



Saul to Paul

A narrative about how God can use His greatest enemies to accomplish His purposes.

THE BIBLE

Acts 8-9, 13, 17

Prepare for the Story

ICEBREAKER

- Share about a time when you were extremely passionate about something, so passionate that it called you to move outside of your comfort zone. What were you passionate about, and what did you do?

Rewind the Story

Can someone highlight what has happened in the story so far ...

- Resurrection – The return of the King
- New Beginnings – Jesus' Ascension & the birth of the church
- Signs & Wonders – The miracles of the Apostles
- Persecution & Growth – Steven and the church scatters

Hear the Story

Scene One: Saul's Conversion

Saul was a Jewish Pharisee and a Roman citizen, well-educated in Jewish laws and Roman customs. He had been at Stephen's execution, and he was determined to destroy the early church because he believed they were false teachers who required harsh punishment according to Jewish law.

So, he traveled from house to house in Jerusalem, dragging followers of Jesus to prison. When the followers of Jesus began to leave Jerusalem for other cities, Saul pursued them. He traveled to the large city of Damascus to persecute more believers in Jesus, who were called "followers of the Way."

As Saul approached the city, a light suddenly flashed from above and surrounded him. Startled, Saul fell to the ground!

A voice said, *"Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting Me?" "Who are you?" Saul asked. "I am Jesus,"* the voice said, *"The one you're persecuting. In Damascus, you'll be told what's next for you."*

When Saul stood up and opened his eyes, he discovered he was blind. So, his traveling companions led him by hand to Damascus.

Meanwhile, God gave a vision to a follower of Jesus in Damascus named Ananias. *"Ananias!"* God said, *"Go to the house where Saul is staying and pray for him."* Full of fear, Ananias replied, *"But...I've heard about the terrible things he's doing to believers..."* But God said to him, *"Go! Saul's been chosen to take my message beyond the Jews...to gentiles and kings!"* So, Ananias went to where Saul was staying.

Saul had been blind for three days and was weak from not eating or drinking. Ananias said to him, *"Jesus sent me so that you may see again and be filled with God's Spirit."* Then Ananias put his hands on Saul. Immediately, something like scales fell from Saul's eyes, and he could see again!

Right away, Saul became a follower of Jesus and was baptized. Within a few days, Saul started teaching in the synagogue, proclaiming, *"Jesus as God's Son - the true Messiah!"*

People were amazed by what they heard and wondered how this could be the same man who persecuted so many of Jesus' followers.

However, some Jewish leaders were offended by Saul's teaching and plotted to kill him. When the believers heard about this, they waited until dark, then put Saul in a basket, lowering him down through an opening in the city wall so he could escape.

Scene Two: Extending into the Empire

Soon, Saul tried to meet with Jesus' followers in Jerusalem, but they were terrified of him! They wondered how this man who harshly persecuted them could now be a true believer.

But Barnabas, a trusted church leader, convinced the Apostles to welcome Saul into leadership. He joined them in sharing about Jesus the Messiah all over the area. More and more people became believers, and new churches started throughout the region.

It wasn't too long before Saul and Barnabas began traveling together. They traveled to Antioch, one of the largest cities in the Roman Empire. There, they taught large crowds about Jesus and helped establish a church. It was there that Jesus' followers were first called "Christians," which means followers of the Messiah (Christ).

From Antioch, Saul traveled throughout the Roman Empire, inviting people of all cultures to become Christians. Before long, Saul became better known by his Roman name, Paul.

Paul used Roman roads and sailed on ships to go to wherever he sensed God was leading him to share about Jesus. During his travels, Paul faced harsh opposition from Jewish authorities. Many times, he was arrested, beaten, and even left for dead.

But Paul was not discouraged. He kept traveling, teaching, encouraging those who were in prison, and healing the sick. Everywhere he went, Paul strengthened the faith of Christians and helped the church expand across the Roman Empire.

Scene Three: Reaching Athens

When Paul traveled to Greece, he was deeply troubled to see that the city of Athens was full of idols.

As he often did, Paul began to teach in the Jewish synagogue about Jesus the Messiah, reasoning with them from the Hebrew Scriptures. Then he took his message into the marketplaces and the public square, sharing it with anyone who would listen.

Paul discovered that Athens was full of philosophers who loved to debate theories about life and the universe. Intrigued by his message, some of the philosophers brought Paul to a place called Mars Hill.

This was a large outdoor court where important debates were held. Philosophers and city officials gathered to hear Paul explain what he was saying about Jesus.

Paul stood before the crowd and said, *"I noticed that you are a very religious culture. As I walked through your city, I saw your many shrines and idols. One of the altars had this written on it: 'To an Unknown God.' This God, who you worship without knowing, is the One I've been talking about."*

"The God who made the world and gives life and breath to all doesn't live in man-made objects or temples. This God has come to us in a living man, Jesus, the one who was raised from the dead. In Him, we live and move and have our being."

Some laughed at the idea of Jesus' resurrection. But some were even more curious and asked to hear more from Paul. As Paul continued to share about Jesus, some of the most influential people in Athens chose to become Christians.

Retell the Story

- Who was Saul? What was he doing? Where was he headed?
- What happened on his way to Damascus?
- Who did God send to Saul?
- What was Ananias' message?
- How did Saul respond?
- Who stood up for Saul with the Apostles?
- Saul became known better by what name?
- What did Paul spend his time doing?
- What happened in Athens?

Discuss the Story

- What is your first reaction to this story? How did this story make you feel?

- What stood out to you from this story? What did you notice for the first time?
- What from this story made you wonder?
- How do you think you would have responded if Saul was trying to capture you?
- If you were one of the Apostles, how would you have reacted to the news that the infamous Saul, who was hunting down followers of Jesus, was now professing faith in Jesus?
- Why do you think Paul was so effective in reaching non-Jewish people?
- Did you hear anything that reminded you of *other* stories?
- From this story, what did you notice about humans?
- From this story, what do you notice about God's character or His qualities?

1) ONE HUNDRED AND EIGHTY DEGREES

In today's text, we have the most famous conversion story in all history. Through this encounter, we see Saul make a radical change of religious direction, and it was accompanied by a radical change of action: the active persecutor became an even more active preacher and evangelist. Why do you think God chose Paul as a key figure in expanding the early church? Read 1 Corinthians 1:18-25. How do you see Paul's words demonstrated in this example?

2) CALLING & CLARITY

Up until this point, the vast majority of those who were following Jesus were Jews who had accepted Him as the promised Messiah. Saul discovers on the Road to Damascus that Jesus has a mission for his life. He shares that He is calling Saul to "take His message to the gentiles and to kings!" Do you feel like God has a calling on your life? If so, what of your calling is clear? If unclear, how might you find clarity?

3) ENCOURAGERS

Naturally, when Saul approaches the leaders of the early church, they are skeptical. It's only when Barnabas stands up for him that the others begin to accept him. Barnabas means "son of encouragement". Without the encouragement Barnabas gave, Paul would have struggled in his early ministry. Who has been a great encouragement to you in your faith? Who are you trying to be an encouragement to right now?

God,

When I consider the history of the Church through the centuries, it amazes me that You have chosen to use such imperfect and inefficient people to spread the gospel to the world. Yet, no matter who or what might stand in the way, your purposes cannot be frustrated. For reasons beyond what we can understand, You have chosen to love us and live through us and have given us the mission to make Your name known. May we be the people who encourage others to find and follow you each and every day. Amen.