

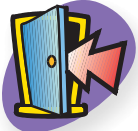


Galatians

Catholic Scripture Study

The Conversion of St. Paul

History of the Early World	Patriarchs	Israel in Egypt	Conquest of Canaan	Judges	United Kingdom	Divided Kingdom Exile	Exile	Return	Maccabean Revolt	Jesus the Messiah	Church



Introduction

Before you begin studying Galatians, you ought to know something about St. Paul, the “Apostle to the Gentiles.” The best way to learn about him is to read the account of his conversion and work in the early church recorded in the book of Acts. Saul of Tarsus, who became the apostle Paul, was raised as a strict and zealous Pharisee. He was born in Tarsus, a Roman city, but he was educated in Jerusalem. He was of the tribe of Benjamin, one of only two of the twelve tribes of Israel that didn’t apostasize during the period of the Davidic kingdom. He studied under Rabbi Gamaliel, one of the most famous teachers in all Israel’s history. He impressed his peers with his intellect and dedication. He also ferociously persecuted the Jewish Christian converts of the early church.

To get you started, here is an excerpt from Acts that will begin your friendship with St. Paul. In this study, you will reflect on his personality, both before and after his conversion. You will examine his encounter with the Lord Jesus on the road to Damascus, which resulted in an apostleship that was unique but not independent. Finally, you will observe first-hand the impact he had in the Christian community he once tried to destroy.

We take up the story of Saul’s life as he witnessed the death of the church’s first martyr, Stephen.

Read this passage all the way through, at least once. Then answer the questions on the text that follow.



ACTS 7:54-8:3; 9:1-30

7:54 Now when they heard these things they were enraged, and they ground their teeth against him. 55 But he, full of the Holy Spirit, gazed into heaven and saw the glory of God, and Jesus standing at the right hand of God; 56 and he said, “Behold, I see the heavens opened, and the Son of man standing at the right hand of God.” 57 But they cried out with a loud voice and stopped their ears and rushed together upon him. 58 Then they cast him out of the city and stoned him; and the witnesses laid down their garments at the feet of a young man named Saul. 59 And as they were stoning Stephen, he prayed, “Lord Jesus, receive my spirit.” 60 And he knelt down and cried with a loud voice, “Lord, do not hold this sin against them.” And when he had said this, he fell asleep.

8:1 And Saul was consenting to his death. And on that day a great persecution arose against the church in Jerusalem; and they were all scattered throughout the region of Judea and Samaria, except the apostles. 2 Devout men buried Stephen, and made great lamentation over him. 3 But Saul was ravaging the church, and entering house after house, he dragged off men and women and committed them to prison.

9:1 But Saul, still breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord, went to the high priest 2 and asked him for letters to the synagogues at Damascus, so that if he found any belonging to the Way, men or women, he might bring them bound to Jerusalem. 3 Now as he journeyed he approached Damascus, and suddenly a light from heaven flashed about him. 4 And he fell to the ground and heard a voice saying to him, “Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?” 5 And he said, “Who are you, Lord?” And he said, “I am Jesus, whom you are





ACTS 7:54-8:3; 9:1-30 (cont.)

persecuting; 6 but rise and enter the city, and you will be told what you are to do.” 7 The men who were traveling with him stood speechless, hearing the voice but seeing no one. 8 Saul arose from the ground; and when his eyes were opened, he could see nothing; so they led him by the hand and brought him into Damascus. 9 And for three days he was without sight, and neither ate nor drank.

10 Now there was a disciple at Damascus named Ananias. The Lord said to him in a vision, “Ananias.” And he said, “Here I am, Lord.” 11 And the Lord said to him, “Rise and go to the street called Straight, and inquire in the house of Judas for a man of Tarsus named Saul; for behold, he is praying, 12 and he has seen a man named Ananias come in and lay his hands on him so that he might regain his sight.” 13 But Ananias answered, “Lord, I have heard from many about this man, how much evil he has done to thy saints at Jerusalem; 14 and here he has authority from the chief priests to bind all who call upon thy name.” **15 But the Lord said to him, “Go, for he is a chosen instrument of mine to carry my name before the Gentiles and kings and the sons of Israel; 16 for I will show him how much he must suffer for the sake of my name.”** 17 So Ananias departed and entered the house. And laying his hands on him he said, “Brother Saul, the Lord Jesus who appeared to you on the road by which you came, has sent me that you may regain your sight and be filled with the Holy Spirit.” 18 And immediately something like scales fell from his eyes and he regained his sight. Then he rose and was baptized, 19 and took food and was strengthened.

