

SEEING THE LIGHT

how to prepare your heart for learning and sharing the gospel

Lesson 1: The Bible records the conversion of Saul to Christ three times (Acts 9, 22, 26). Please take time to read these with this and every succeeding lesson. Saul of Tarsus later became better known as Paul the apostle (Acts 13:9). The names will be used interchangeably as we move through these lessons.

The apostle Paul's eyes have been the subject of much speculation. Many believe his "thorn in the flesh" was poor eyesight (2Corinthians 12:7–9). This is based on the willingness of the Galatians to pluck out their eyes for him (Galatians 4:15).

On the road to Damascus, a great light shined upon Saul and in the light he saw Jesus. After this vision "he was three days without sight" (Acts 9:9). Christ then sent Ananias to heal him and teach him the gospel (9:17–18).

During these three dark days, what Saul did in his heart prepared him to truly "see" the light of the Gospel. The eyes of his understanding were opened (Ephesians 1:18). **What did Saul come to see when he couldn't see?** What did Paul see so that he could see the light?

PAUL SAW THAT JESUS IS THE SON OF GOD.

- Prior to this trip, Saul flatly rejected Jesus' claim to deity, being firmly convinced He was another imposter in a long line of usurpers. Saul left Jerusalem an intellectual skeptic, a hater of Jesus, and an enemy of every Christian (Acts 26:10–11).
- Saul made an amazing transformation practically overnight. He left home a Jewish Pharisee and returned a Christian missionary. He flipped from the church's fiercest opponent to its greatest proponent. He switched from arguing against Jesus as the Christ to defending His deity in the same synagogues (Acts 9:20).
- How can Saul's remarkable change be explained? When a prominent Pharisee suddenly turns his back on his religion, family, education, career, peers, and nation, there must be a reason. This conversion is a great puzzle to skeptics. They advance three dubious theories to explain it:
 - *"Saul was a liar who made up the vision entirely."* What motive would Saul have? People lie for money, but this made Paul poor (1 Corinthians 4:11). People lie for popularity, but this made Paul unpopular (4:12–13). People lie for prestige, but this made others think Paul was a "fool" (4:9, 13). People lie to avoid pain, suffering, and death, but this caused Paul all three (1 Corinthians 4:9; 2 Corinthians 11:24–25; 2 Timothy 4:6–8).
 - *"Saul was deceived by the apostles who had invented the legend of Jesus' resurrection."* Legends take time to develop, but Jesus' resurrection was taught immediately—within fifty days (Pentecost) (Acts 2:24, 32). Paul's writings show an independent thinker and an educated scholar unlikely to gullibly follow untrained fishermen and tax collectors (Acts 4:13). Paul said he received his doctrine directly from Jesus (Galatians 1:11–16) and did not even meet the apostles for three years (1:17–18).
 - *"Saul went insane with guilt for killing Stephen."* Worldly Festus, who saw religion as superstition (Acts 25:19), first made this accusation. He interrupted the apostle, asserting that much learning had made Paul "mad." Paul calmly pointed to his speech as evidence of his sanity: "I am not mad, most noble Festus; but speak forth the words of truth and soberness" (Acts 26:25). Paul's writings are not those of a madman, but reflect a structured, logical, disciplined mind. The quarter century he spent as a missionary shows a focused purpose that defies insanity. His social relationships (he mentions

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about a hundred coworkers) show one respected by peers and capable of functioning successfully in a complex world.

- The explanation of Scripture explanation is the most plausible. ***Saul changed because he saw the resurrected Jesus.*** When Jesus identified Himself (Acts 9:5), Saul, “trembling and astonished said, Lord, what wilt thou have me to do?” (9:6). The blasphemer had become a worshipper. After the empty tomb and the New Testament itself, Saul’s conversion may be the greatest proof of Christ’s deity.
- Paul saw the light because He was willing to see Jesus as the Son of God.

APPLICATIONS:

1. Paul had to acknowledge he had been wrong about Jesus all along (Acts 26:5, 9-11).
 - Do you leave behind the wrong notions about God and Jesus you had or may still have – even more are you willing to leave them behind?
 - *Will you?*
2. Paul had to acknowledge that his nation had been wrong about righteousness all along (c.f. Romans 10:1-4).
 - Do you leave behind the notion that God is concerned about which country you belong to? Or, that your country could be wrong with what God wants?
 - *Will you?*
3. Paul had to acknowledge that the religion of God will [always] be about the Righteous One – and not him, his traditions, or his nation (c.f. Acts 22:8, 14-15).
 - Do you believe the religion that is the religion from God will always be about Him alone: Not human history, not a national history, and not your personal history?
 - *Will you?*

Next Week:

Lesson 2: PAUL SAW THAT PEOPLE SHOULD LOVE PEOPLE INSTEAD OF HURT THEM.

Re-read the conversion of Paul in Acts 9, 22, 26 and think through this title.

