their newly-Christian neighbors and friends. This is a religious power play, independent of the higher legal governmental authority.

? Optional: Saul is the only one in his group who sees Jesus. What does this say about how God can choose to reveal Himself?

Possible Answer: God can choose to reveal Himself to specific people at specific times, even when they're sharing space with others who can't comprehend the scope of His presence at that moment. Saul's companions could see the effects of Jesus' appearance, but could not perceive Him. God is very intentional in how He reveals Himself!

? God gives Ananias a command in verses 11 and 12. In verses 13 and 14, Ananias voices his concerns about what God has asked of him. Why do you think Ananias is hesitant to obey? How might you respond in a similar circumstance? How does God respond to Ananias's hesitation?

Leaders' Note: As a reminder, it's typically going to help discussion flow better if you don't read off all of these questions at once. We encourage you to read the first one and then see where the conversation goes! If needed, ask the follow-up questions to ensure you hit all the important parts of this section.

Possible Answers: Ananias knows Saul's reputation and is justifiably anxious about going to meet him. I may choose to be obedient, or run away from what God has called me to do. God's response reveals

more of His plan for Saul, but not reveal the outcome of this meeting for Ananias. He doesn't promise safety: He tells him to "go!"

? Ananias addresses Saul as "Brother Saul," indicating his acceptance of him as a believer. Why is this important?

Possible Answers: This is important because it shows that it is crucial to accept other believers no matter what their past is and your personal feelings about them, because we are all brothers and sisters in Christ. No one is perfect from the get-go, and God can use anyone.

? What does Ananias model for us as believers? How is this a godly model rather than a human model?

Possible Answers: Honest questions and concerns brought to God are not inconsistent with faith. Disobedience is inconsistent with faith. Ananias brings his cares before God, and then does what is asked of him. He accepts and cares for Saul as a brother immediately. Ananias could have rejected Saul or disobeyed God (human model), but instead he chose to accept him and obey God wholeheartedly (godly model).

? Do you bring your honest concerns to God, or do you hesitate to voice your questions? Why?

Possible Answers: I bring my honest concerns to God because I know He cares for me, and I know He's a loving Father who wants a relationship with me. I know He's not surprised by my thoughts. And/or: I hesitate to bring my honest concerns to God because I think He wants me to follow Him without questioning Him, and I feel like I'm displeasing Him when I have concerns about what He's asking me to do.

Read Out Loud: Acts 9:19b-31 (NIV)

¹⁹ Saul spent several days with the disciples in Damascus. ²⁰ At once he began to preach in the synagogues that Jesus is the Son of God. ²¹ All those who heard him were astonished and asked, "Isn't he the man who raised havoc in Jerusalem among those who call on this name? And hasn't he come here to take them as prisoners to the chief priests?" ²² Yet Saul grew more and more powerful and baffled the Jews living in Damascus by proving that Jesus is the Messiah.

²³ After many days had gone by, there was a conspiracy among the Jews to kill him, ²⁴ but Saul learned of their plan. Day and night they kept close watch on the city gates in order to kill him.

²⁵ But his followers took him by night and lowered him in a basket through an opening in the wall.

²⁶ When he came to Jerusalem, he tried to join the disciples, but they were all afraid of him, not believing that he really was a disciple. ²⁷ But Barnabas took him and brought him to the apostles. He told them how Saul on his journey had seen the Lord and that the Lord had spoken to him, and how in Damascus he had preached fearlessly in the name of Jesus. ²⁸ So Saul stayed with them and moved about freely in Jerusalem, speaking boldly in the name of the Lord. ²⁹ He talked and debated with the Hellenistic Jews,

Historical FYI

Hellenistic or Grecian Jews were Jews who had adopted Greek language and culture.

but they tried to kill him. ³⁰ When the believers learned of this, they took him down to Caesarea and sent him off to Tarsus.

³¹ Then the church throughout Judea, Galilee and Samaria enjoyed a time of peace and was strengthened. Living in the fear of the Lord and encouraged by the Holy Spirit, it increased in numbers.

? The Jews were astonished when Saul started preaching about Jesus in the synagogues. Why was this so drastic for them?

Possible Answers: Saul's conversion and subsequent preaching stunned the believers because he had joined the church he had persecuted. He was "the man who raised havoc in Jerusalem among those who call on this name." Saul had been someone notorious for violence against believers, someone to be feared by those who believed in Jesus, and now he was teaching in the synagogues about the Savior.

? How did Saul's past uniquely equip him to serve as someone who could effectively spread the Gospel?

Possible Answers: Saul was already well-known, and actually notorious for his actions taken against believers. His high visibility would make him a figure of interest, and make people curious about what could affect such drastic change in his life. His experience doing public speaking and acting in high-visibility situations would also equip him to share the Gospel more effectively and with a great deal of persuasiveness and courage.

? Optional: Are there portions of your past that uniquely equip you to share the Gospel? How have you seen God use those experiences?

? The believers were afraid of Saul when he tried to join them. How do you think you would have reacted? Do you identify more with Saul or with the believers? Why?

Possible Answers: Answers will vary: I identify with Saul because I made a big change in my life, and it took time for people to believe it was authentic. I identify with the believers more, because I've had someone in my life made a change and even though it was positive, it was difficult to accept.

? *Based on your conversation about Ananias in the first section, this question may not be necessary:*

Optional Question: The believers in general had a worldly response to Saul's conversion, but Barnabas had a godly reaction. How did Barnabas react differently than the believers at large, and how can we learn from his response?

Possible Answers: (vv. 26-27) The believers at large fled from Saul, but Barnabas believed Saul and brought him to the leaders, explaining the unique circumstances of Saul's conversion. Barnabas learned of Saul's behavior in Damascus and acted to bring him in rather than pushing him away, knowing God called him for a reason. No matter their past, God can use anyone, and we need to recognize and embrace that truth. Not all believers are suited for all things, but we are all brothers and sisters in Christ!

? Verse 31 talks about an important period in the timeline of the church. What was the start of the sequence of events that led to this? How might things have been different if Saul had not chosen to follow God?

Possible Answers: There was a huge chain of events that happened leading to this time of peace in the church: God called Saul, Saul responded, Ananias chose to obey God, Saul spoke fearlessly for a long time in Damascus, the believers there helped him to escape, Saul traveled to Jerusalem and became part of the group of believers there; and in no small part because Saul's zeal to persecute Christians was removed, the church enjoyed a time of peace and growth blessed by the Holy Spirit! The start of that chain of events was God calling Saul. Saul's conversion was very important, and the church of the future would have lost out a great deal without his presence and passion for God. God doesn't waste anything, and every believer matters, no matter their past or circumstances.

For Discussion and Accountability

? You don't have to be afraid to bring your concerns to God, but what counts is your decision to follow Him or not. Is there any area of your life where God is calling you to act where you are hesitating to obey?

? Are there any significant changes God is asking you to make in your life that you are not making? How can our small group come alongside you in pursuing change?