



FIRST BAPTIST CHURCH
LEWISVILLE

Session 11

From Here to There

Summary and Goal

Acts 9 records the conversion of Saul of Tarsus from persecutor of Christians to follower of Christ and minister of the gospel. His life was radically transformed by his encounter with the Lord. God then used both Ananias and Barnabas to help Saul transition into ministry. Through a series of events, God took Saul from “here”—right where he was—to “there,” the place where God wanted Saul to be. Saul’s story shows us that whatever a person’s “here” is, God has a “there” in store and the power to make it happen.

Main Passages

Acts 9:1-31

Session Outline

1. Whatever Means Necessary (Acts 9:1-9)
2. Reluctant Obedience (Acts 9:10-19)
3. A Changed Life (Acts 9:20-25)
4. Advocates for Change (Acts 9:26-31)

Theological Theme

We often have a hard time believing someone could be saved because of their hard heart. But if God can save the great persecutor, Saul—who was bent on destroying Christianity—He can save anyone.

Christ Connection

Jesus died for sinful, ungodly people. (See Rom. 5:6-8.)

Missional Application

God wants to transform us in the here and now so that He might take us “there”—the place where He is most glorified and we are most useful for His kingdom purposes.

Historical Context of Acts

Purpose

The Book of Acts emphasizes the work of God through the Holy Spirit in the lives of people who devoted themselves to Jesus Christ, especially Paul as he led the Gentile missionary endeavor. It is no exaggeration to say that the Christian church was built through the dynamic power of the Spirit working through chosen vessels. Another important concept is the radial spread of the gospel from Jews to Gentiles, from Jerusalem to Judea, from Samaria and on to the rest of the world (1:8). Thus Christianity transformed from being a sect within Judaism to a world religion that eventually gained acceptance everywhere, even in the heart of the pagan Roman Empire: Rome itself.

Author

The Book of Acts is formally anonymous. The traditional view is that the author was the same person who wrote the Gospel of Luke—Luke the physician and traveling companion of Paul (Col 4:14; 2Tm 4:11; Phm 24). As early as the second century AD, church leaders such as Irenaeus wrote that Luke was the author of Acts. Irenaeus based his view on the “we” passages in Acts, five sections where the author changes from the third person (“he/she” and “they”) to first-person plural (“we”) as he narrates the action (16:10–17; 20:5–15; 21:1–18; 27:1–29; 28:1–16). Irenaeus and many scholars since his time have interpreted these passages to mean that the author of Acts was one of the eyewitness companions of Paul. Luke fits this description better than any other candidate, especially given the similar themes between the Gospel of Luke and the book of Acts.

Setting

The date of composition of the Book of Acts is to a large extent directly tied to the issue of authorship. A number of scholars have argued that Acts should be dated to the early 60s (at the time of Paul’s imprisonment). Acts closes with Paul still in prison in Rome (28:30–31). Although it is possible that Luke wrote at a later date, a time when Paul had been released, it is more plausible to think that he completed this book while Paul was still in prison. Otherwise he would have ended the book by telling about Paul’s release.

Special Features

The Book of Acts provides a glimpse into the first three decades of the early church (ca AD 30–63) as it spread and multiplied after the ascension of Jesus Christ. It is not a detailed or comprehensive history. Rather, it focuses on the role played by apostles such as Peter, who ministered primarily to Jews, and Paul, the apostle to the Gentiles.



Condensed Leader Guide

From Here to There

? For Further Discussion

Do you think of yourself as having been miraculously changed by God? Why or why not? If so, what are the implications of that change? What are some reasons we might think a person is too far gone to ever be truly changed?

Introduction

- ? Over time, what is something on which your views have radically changed (i.e. eating kale, country music, the Houston Astros and MLB's American League, etc.)? What led to this change in your thinking?
- ? Has this shift in your thinking affected any of your relationships or changed the way people view you, for better or worse? Explain.

The Book of Acts contains a number of stories about transformation, and Saul's is one of the more dramatic. A man who had fought passionately to eradicate Christianity was transformed into one of its biggest advocates.

