

Paul's Calling and Mission

Called by Christ, sent by the Spirit through the church

BIG IDEA The risen Christ called Paul, and the Holy Spirit sent him through the church to carry the gospel to the Gentiles and build up Christ's people.

Purpose and outcome

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

- trace how Saul's redirected zeal became immediate witness, suffering, and participation in Christ's church;
- explain how the Holy Spirit and the Antioch church both participated in sending Barnabas and Saul;
- identify Paul's synagogue-first pattern without losing sight of his calling to the Gentiles;
- use Romans 15 to describe mission as Christ's work through Spirit-empowered witnesses and partnering churches; and
- distinguish strong gospel protection from careless or self-righteous harshness.

Lesson at a glance

TIME	MOVEMENT	AIM
0-3	Welcome and prayer	Ask the Spirit to guide, teach, and send the church.
3-6	Recap Lesson 2	Grace confronted Saul, created a brother, and redirected his zeal.
6-17	Calling in action	Acts 9:19-31: new people, message, pattern, opposition, and suffering.
17-20	Bridge to Antioch	Barnabas brings Saul into a teaching and sending church.
20-32	Spirit and church send	Acts 13:1-12: worship, discernment, synagogue witness, and opposition.
32-41	Paul explains mission	Romans 15:15-21, 23-24, 30-32: grace, frontier, partnership, prayer.
41-47	The Gospel Then and Now	How does a congregation participate in Christ's mission?
47-50	Synthesis and prayer	Review, assign Galatians and Acts 15, and pray.

Before class

BOARD QUESTION Who sends the church into mission—and how does the whole church participate?

Have participants use their own Bible or Bible app. Plan one reader for Acts 9:19-31 and one for Acts 13:1-12. In Romans 15, read selected verses rather than the entire paragraph in detail.

1. Redirected zeal becomes witness and suffering

Read Acts 9:19-31. Move quickly through the conversion recap and ask the class to watch for Saul's new people, new message, regular pattern, opposition, and dependence upon the church.

- New people — Saul spends several days with the disciples he had intended to arrest. Christ's call places him within Christ's church.
- New message — he immediately proclaims that Jesus is the Son of God and proves that Jesus is the Messiah.
- Developing pattern — he begins in the synagogues among his Jewish kinsmen and their shared Scriptures.
- New cost — the persecutor becomes the persecuted and escapes Damascus in a basket.
- Church reception — Barnabas listens, advocates, and uses his credibility to help the Jerusalem believers receive Saul.

TEACHING LINE Saul entered Damascus carrying official letters and expecting to lead Christians out as prisoners. He left hidden in a basket, dependent upon Christians to save his life.

READING NOTE Spending several days with the disciples and preaching 'at once' most naturally overlap. It is reasonable that the disciples taught Saul about Jesus and Christian life, but Luke does not describe a curriculum. Galatians denies a merely human origin for Paul's gospel and commission; it does not mean Paul never learned Christian tradition from other believers.

LOOK CLOSER Acts 9:20 is the only direct use of the exact title 'Son of God' in Acts, apart from the related quotation 'You are my Son' in Acts 13:33. The title presents Jesus in unique relationship with the Father, in David's royal line, and as Israel's promised Messiah.

BARNABAS Do not claim Barnabas felt no fear or received a special revelation. Acts later calls him full of the Holy Spirit and faith (11:24). Here he hears Saul's testimony, brings him to the apostles, and risks his own credibility. Gospel-shaped advocacy is courageous without being gullible.

Possible connection to Stephen: Saul debates Hellenistic Jews and meets violent resistance, as Stephen did. Acts 6:9 mentions Jews from Cilicia, Saul's home region, but Scripture does not say this was the same synagogue or that Saul participated in Stephen's earlier debate. Stephen was seized by synagogue opponents and tried before the Sanhedrin; he was not tried in a synagogue.

2. The Spirit calls and the church sends

Briefly bridge through Acts 11:25-26: Barnabas later finds Saul in Tarsus, brings him to Antioch, and teaches with him for a year. Then read Acts 13:1-12.

- A diverse leadership community — Barnabas came from Cyprus; Lucius from Cyrene in North Africa; Saul from Tarsus; Manaen had ties to Herod's court; Simeon carried the Latin nickname Niger. Describe the group as geographically and socially diverse without assuming five distinct ethnicities.
- Prophets and teachers — Luke places all five among Antioch's recognized leaders but does not assign each man one title. Saul's teaching ministry is explicit in Acts 11:26.
- Worship and discernment — the Spirit's direction comes while the church worships and fasts. It may have been voiced through a prophet, but Luke does not say how or through whom.
- Spirit and church — verse 3 says the church sent them; verse 4 says the Holy Spirit sent them. The Spirit calls; the church discerns, commissions, and participates.
- Synagogue first — in Salamis they again begin among Jews and the Scriptures. John Mark accompanies them as helper.
- Opposition — Elymas actively attempts to turn Sergius Paulus away from the faith. Protecting a seeker requires Paul to confront the deceiver.

