

PAUL

A MAN OF GRACE AND GRIT

STUDY TWO

The Violent Capture of a Rebel Will

Acts 9:1–9

If we're going to talk about remarkable conversions, there is none more notorious than Saul of Tarsus. No conversion in the history of Christianity was ever more remarkable than the one that happened on the road to Damascus. Because no opponent of Christ was ever more notorious than Saul of Tarsus.

—Pastor Charles R. Swindoll

CONVERSIONS of the famous intrigue us.

It could be the promiscuous Hollywood star or a ruthless mobster, the drug-abusing politician or a bad-tempered chief executive. At the very least, these people couldn't care less about Christ, but it's more likely they were unabashedly against Him and His ways. Then, one day, you see it in the headlines when the celebrity gets baptized and joins a local church.

Do you think? *How wonderful! . . . or . . . We'll see how long this lasts.*

How quick we jump to judgment and wonder if the whole thing is genuine or just another publicity stunt. It might be tough to accept that God could forgive such a person. If he or she stumbles soon after converting, everyone is quick to write it all off. Time often reveals whether a conversion is genuine. After all, when God is composing the score of our spiritual lives, our conversion is the opening downbeat to the whole piece.

Perhaps there is no more notorious conversion than Saul's, that Jewish Pharisee from Tarsus. If ever a person's conversion proved to be genuine, it was his. Jesus stopped Saul on the dusty Damascus Road while he was on mission, targeting Christians in a bloodthirsty attempt to annihilate the church. This *Searching the Scriptures* Bible study recounts Saul's riveting story of how God pursues and captures even the most rebellious of hearts.



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PREPARE YOUR HEART

Prepare to engage God’s Word today by reflecting on the following lyrics, “Amazing Grace” by John Newton, and then praying for God’s blessing on your time with Him.

Amazing grace! How sweet the sound
That saved a wretch like me.
I once was lost, but now am found,
Was blind, but now I see.

’Twas grace that taught my heart to fear,
And grace my fears relieved.
How precious did that grace appear
The hour I first believed. . . .

When we’ve been there ten thousand years
Bright shining as the sun,
We’ve no less days to sing God’s praise
Than when we’ve first begun.¹



TURN TO THE SCRIPTURES

In our previous Bible study, we learned that Saul of Tarsus was a hateful and hostile persecutor of early Christians who followed “the Way” (Acts 9:2).

Take a few minutes to review these verses which depict Saul’s anger and aggression: [Acts 8:1, 3; 9:1; 22:3–5; 26:9–11; 1 Timothy 1:13](#). Summarize your findings.

According to 9:2, Paul “requested letters addressed to the synagogues in Damascus, asking for their cooperation in the arrest of any followers of the Way he found there. He wanted to bring them—both men and women—back to Jerusalem in chains.” Locate [Damascus](#) on a Bible map like the one called the “Roman Division of Palestine” at insight.org/maps.

Damascus stood more than 130 miles north of Jerusalem. Considered by some the world’s oldest occupied city, Damascus functioned as a safe haven for fugitive Christians. Review the article on [Damascus](#) in the free, online *Holman Bible Dictionary* at studylight.org.

As Saul approached Damascus with his mind fixed on hunting down Christians, his world was suddenly and radically turned upside down.

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Observation: The Violent Capture of Saul's Will

We pick up the scene in Acts 9:3. Carefully observe [9:3–9](#). Observation looks closely at what's said in the text.² For narratives like this one, look for who, what, where, when, why, and how. Describe Saul's experience recorded in 9:3.

The light from heaven may well have been the [Shecaniah](#) glory of God. Read about this light in *Holman Bible Dictionary* at studylight.org. Record your insights below.

From 9:3–4, list the sequence of events as Luke recorded them.

According to 9:4, what did the voice say to Saul? What does [26:14](#) indicate about the language the voice used? What detail does [22:9](#) add to our understanding of 9:4?

Acts 9:5 records Saul's first words. What did Jesus say in response to Saul's question according to 9:5–6? What did Jesus repeat in 9:4 and in 9:5, and why is this significant?

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What did Saul's traveling companions experience according to Acts 9:7?

According to 9:8–9, how did the Shecaniah glory affect Saul, and what did his companions do for him?

With Jesus' instruction and the help of his companions, Saul stumbled into Damascus.

When the hounds of heaven caught the scent of this sinner, it was only a matter of time before irresistible grace violently captured this rebel will.
—Pastor Chuck Swindoll



Interpretation: In the End, God Wins

God has never met His match. Humbled to his knees, temporarily blinded, fasting without food or water for three days, and fully dependent on the care of others, Saul found himself in Damascus ruminating on every word he had just received from the risen Lord. Saul was now on a radically different mission.