1. Whatever Means Necessary (Acts 9:1-9)

Armed with the authority of the high priest, Saul intended to stamp out the Christian movement. Saul's desire to go to Damascus revealed the extent of his hatred. (It was an eight to nine day trek.) His earlier activity against believers had been directed primarily in and around Jerusalem. Saul would not quit until he had stopped the spread of the gospel because he believed the church was an affront to God. It was his misplaced zeal that led Saul to do everything in his power to stop the church.

- ? In keeping with this week's session title, "From Here to There," how would you describe Saul's "here" in Acts 9:1-2—the life and characteristics that defined him?
- ? What effects did Saul's encounter with Jesus have on him and on the men traveling with him?
- ? Why do you think Saul was struck blind? What might God have been trying to teach him through blindness? Given Saul's previous activities, what might he have been thinking about during those three days of blindness and fasting (v. 9)?

2. Reluctant Obedience (Acts 9:10-19)

Soon after Saul's encounter with the Lord, Ananias received instructions to minister to Saul. Although Ananias protested the assignment, the Lord told him that Saul was His chosen instrument to carry the gospel to others. This enemy of the gospel would become a primary advocate of it.

- Why didn't the Lord restore Saul's sight without Ananias's involvement? What does this tell us about how God wants spiritual growth to happen?
- What plans did the Lord have for Saul? How might this have differed from Ananias's expectations?
- How was Ananias transformed by his own encounter with God? Why must we always obey God, even if we don't fully understand?

3. A Changed Life (Acts 9:20-25)

Saul began preaching Christ as God's Son in Damascus's synagogues. His hearers were skeptical, but he was convincing in presenting Jesus as the Messiah. Saul wasted no time beginning to serve his newfound Savior.

- What might the synagogue crowd have expected Saul to say? Why do you think some of the people were upset by Saul's preaching?
- How do other believers help us get through times of difficulty in ministry?

4. Advocates for Change (Acts 9:26-31)

The Jerusalem Christians' fear of Saul was understandable. If Saul was only pretending to act like a disciple, he could've destroyed the church. Apparently, Barnabas saw evidence of God's work in Saul's life and recognized Saul as a true disciple and brother in the Lord.

- What transformation did God want to cause in the Jerusalem Christians' lives? How did He accomplish this?
- How has God used other believers here at First Baptist Lewisville to cause transformation in your life? How might He desire to move our church from "here" to "there"? What is your role in that process?

Conclusion

- Name one way the Holy Spirit is prodding you now as an invitation to life-change.
- What about "here" is making you reluctant to His leading?
- Do you have a hard time believing someone you know could be saved because of their hard heart? How does God's work in Saul's life (and yours) challenge you to think and act differently?

? For Further Discussion

What do you think are other peoples' expectations of us here at First Baptist Lewisville? Why?



Expanded Leader Guide

From Here to There

Introduction

- Over time, what is something on which your views have radically changed (i.e. eating kale, country music, the Houston Astros and MLB's American League, etc.)?
- What led to this change in your thinking?
- Has this shift in your thinking affected any of your relationships or changed the way people view you, for better or worse? Explain.


The dictionary defines *metamorphosis* as a change of the form or nature of a thing or person into a completely different one, by natural or supernatural means. For example, while it's a strange, gigantic shift to go from wearing maroon on Saturdays to wearing burnt orange (or vice versa), a metamorphosis is different because it's not just a change in opinion, it's a change in nature. This is a change that is impossible outside miraculous intervention.


- Do you think of yourself as having been miraculously changed by God? Why or why not? If so, what are the implications of that change?
- What are some reasons we might think a person is too far gone to ever be truly changed?

The Book of Acts contains a number of stories about transformation, and Saul's is one of the more dramatic. A man who had fought passionately to eradicate Christianity was transformed into one of its biggest advocates.


After meeting Jesus on the road to Damascus, Saul became the primary leader to take the gospel to the Gentile world, meaning we are Christians today because of Saul's ministry.


1. Whatever Means Necessary (Acts 9:1-9)

-  In keeping with this week's session title, "From Here to There," how would you describe Saul's "here" in Acts 9:1-2—the life and characteristics that defined him?

-  What effects did Saul's encounter with Jesus have on him and on the men traveling with him?