For several days he was with the disciples at Damascus. 20 And in the synagogues immediately he proclaimed Jesus, saying, “He is the Son of God.” 21 And all who heard him were amazed, and said, “Is not this the man who made havoc in Jerusalem of those who called on this name? And he has come here for this purpose, to bring them bound before the chief priests.” 22 But Saul increased all the more in strength, and confounded the Jews who lived in Damascus by proving that Jesus was the Christ.

23 When many days had passed, the Jews plotted to kill him, 24 but their plot became known to Saul. They were watching the gates day and night, to kill him; 25 but his disciples took him by night and let him down over the wall, lowering him in a basket.

26 And when he had come to Jerusalem he attempted to join the disciples; and they were all afraid of him, for they did not believe that he was a disciple. 27 But Barnabas took him, and brought him to the apostles, and declared to them how on the road he had seen the Lord, who spoke to him, and how at Damascus he had preached boldly in the name of Jesus. 28 So he went in and out among them at Jerusalem, 29 preaching boldly in the name of the Lord. And he spoke and disputed against the Hellenists; but they were seeking to kill him. 30 And when the brethren knew it, they brought him down to Caesarea, and sent him off to Tarsus.



Questions on the Text

SAUL PERSECUTES THE CHURCH

Read Acts 7:54-8:3; 9:1-2

1. *From just these few verses, list everything you can observe about the type of personality Saul had.*
2. *Think about people who behave in this zealous way. What are some possible motivations for this kind of behavior? What do you think Saul's motivation was?*
3. *Why is it important to discern the motives people have when they oppose us?*

AN ENCOUNTER WITH JESUS

Read Acts 9:3-9

4. *Look at vs. 4. Describe the tone of the question that Jesus put to Saul.*





Questions on the Text (cont.)

5. *When Saul asks the Lord, in vs. 5, "Who are you, Lord?" he isn't using the word "lord" as we do in reference to Jesus the Lord. He's using it as a term of respect. Look carefully at how Jesus replies to this question. What, if anything, do you find unusual about it?*
 6. *Knowing what you know about Saul's personality, what do you think it was like for him to be led by the hand to Damascus, unable to see?*
 7. *Most of us expect to experience joy, not humiliation and darkness, when Jesus draws near. Why do you suppose it happens like this sometimes? Has it ever happened to you?*
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SAUL ENCOUNTERS THE CHURCH

Read Acts 9:10-19a

8. *What was the reaction of Ananias to the Lord's directive to him?*
 9. *How does Jesus describe the mission that Saul is to have? What, in Saul's background, would equip him to fulfill such a mission? Why do you think suffering will be a part of it?*
 10. *When Ananias enters the house and speaks to Saul, how do we know that he was able to overcome the fear of Saul he felt initially? What do you suppose he saw when he looked at Saul? (Note: See vs. 9.)*
 11. *Ananias told Saul he would regain his sight and be filled with the Holy Spirit (vs. 17). How was the first thing accomplished? How about the second?*
 12. *Think about the sequence of Saul's conversion. First, the experience on the road to Damascus, then the three days blind, then the arrival of Ananias and the recovery of sight and baptism. Surely Saul's total conversion could all have been accomplished right at the beginning, when he saw the Lord. Why do you suppose it happened this way instead?*
 13. *The Catholic Church understands herself to be an incarnation, both human and divine. How does this episode from Acts demonstrate that?*
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A LIFE RE-DIRECTED

Read Acts 9:19b-30

14. *Do you see any of the old Saul in the new?*
15. *How did the apostles first react to him?*
16. *Who broke the ice? (Read also Acts 4:33-35 for background information on this man.)*
17. *In what ways did the prophecy of Ananias get fulfilled?*
18. *Taking Saul as an example, what can we say about how the call of God to us, especially in apostolates, is personal?*





Questions for Reflection

One of the best ways to meditate on God's Word is to take it deeply into your life through memorization. The suggested memory verse is always highlighted in the text in the lesson. Or you may choose one of your own. For further reflection, consider these:

1. ***Is there a place in your life now—your family life, your career, your vocation—where you long to encounter Jesus as St. Paul did? Ask Him to meet you there.***
2. ***Is there a job the Lord wants you to do that makes you frightened or doubt that He knows what He's doing? Ask Him for courage and reassurance.***
3. ***Is there any resistance in you to the authority of the Church to speak and act on behalf of Jesus in your life? Ask for the will to submit.***
4. ***Are you willing to risk everything—your reputation, your standing in the community, your control—as St. Paul did, to serve the Lord? Ask St. Paul to pray for you to let go of every remnant of pride and be thoroughly converted.***





Opportunities for Additional Study

For the student who wishes to reflect more deeply on the passage in the lesson, consider these:

Points to Ponder

In his account of Stephen's martyrdom in Acts 7:54-8:2, it is clear that St. Luke does not want us to miss the connection between Stephen and Saul. It is not simply an historical fact that Saul was present at the stoning of Stephen. St. Luke wants us to recognize that Stephen's prayer for his persecutors was the seed that grew into the amazing and powerful conversion of Saul, a conversion that would affect the history of the Church for all time. As St. Augustine noted, "If Stephen had not prayed to God, the Church would not have had Paul (*Sermons*, 315, 7). Of course, Stephen had learned this kind of intercession from the example of Jesus, whose prayer for forgiveness on the Cross rings out through the centuries. We make an unfortunate mistake if we calculate the "success" of the gospel only in the ways men count success—large numbers, victory over opposition, respect and reputation. Prayers for persecutors uttered in the depth of pain, defeat, and humiliation are the means for God to redeem the world.

It is no coincidence that the first effect of Saul's encounter with Jesus is physical blindness. Conversion to Christ gives us eyes to really see. It is a kind of sight that is so different from what we see without grace that the only appropriate metaphor for the old way of seeing is blindness. Think of what Jesus says about the eye in Matt. 6:22-23: "The eye is the lamp of the body. So, if your eye is sound, your whole body will be full of light; but if your eye is not sound, your whole body will be full of darkness. If then the light in you is darkness, how great is the darkness!" Saul had to sit in that darkness for three days, re-living the darkness of Jesus' tomb and the apparent victory of evil over good. Once his sight is restored, he is able to see the world in truth. Instead of persecuting the Church, he is ready to be persecuted for her. St. Stephen's prayer will be continued through St. Paul and through all of us who have eyes to see that in our darkest moments, as long as we can pray, we can overcome the world.

Catechism Connection

Excerpted from the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*:

Acts 7:56 - "Christ's body was glorified at the moment of his Resurrection, as proved by the new and supernatural properties it subsequently and permanently enjoys...Only in a wholly exceptional and unique way would Jesus show himself to Paul 'as to one untimely born,' in a last apparition that established him as apostle." (659)

Acts 7:60 - "Since Abraham, intercession—asking on behalf of another—has been characteristic of a heart attuned to God's mercy." (2635)

Acts 9:5 - "In her Magisterial teaching of the faith and in the witness of her saints, the Church has never forgotten that 'sinners were the authors and the ministers of all the sufferings that the Redeemer endured'...We must regard as guilty all those who continue to relapse into their sins...those who plunge themselves into disorders and crimes crucify the Son of God anew in their hearts (for He is in them) and hold Him up to contempt." (598)

Rome to Home

A papal quote relating to the lesson:

"The apostolate is an inner voice, which makes one both restless and serene, a voice that is both gentle and imperious, troublesome and affectionate, a voice which comes unexpectedly and with great events and then, at a particular point, exercises a strong attraction, as it were, revealing to us our life and destiny. It speaks prophetically and almost in a tone of victory, which eventually dispels all uncertainty, all timidity and all fear, and which facilitates—making it easy, desirable and pleasant—the response of our whole personality, when we pronounce that word which reveals the supreme secret of love: Yes, Yes, Lord, tell me what I must do and I will try to do it, I will do it. Like St. Paul, thrown to the ground at the gates of Damascus: What would you have me do?" (Pope Paul VI, *Homily*, 14 October 1968)



Summary

Summary

In this lesson, we observed that:

1. God's call to St. Paul enabled him to re-direct his personality, experiences, talents, education, and zeal to serve the kingdom of God instead of opposing it.
2. Although he had a unique encounter with the Lord Jesus, St. Paul was only able to fully respond to the call of Jesus through the ministry of the Church, which was already in existence. He had to receive and submit to the intercession of a human being, Ananias, in order to enter into the fullness of his conversion and new life.
3. Jesus made it clear to St. Paul, in Acts 9:16, that he was going to suffer for the sake of the gospel. This is much like the statement He made to Peter, after the Resurrection: "Truly, truly, I say to you, when you were young, you girded yourself and walked where you would; but when you are old, you will stretch out your hands, and another will gird you and carry you where you do not wish to go" (John 21:18). John tells us that this was a prophecy of Peter's death, presumably by crucifixion. Again, in Rom. 8:16-17, St. Paul writes, about all of us, that "...we are children of God, and if children, then heirs, heirs of God and fellow heirs of Christ, provided we suffer with Him in order that we may also be glorified with Him." The call to suffer is a basic characteristic of the call of the gospel. Just as the Cross was central to the mission of Jesus, becoming the door to victory, our own rising will come only through our dying.

A Message from the Authors

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God Bless,

Scott, Jeff, Mark and Gayle