LESSON NOTES

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Lesson 2: PAUL SAW THAT PEOPLE SHOULD LOVE PEOPLE INSTEAD OF HURT THEM.

- Judaism in Saul's time had grown violent against Christians. Even in the Maccabean period, there was plenty of examples of violence purported in the name of religion.
- But when Christians were arrested (Acts 4:3; 5:18), it was not because they had brought violence upon others. Instead, murderous plots were contemplated against them (5:33). Stephen was brought up on false charges and stoned by an angry mob (Acts 7:58–60). There was a great persecution against the church at Jerusalem (Acts 8:1). Christians were chased from city to city (Acts 9:1–2).
- And Saul joined in wholeheartedly. He gave his consent to the murder of Stephen and others (Acts 7:58; 26:10). He breathed out “threatenings and slaughter” against the disciples and “made havoc of the church” (Acts 9:1; 8:3). He dragged Christians—men and women—to prison. He punished them often in synagogues and “compelled them to blaspheme.” He was “exceedingly mad” and persecuted near and far (Acts 26:11).
- During his three days in darkness, Saul/Paul came to see that his violent life in his religion was wrong. He should love people, not hate them (John 13:34–35). He should help them, not hurt them (Galatians 6:10). He should free them, not incarcerate them (Luke 4:18). Once Saul became a Christian, he never lifted a finger against those of any other religion – even His own Jewish brothers. He taught and persuaded but never coerced or persecuted. He was willing to spend and be spent for others, even if he was not loved in return (2 Corinthians 12:15).
- Christianity is a peaceful religion. It is based on the “gospel of peace” (Romans 10:15). Jesus, the Prince of Peace (Isaiah 9:6), never raised a violent fist against another, even when assaulted (1 Peter 2:23). He never owned a sword; He never smote an enemy; He never sued a foe. His true followers today imitate His peaceful behavior (1 Peter 2:21–22). While Christians “earnestly contend for the faith” (Jude 1:3), they do so with words, not weapons. Evangelism is done by teaching and reason (Matthew 28:19), never by threat or violence. Christians seek to follow peace with all (Hebrews 12:14; Romans 12:18).
- Any religion that teaches followers to hate “unbelievers” and to force conversion by threat of physical harm does not deserve a seat at the table in the marketplace of ideas. A few have marched under a false flag and committed violence in Christ's name. The Spanish Inquisition and the Crusades come to mind. Yet these never did so at His behest, and they will face His gavel at the last tribunal (Matthew 25:31–33).

Lesson 3 – PAUL SAW THAT SIN WAS THE SOURCE OF HIS PROBLEMS.

- “Kicking against the goads” was what Paul was accused to need to resolve. He was “religious man”; He was “respected” by people of importance. But He was a sinner.
- Even when Paul called himself the “Chiefest of all sinners,” He is acknowledging the pathway through which he walked on that road to see Jesus.
- Sin is a problem we must accept in ourselves before we can truly see the light.

Lesson 4 - PAUL SAW THERE IS LIFE AFTER DEATH.

- Before Damascus, Saul held to the Pharisees' party line that the disciples had stolen Jesus' body (Matthew 28:13). After Damascus, he taught, “Why should it be thought a thing incredible with you, that God should raise the dead?” (Acts 26:8).

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- The empty tomb transformed Jesus from a martyr to a Savior. Without it, Christianity is a fraud and Christians are, at best, deluded—of all men most miserable (1 Corinthians 15:12–19). With it, Christians are also guaranteed a resurrection (15:22).
- Paul emphatically stated that “Christ is risen from the dead” (1 Corinthians 15:20). He believed the tomb was empty because he knew its former occupant. He saw Him; he heard Him; he conversed with Him. When Paul “saw Him” on the road – He knew He was alive.
- Every other religion lacks what Christianity has—a living Savior, an eternal High Priest ministering for His people in heaven.

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Lesson 5 - PAUL SAW THAT ONE RELIGION IS NOT AS GOOD AS ANOTHER.