Armed with the authority of the high priest, Saul intended to stamp out the Christian movement. Saul's desire to go to Damascus revealed the extent of his hatred. (It was an eight to nine day trek.) His earlier activity against believers had been directed primarily in and around Jerusalem. Saul would not quit until he had stopped the spread of the gospel because he believed the church was an affront to God. It was his misplaced zeal that led Saul to do everything in his power to stop the church.

-  Why do you think Saul was struck blind? What might God have been trying to teach him through blindness?


-  Given Saul's previous activities, what might he have been thinking about during those three days of blindness and fasting (v. 9)?

It took Saul being physically blinded by the light to realize he'd been spiritually in the dark all along. Saul knew about God, but not like this. When he asked, "Who are you?" God the Father could have answered Saul. But Jesus answered instead, which was God's way of telling Saul in no uncertain terms that Jesus was God.



Jesus revealed Himself to Saul and gave him further instructions, and Saul's response was immediate (v. 8). His fasting was not a punishment, but an appropriate response to the intensity of his encounter with Jesus (v. 9). This encounter with Jesus resulted in a dramatic transformation in the life of this proud, Christian-hating Pharisee. God's ability to forgive is not based on the depth of our sin, but on the depth of His love. God's grace is so overwhelming that no sin of ours is too big to stand in His way.

2. Reluctant Obedience (Acts 9:10-19)

Soon after Saul's encounter with the Lord, Ananias received instructions to minister to Saul. Although Ananias protested the assignment, the Lord told him that Saul was His chosen instrument to carry the gospel to others. This enemy of the gospel would become a primary advocate of it.

-  Why didn't the Lord restore Saul's sight without Ananias's involvement? What does this tell us about how God wants spiritual growth to happen?

Ananias was reluctant to obey the Lord's command; he was aware of the havoc Saul had caused among the Christian community in Jerusalem. Although Luke did not record a detailed account of Saul's activity in Jerusalem, it is obvious from reading Acts 8:1-3 that his persecution had dealt a serious blow to the Jerusalem church. Reports of the intense persecution in Jerusalem had already reached the Christian community in Damascus. The Christians in Damascus were aware that Saul had come to their city to arrest believers.

-  What plans did the Lord have for Saul? How might this have differed from Ananias's expectations?
-  How was Ananias transformed by his own encounter with God? Why must we always obey God, even if we don't fully understand?

Ananias eventually followed the Lord's command, but he did so only after the Lord assured him that He had chosen Saul. The risen Christ referred to Saul as "my chosen instrument." To further encourage Ananias, the Lord briefly outlined Saul's future as a believer—he would carry the gospel to a broad cross section of the population in the Roman world of the first century. Both Gentiles and Jews would be among those to whom Saul would proclaim the message.

3. A Changed Life (Acts 9:20-25)

Saul began preaching Christ as God's Son in Damascus's synagogues. His hearers were skeptical, but he was convincing in presenting Jesus as the Messiah. Saul wasted no time beginning to serve his newfound Savior.

- ❓ What might the synagogue crowd have expected Saul to say?
- ❓ What do you think are other peoples' expectations of us here at First Baptist Lewisville? Why?
- ❓ Why do you think some of the people were upset by Saul's preaching?

The Jews plotted to kill Saul, but his followers helped him escape. Under the cover of night, these followers lowered Saul in a basket through an opening in the wall. Walls that surrounded ancient cities were wide enough for houses to be built along them. Saul may have escaped through a window in the house of a follower. He likely was lowered by ropes in a large woven basket used for hauling hay or other goods. Whatever the exact details, Saul's escape would not have been possible without caring believers who came to his aid.

- ❓ How do other believers help us get through times of difficulty in ministry?

4. Advocates for Change (Acts 9:26-31)

- ❓ What transformation did God want to cause in the Jerusalem Christians' lives? How did He accomplish this change in them?
- ❓ How has God used other believers here at First Baptist Lewisville to cause transformation in your life? How might He desire to move our church from "here" to "there"? What is your role in that process?