LOOK CLOSER Bar-Jesus means 'son of Jesus/Joshua.' Elymas may be a professional name connected with a learned man or magician, but its exact origin is uncertain. Luke's sharper irony comes when the man called 'son of Jesus' is exposed as a 'child of the devil' because he obstructs the Lord's truth.

SAUL AND PAUL God did not rename Saul at conversion. Acts 13:9 says, 'Saul, who was also called Paul.' Saul was his Jewish name and Paul his Roman name. Luke's switch fits the story's movement more deeply into the Gentile world; a connection to King Saul is possible but not stated.

STRONG WORDS Paul is filled with the Spirit, addresses a false prophet who is actively obstructing another person, and announces a temporary apostolic judgment. This is not permission to insult unbelievers. Gentleness is not passivity, but neither should Christians baptize impatience as boldness.

The blindness deliberately echoes Saul's experience: an opponent of Christ is unable to see and must be led by the hand. Luke does not tell us whether Elymas later repented. Sergius Paulus believes after seeing what happened, but Luke says he was amazed at the teaching about the Lord. The sign authenticates the message; the message remains central.

3. Paul explains his missionary calling

Acts shows the mission happening; Romans 15 lets Paul explain what Christ was doing through him. Read Romans 15:15-21, 23-24, and 30-32. Summarize verses 25-29 and the Jerusalem collection.

- Grace given for service (15-16) — grace does not merely forgive Paul; it entrusts him with ministry to the Gentiles.
- Christ accomplishes the work (17-19) — Paul boasts only in what Christ has accomplished through him by word, deed, signs, and the Spirit.
- Frontier ambition (20-21) — Paul aims to proclaim Christ where Christ is not known.
- Church partnership (23-29) — Rome can assist Paul toward Spain, while Gentile churches serve Jewish believers through the Jerusalem collection.
- Prayer partnership (30-32) — Paul asks ordinary believers to join his struggle by praying.

SYNTHESIS Acts tells what Paul did. Romans tells what Paul believed Christ was doing through him—and how churches participated.

The Gospel Then and Now

CHURCH REALITY THEN The Spirit formed a diverse worshiping church that discerned, commissioned, protected, supported, and prayed for gospel witnesses.

CHURCH TEMPTATION NOW A congregation can become inward-looking, outsource mission to professionals, or confuse harshness with faithfulness.

GOSPEL-SHAPED CHURCH Because mission belongs to Christ, the whole church worships, listens, sends, goes, gives, welcomes, protects, and prays.

Discussion

1. What changed in Saul's zeal—and what remained recognizable?
2. What does Acts 13 teach about the relationship between the Holy Spirit's call and the church's responsibility?
3. When might strong words be necessary to protect others from deception, and what guardrails should govern them?
4. If not every Christian is called to be Paul, how does every congregation participate in Christ's mission?

Scholarly notes and guardrails

- Chronology — Galatians 1:17 says Paul went into Arabia and later returned to Damascus. Luke compresses this period into 'after many days.' Do not claim a precise itinerary Acts does not supply.
- Conversion explanations — thunderstorm, epilepsy, psychological blindness, repressed guilt, and despair over legal righteousness are speculative attempts to replace Luke's and Paul's stated explanation: the risen Christ appeared to and commissioned Saul.
- Elymas's motive — loss of influence with the proconsul is plausible, but Luke states only that he opposed the missionaries and tried to turn Sergius Paulus from the faith.
- First missionary journey — use the familiar label, while remembering that it is Paul's first recorded journey; Christian mission was already underway through others.

Leader preparation

Commentaries consulted: John Stott, *The Message of Acts*; John B. Polhill, *Acts* (New American Commentary); Ajith Fernando, *Acts* (NIV Application Commentary); Life Application Bible Commentary on Acts.

ECO connection: Essential Tenets III.B (election for salvation and service) and III.D (faithful stewardship of all of life). Official text: <https://eco-pres.org/constitution/>

Before Lesson 4: Read Galatians 1-6 in one sitting and Acts 15. Mark the church problem, Paul's gospel answer, and the response he calls for.