Return to [Acts 9:4–5](#). In the exchange between Jesus and Saul, three important realizations strike Saul. First, given that Saul assumed Jesus was nothing more than a misguided, dead zealot, how did that assumption immediately transform when he heard Jesus identify Himself?

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Second, when Jesus addressed Saul by name, what did Saul recognize about the resurrected Jesus?

Third, Jesus told Saul He was the one Saul was persecuting, “I am Jesus, the one you are persecuting!” Why did Jesus say that? What does His comment teach about His relationship with the church?

In [Acts 26:14](#) (NASB), Jesus said Saul was kicking “against the goads” to describe Saul’s persecutory actions. Look up the meaning of [goad](#). StudyLight.org offers a short article in *Holman Bible Dictionary*. Farmers plowing their field while working with stubborn oxen would employ a sharp, pointy “goad” to prompt the oxen to submit to their direction. If the oxen resisted and kicked back against the goad, it only incurred pain.

With this idiom, what did Jesus signify to Saul? Who was doing the goading? How is this idiom instructive for those who follow Jesus today?

In the end, God won. Graciously and mercifully so. Saul thought he was going to Damascus to destroy the church, but God led Saul on that road because Jesus had a divine appointment with the man He would transform into Paul, the apostle to the gentiles.

“I am JESUS whom you are persecuting. I’m alive from the dead. I will never again go to a cross.” At this moment there is the beginning of the manufacture of a saint. —Pastor Chuck Swindoll

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Correlation: From Terrorist to Missionary

As God graciously but persistently goaded Saul, He knew the strength of character Saul possessed. Saul's fortitude was forged through years of zealous, religious training. God used that to Saul's advantage. Turn to [Galatians 1:13–14](#). Focusing on 1:14, what specific words did Saul (now Paul) use which reveal his pre-conversion, Jewish accolades? Though misguided, what or who fueled Saul?

In his fanaticism to exterminate the church, Saul might have been considered a terrorist. His thinking mirrored that of someone steeped in a cult, unable to see truth. After his sudden conversion, Saul would have much to “unlearn.” Why would that prove challenging and require time?

The remarkable thing is, Saul did what he did in the name of religion, which proves the point that there is no greater terroristic work than what's done in the name of one's god. —Pastor Chuck Swindoll



Application: God's Preparatory Goadings

Saul experienced a sudden, dramatic conversion on the road to Damascus. But that doesn't mean God wasn't already at work in Saul's life. God was “goadings” him—moving in his heart through the conviction of the Holy Spirit ([John 16:8](#))—in three ways.

First, Saul was probably haunted by Jesus' life, teaching, miracles, and even the events surrounding His crucifixion. Second, Saul may have been haunted as an accomplice in Stephen's death (Acts 6:5–8:3). Third, Saul may have been goaded by the courage and resilient faith demonstrated by the Christians he persecuted.

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What goads did God use in your life to bring you to Him in your conversion?

God transformed Saul's Pharisaic fanaticism into an irrepressible zeal for Christ. What character qualities has God used from your past in your service to Christ?

Is there a person you deeply care about who is outside of Christ? What goads do you see God using in his or her life? Have those goads been effective? Take a moment now to pray for your loved one.

Those goads pricked and prodded the Pharisaic ox, Saul, to such an extreme he couldn't stop, until he was blinded by that laser-like light from heaven. . . . And the hounds of heaven caught him. Isn't that a great thing? I love it. You can run, but you cannot hide. You can hide, but you cannot escape. It's only a matter of time. —Pastor Chuck Swindoll



A FINAL PRAYER

Close your study with prayer.

Father, thank You for the doubts that plague us, for the Stephens who haunt us. Thank You for the evidence of truth that dogs our steps. Whatever it takes, I pray that You will bring me to the place of full surrender and submission, so that I might know the kind of peace that only You can give as a result of faith in the One who died and was raised for me. I trust You in the strong name of Jesus Christ. Amen.

ENDNOTES

1. John Newton, "Amazing Grace," in *The Celebration Hymnal: Songs and Hymns for Worship* (n.p.: Word/Integrity, 1997), hymn 343.
2. To learn more about Pastor Chuck Swindoll's *Searching the Scriptures* Bible-study method, go to the web page, "[How Does Pastor Chuck Swindoll Study the Bible?](#)"

For the 2025 broadcasts, this *Searching the Scriptures* Bible study was developed by Marshall F. Davis in collaboration with Aaron Massey, senior vice president of *Searching the Scriptures* Ministries, and Bryce Klabunde, vice president of *Searching the Scriptures* Ministries, based upon the original outlines, charts, and transcripts of Charles R. Swindoll's messages. Copyright © 2001, 2025 by Charles R. Swindoll, Inc. All rights are reserved worldwide. Duplication of copyrighted material for commercial use is strictly prohibited.

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