The Jerusalem Christians' fear of Saul was understandable. In fact, when he later gave his testimony, he described how he had imprisoned many Jesus followers and voted for the death sentence for others. (See Acts 22:4-5; 26:9-10.) If Saul was only pretending to act like a disciple, he could've destroyed the church. Apparently, Barnabas saw evidence of God's work in Saul's life and recognized Saul as a true disciple and brother in the Lord. By endorsing Saul, Barnabas risked his reputation and his life.

Conclusion

- ❓ Name one way the Holy Spirit is prodding you now as an invitation to life-change.

- ❓ What about “here” is making you reluctant to His leading?

- ❓ Do you have a hard time believing someone you know could be saved because of their hard heart? How does God’s work in Saul’s life (and yours) challenge you to think and act differently?

Prayer of Response

Thank God that your reluctance to the changes He wants to make in your life don't disqualify you from His grace. Thank Him that He even uses your resistance to His prodding to take you from here to there. Ask Him to change and move you now in whatever ways He desires.

Family Discussion

Family Discussion Questions For Children

- *Who helps you grow in your faith? How do they do it?*
- *What does it teach you about God that He uses people and experiences to change you? What does the way God works teach you about yourself?*

Family Discussion Questions For Teens

- *Who (or what) has God used to get your attention? Is it usually dramatic or subtle?*
- *Why do you think we're so often reluctant to change in needed areas if we're going to really follow Jesus?*
- *What is one of those areas for you? How can we help you in that?*

For Next Week

Session Title

- Two Sides of the Story

Main Scripture

- Acts 10

Session Outline

1. God's Work with the Yet-to-be-Christian (Acts 10:1-8)
2. God's Word to His Missionary (Acts 10:9-16)
3. God Brings the Two Sides Together for a Gospel Conversation (Acts 10:17-33)

Memorize

We all, with unveiled faces, are looking as in a mirror at the glory of the Lord and are being transformed into the same image from glory to glory; this is from the Lord who is the Spirit.

—2 Corinthians 3:18

Extended Commentary

Acts 9:1-31

9:1-2. As the word of God spread and the number of disciples increased, the church met strong opposition. Saul, who had held the clothing of those who had stoned Stephen, was intent on destroying the church. This persecution was the most severe threat believers had faced to this point in the church's brief history. Saul was breathing out threats against the disciples. Saul's hostile mission was to place believers under arrest and bring them as prisoners to Jerusalem. There they would stand trial before the Sanhedrin. Saul was an enemy of Christ and His people.

9:3-5. As Saul and those traveling with him neared the completion of their journey to Damascus, Saul encountered the resurrected and exalted Christ. A blinding light flashed around him, and he heard a voice. The question Saul heard was succinct and accusatory. Saul was on a mission of hate to persecute Jesus' followers. The resurrected Christ, however, so identified with His people that He said the persecution was against Him personally. When Saul inquired about the identity of the One speaking to him, he used the title Lord. Saul quickly learned the Lord's identity and soon learned the deeper significance of the lordship of Christ in his life.

9:6-7. After securing Saul's full attention and revealing His identity as the risen Christ, Jesus commanded Saul to go into Damascus and await further instructions. This stepwise introduction to his future kept him from being overwhelmed all at once with the changes Jesus had initiated in his life, and it also allowed the Christians in Damascus to meet and accept the one whom they feared.

9:8-9. Saul was unable to see when he got up from the ground. His traveling companions had to lead him by the hand into Damascus. For three days Saul was blind, and did not eat or drink anything. His life would be changed radically by this encounter with the resurrected Christ.

9:10-12. The Lord spoke to Ananias in a vision and informed him that he was to go to Saul and place his hands on him so that Saul's sight would be restored. The Lord Jesus informed Ananias that He was at work in the lives of both persons involved in the situation. The Lord had given Saul a vision of Ananias coming to him.

9:13-14. Aware of the havoc Saul had caused among believers in Jerusalem, Ananias was reluctant to obey the Lord's command. Reports of the intense persecution in Jerusalem already had reached the Christian community in Damascus. The Christians in Damascus also were aware that Saul had come to their city to arrest believers. Naturally Ananias was reluctant to place himself in what he viewed as jeopardy. He knew Saul's reputation and thus protested the Lord's call. Ananias's honest response helps to emphasize the radical transformation that had occurred in Saul's life.

