

Saul Before Paul

When religious certainty is confronted by the risen Christ

BIG IDEA Saul's religious credentials and zeal made him certain he was serving God, even while he opposed Christ and attacked Christ's church. By grace, Jesus confronted him, overturned his confidence, and brought him into the church he tried to destroy.

Purpose and outcome

By the end of the lesson, the class should be able to:

- trace Saul's movement from religious certainty and violence to helplessness and grace;
- explain why Stephen's final prayer included Saul without claiming that the prayer caused Saul's conversion;
- show how Galatians and Philipians interpret the Damascus-road encounter; and
- identify how churches can turn good religious gifts into grounds for confidence or superiority.

Lesson at a glance

TIME	MOVEMENT	AIM
0-3	Welcome and prayer	Ask the Spirit to teach and correct us.
3-6	Frame the lesson	Can sincere religious certainty still resist God?
6-19	Stephen and Saul	Acts 7:54-8:4: seeing, refusing, violence, prayer, scattering.
19-21	Summarize Acts 8	Persecution scatters the church; the gospel spreads.
21-36	Christ and Ananias	Acts 9:1-19: confrontation, grace, helplessness, reception.
36-44	Paul interprets	Galatians: God's initiative. Philipians: a new accounting.
44-48	The Gospel Then and Now	Apply the problem corporately to the church.
48-50	Close	Summary, next reading, and prayer.

1. Religious certainty becomes spiritual blindness

Read Acts 7:54-8:4. Ask the class to watch for what Stephen sees, what the council refuses to hear, how Saul is introduced, and what happens after Stephen dies.

KEY CONTRAST Stephen is filled with the Spirit and sees clearly. The council is religiously certain but refuses to hear. Stephen speaks about the heavenly court. The earthly court dissolves into a violent mob.

Saul is not a neutral observer. He guards the garments, approves the killing (Acts 8:1), and later acknowledges his participation (Acts 22:20). Luke does not tell us what Saul felt; Luke tells us what Saul did next.

Stephen's prayer: Saul was present, approving and assisting those carrying out the killing. Stephen's prayer, 'Lord, do not hold this sin against them,' therefore included Saul. Scripture does not say that the prayer caused Saul's conversion.

TEACHING LINE Before Saul knew he needed grace, Stephen was praying for grace to be shown to his persecutors - including Saul.

Acts 8:4 supplies the reversal: Saul tried to scatter the church, but the scattered church spread the gospel. Summarize Acts 8:5-40 rather than reading it aloud.

Discuss: What warning does this give churches about religious certainty that refuses to listen?

2. The risen Christ confronts and claims his enemy

Read Acts 9:1-19. Ask who takes the initiative, what Saul intends to do, what he can do after meeting Jesus, and what Jesus asks Ananias to do.

- **Power to helplessness** - Saul carries authority and intends to enter Damascus as a captor; he enters blind and led by the hand.
- **Christ and the church** - 'Why do you persecute me?' reveals that attacking Christ's people means attacking Christ himself.
- **Judgment enveloped in grace** - Jesus stops and humbles Saul, but instead of destroying him, Jesus claims him.
- **Ananias embodies the gospel** - his fear is reasonable, but he trusts Christ's authority and addresses the persecutor as 'Brother Saul.'

Discuss: What did obedience require Ananias to believe about Jesus - and about Saul?

CORPORATE EMPHASIS Jesus did not merely reconcile Saul to himself. Jesus sent a member of the persecuted church to receive the persecutor as a brother.

3. Paul interprets what happened

Galatians 1:11-16, 22-24 - Who acted? God set Paul apart, called him by grace, revealed his Son, and commissioned him. Paul's gospel was neither his invention nor dependent upon a human pedigree.

Philippians 3:4-9 - What changed? Saul's heritage, achievement, zeal, and law-keeping became loss as grounds for confidence. Christ became his surpassing treasure.

SYNTHESIS Acts shows Christ stopping Saul. Galatians shows God calling Saul by grace. Philippians shows grace changing what Saul valued.

The Gospel Then and Now

Church problem then: Religious certainty, institutional authority, and zeal were used to resist Christ and harm Christ's people.

Church temptation now: Churches can make doctrine, heritage, morality, politics, worship traditions, biblical knowledge, or years of service into grounds for confidence and superiority.

Gospel-shaped church: A church listens humbly, submits every credential to Christ, and receives those whom Christ receives.

Scholarly notes and guardrails

- Jesus standing at God's right hand can be understood as advocacy, vindication, honor, or welcome. Present F. F. Bruce's heavenly-court reading as a compelling interpretation, not the only possible one.
- Acts 26:14 suggests that Saul had been resisting God's direction, but Scripture does not identify the specific 'goads.' Do not invent a hidden psychological biography.
- Saul and Paul are not conversion names. Saul was his Jewish name and Paul his Roman name; Acts 13:9 identifies both.
- Galatians denies a merely human origin for Paul's gospel and apostolic commission. It does not mean Paul never received or passed on Christian tradition.

If time

Compare Acts 9:4-6 with Acts 22:8-10: 'Who are you, Lord?' and 'What shall I do, Lord?' These questions join conversion and calling. Also mention: Saul's conversion was sudden enough to knock him down, but it was not sudden to God.

Leader preparation

Commentaries consulted: F. F. Bruce, The Book of Acts; John Stott, The Message of Acts; Ajith Fernando, Acts (NIV Application Commentary); Life Application Bible Commentary on Acts and Galatians. Add page citations from the editions used before publication if desired.

ECO connection: Essential Tenets III.A (God's grace in Christ) and III.B (election for salvation and service). Official text: <https://eco-pres.org/constitution/>

Before Lesson 3: Acts 9:1-31; Acts 13:1-12; Romans 15:14-33. Notice who calls and sends Paul, the mission he receives, and how he understands his responsibility to churches and people who have not heard.