- While Judaism was the religion of Saul’s upbringing and Jews (and even some Gentiles who “converted”) knew this religion that had come from the Old Testament from God, Paul changed that day. While what he had believed had been popular with his people, and it was monotheistic and based upon objective revelation, it was not the religion he would keep anymore.
- He was comfortable with it; he was trained in it; his family were members of it; his career and livelihood were tied to it. If anyone ever had good reason to stay in a religion, it was Saul. Yet it lacked one thing—it no longer pleased God. The whole point of religion is to pay homage to the Creator (Ecclesiastes 12:13), to be saved from sin, and to go to heaven at death (Romans 3:23; 6:23).
- Saul’s sins could not be forgiven under Judaism. Moses’ Law had been nailed to the cross (Colossians 2:14) and replaced by the gospel (Hebrews 8:6–7). The Law no longer justified (Romans 3:20) but brought a curse upon those who failed to keep even one statute (Galatians 3:10; James 2:10). Salvation now comes only through Christ (John 14:6; Acts 4:12), so Saul needed to change to Christianity to go to heaven.
- Thankfully, we enjoy both freedom of religion and speech. Yet equal access to every religion does not mean that every religion is equally valid. We must be discerning (Hebrews 5:14). Only Christianity has Christ as High Priest and Mediator (Hebrews 4:14–16; 9:24–28; 1 Timothy 2:5). Christ’s blood—the only antidote for sin—is found only in His body, the church (Ephesians 1:3, 7, 22–23).
- One religion today is not as good as another. A Christless religion is not as good as Christ’s religion (Colossians 1:18). A cult is not as good as the church (Colossians 2:8). A church teaching false doctrine is not as good as one teaching truth (John 8:31–32). A church that hurts people is not as good as one that helps people (Galatians 6:10). A dead church is not as good as a live church (Revelation 3:1). We should not be satisfied with less than the religion Jesus established, which is the church of the New Testament.

Lesson 6 - SAUL SAW THAT CONVERSION IS NOT A MIRACULOUS EXPERIENCE.

- On the Damascus road, Saul had an unrivaled religious experience. He saw the risen Savior! And the manifestation was indeed miraculous. His conversion process “began” there, but like Jesus’ resurrection, it was not completed until the third day. Why would Jesus wait three days to send Ananias to Saul?
- Christianity is a taught religion (Matthew 28:19; John 6:44–45), and a person is not taught until he understands facts and assimilates meaning. To believe, Saul needed time to process what he had seen and heard. To repent, he needed to think of the persecutions he had perpetrated and be deeply saddened over them (2 Corinthians 7:10). To convert, he needed to count the cost of a decision (Luke 14:28–32). God does not favor rash decisions (Proverbs 4:26; Psalm 119:59).

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Trembling and astonished on that roadside, he was in no condition to make such a life-altering decision.

- Christ usually dawns upon sinners as a sunrise rather than coming upon them like a thunderstorm. In reading Scripture, hearts open gradually to His love, as a rosebud opens to the warmth of the sun. Lydia's conversion (Acts 16:14–15), different from Saul's (since his involved preparing him to be an apostle, cf. Acts 1:22; 1 Corinthians 9:1; 15:8), is a typical conversion. She saw no blazing glory; she heard no heavenly voice, but the Lord opened her heart through the power of the gospel as Paul preached (Romans 1:16).

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Lesson 7 - SAUL SAW THAT FAITH manifest true PENITENCE and BAPTISM.

- Seeing is believing, and Saul saw Jesus alive. Yet the Bible does not indicate that Saul was saved on the road to Damascus. If so, for seventy-two hours, he was the most miserable "saved" man there ever was (Acts 9:9, 11). He did not rejoice, as other saved sinners did (Acts 8:39; 16:34). He had no peace with God (Romans 5:1; Colossians 3:15). He was penitent. He fasted. He agonized as he ... remembered the innocent people he had hurt ... thought of the sorrow and pain he had caused families by driving them from home ... remembered the spouses he had separated and the parents he had taken from their children ... thought of the faithful Christians he had compelled to blaspheme their Savior. He allowed not a morsel nor a drop to pass his lips. Normally going without sustenance for so long would be exhausting; but Saul did not sleep. He prayed . . . and prayed . . . and prayed.
- Jesus had told Saul that there was something he "must do" (Acts 9:6), so he waited to learn what that was. Upon arrival at the house on Straight Street, the preacher Jesus sent did not congratulate Saul on his new-found salvation or announce to him that he had successfully prayed through. Instead, Ananias asked Saul what he was waiting for: "Arise, and be baptized, and wash away thy sins, calling on the name of the Lord" (Acts 22:16). One could say, then, that Saul's sins were removed not on the road, but in the pool (cf. Mark 16:16; Acts 2:38; 1 Peter 3:21).
- After his baptism, he ate. He fellowshiped. He taught (Acts 9:19–20). His agony was over; his sins were forgiven; he was at peace; he was now a Christian.

Lesson 8 – PAUL CAME TO SEE that GOD'S PURPOSE would take Him Where he would have never imagined Paul would go.

- Seeing the vast purpose God had before Paul, the other Apostles and the church was something a finite mind could not see without help. And when Paul was blinded, and then His eyes opened, there was many things that God would show Paul.
- And into the all the world in one generation?
- How is that even possible?
- We must open our eyes to the possibilities of where we can really take the gospel.

Lesson 9 – PAUL CAME TO SEE THAT GOD'S PURPOSE would like HIM to SUFFER.

- That He would suffer was made plain to him by God from the outset.
- Paul preached to early disciples they would suffer (Acts 14:23ff)..
- Peter wrote to early disciples that they would suffer (1Peter 4).