9:15-16. Ananias eventually followed the Lord's command but he did so only after the Lord assured him that He had chosen Saul. The risen Christ referred to Saul as "my chosen instrument." To further encourage Ananias, the Lord briefly outlined Saul's future as a believer: he would carry the gospel to a broad cross section of the population in the Roman world of the first century. Both Gentiles and Jews would be among those to whom Saul would proclaim the message. The Lord also told Ananias that Saul himself would be called to suffer for Jesus' name. Saul, who had persecuted Christ's followers, would experience as a believer the same kind of suffering he had inflicted on others. We are not to understand this message as one of divine retaliation for what Saul had done prior to his conversion. Rather, the Lord's words to Ananias were a prophecy about a privilege Saul would experience as he followed the Lord.

9:17-18. The ordering of events in Saul's conversion may have been altered from the standard pattern so that baptism rather than the filling of the Holy Spirit was the final event. The process may have been extended over several days rather than occurring all at once. But the result was the same: Saul became a follower of Jesus Christ.

9:20. Saul stayed in Damascus for some days, likely becoming oriented to basic Christianity even as he began proclaiming Jesus in the synagogues. He gave priority to the synagogues throughout his ministry, starting there before being forced to take the message elsewhere.

9:21-22. Understandably, the initial response to Saul was skeptical amazement, but as he grew more capable he was able to confound unbelieving Jews, proving that Jesus is the Messiah. Apparently, he was able to explain the messianic connections between the Old Testament and Jesus so clearly that the Jews in Damascus could not refute him.

9:23-25. Saul dutifully preached Jesus as Messiah for long enough to become the enemy of unbelieving Jews in Damascus. He had helped their struggle against the growing Christian movement, but now he was the chief cause of its growth. So they conspired to kill him. Unable to leave via the city gates, Saul escaped in a most undignified but effective manner: he was placed in a large basket and shoved through an opening in the wall.

9:26. Saul traveled south to Jerusalem and attempted to associate with the Christian community. He sought to be attached to them, to be known as one of them. Understandably, they were all afraid of him. After all, shortly before this time he had persecuted the Jerusalem church, hunting down and imprisoning believers (see 8:3). The disciples did not believe his commitment to Christ was genuine; they thought it was a trick to enable him to capture them. They seriously doubted he was a genuine disciple.

9:27. Barnabas, "Son of Encouragement," took a tremendous risk. He was a respected believer whom the disciples trusted (see 4:36-37). Barnabas took Saul to the apostles—the Twelve. Convinced Saul was a genuine believer, Barnabas was willing to act as a mediator with the apostles, recounting Jesus' appearing to Saul on the road to Damascus, their conversation, and Saul's bold preaching about Jesus in Damascus.

9:28. The apostles accepted Saul into their fellowship. That he was coming and going with the apostles indicates his full identification with them. He was speaking boldly about Jesus in Jerusalem's synagogues, mainly in those of the Greek-speaking Jews.

9:29. Saul conversed and debated with the Hellenistic (Greek-speaking) Jews. Saul took up Stephen's work and likely advocated Stephen's view that the gospel is for every person. Saul's background as a Jew who was born and had lived in a Gentile area, Cilicia, equipped him to speak to and debate with these Jews.

The Hellenistic Jews reacted to Saul as they had responded to Stephen: they attempted to kill Saul. His claims for Christ enraged the synagogue members; they considered him to be a traitor to Judaism and sought to eliminate him.

9:30. Members of the Christian community discovered the plot to kill Saul. These believers escorted him to Caesarea on the Mediterranean coast, where he boarded a ship bound for Tarsus, his native city in Cilicia. Saul's name does not resurface in Luke's narrative until Acts 11:25, in events of about 10 years later. Saul demonstrated his intense commitment by going to Jerusalem and meeting with the disciples. In addition, he preached about Jesus and risked his life by debating some Greek Jews about Jesus.

9:31. This verse marks a significant point in the development of the early church. The church, having been forced by persecution to scatter outward from Jerusalem, was at peace in Judea, Galilee, and Samaria. This set the church up for a second stage of growth, which would see the gospel boldly taken outside Israel.

