

# Confronted by the Gospel of Jesus

**SESSION IN A SENTENCE:** Jesus confronts unbelievers to trust in Him and calls them to live on mission for Him as part of His church.

**BACKGROUND PASSAGE:** Acts 9:1-30

Thank God that He periodically stops us in our tracks! Not every disruption we experience in life is a force of evil sent to derail believers. Every now and then, the interruption is God directing us toward our life's mission as Christians.

God is also able and willing to stop unbelievers in their tracks. No shell so thick, no sin so big, no guilt so deep can prevent God from breaking through and interrupting a sinner's plans and steps. No one—even those most inoculated against or most hostile to the claims of Christianity—is outside the reach of our Lord. Yet God is so kind that He will not conquer by force that which He does not first confront by grace.



How has God used unusual circumstances in your life to clarify His call and purpose for your life?

# Group Time

## Point 1: Confronted by the Savior (Acts 9:3-9)

<sup>3</sup> As he traveled and was nearing Damascus, a light from heaven suddenly flashed around him. <sup>4</sup> Falling to the ground, he heard a voice saying to him, “Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?”

<sup>5</sup> “Who are you, Lord?” Saul said. “I am Jesus, the one you are persecuting,” he replied. <sup>6</sup> “But get up and go into the city, and you will be told what you must do.”

<sup>7</sup> The men who were traveling with him stood speechless, hearing the sound but seeing no one. <sup>8</sup> Saul got up from the ground, and though his eyes were open, he could see nothing. So they took him by the hand and led him into Damascus. <sup>9</sup> He was unable to see for three days and did not eat or drink.

In Acts 9 we learn a lesson about the prevailing power of heaven, the deliberate movement of God, and the humility of humanity in response. Saul had garnered favor among the religious rulers and acquired clout for his audacious threats against the church, but when the time was right, a sudden light from heaven and the voice of the risen Savior forever changed Saul’s life. Jesus called the one persecuting Him to come to Him in faith and obey.

**Calling:** The calling of God to salvation happens in two ways: externally through the proclamation of the \_\_\_\_\_ and internally through the \_\_\_\_\_ working in the heart of the person who hears. Both of these callings are \_\_\_\_\_, and both work together to bring someone to faith in Christ.

Saul did not think his reign of terror on the fledgling church was a war waged against God Himself, that is until the resurrected Jesus named Himself as the subject of Saul’s terrorism. Jesus is the head of the church, and He will stand up for His body. Yet while Jesus could have confronted Saul with force to kill and judge this persecutor, He confronted Saul with grace instead. He loved this religious zealot by confronting him, stopping him in his tracks, and calling him to join His church and mission.



What are some reasons we might consider people unqualified to be called by God?

## Point 2: Called for a Mission (Acts 9:10-16)

<sup>10</sup> There was a disciple in Damascus named Ananias, and the Lord said to him in a vision, “Ananias.” “Here I am, Lord,” he replied.

<sup>11</sup> “Get up and go to the street called Straight,” the Lord said to him, “to the house of Judas, and ask for a man from Tarsus named Saul, since he is praying there. <sup>12</sup> In a vision he has seen a man named Ananias coming in and placing his hands on him so that he may regain his sight.”

<sup>13</sup> “Lord,” Ananias answered, “I have heard from many people about this man, how much harm he has done to your saints in Jerusalem. <sup>14</sup> And he has authority here from the chief priests to arrest all who call on your name.” <sup>15</sup> But the Lord said to him, “Go, for this man is my chosen instrument to take my name to Gentiles, kings, and Israelites. <sup>16</sup> I will show him how much he must suffer for my name.”

God’s providence works in ways unexpected by us as He accomplishes His plan to reach the world with the gospel. With Saul, the Lord would call a Jewish zealot to commit himself to sharing the good news of Jesus with non-Jewish people. A rigorous Pharisee would now count his pedigree as trash in comparison to knowing the gospel truth he would proclaim to Jews and Gentiles alike (Phil. 3:3-11). But first, the Lord would use the people Saul came to persecute to become his teachers, his supporters, and his safety net.



What are some unexpected ways you have seen God work in your life or the lives of others?

The Lord told Ananias to go to Saul so that Saul could go to the Jews and the Gentiles with the gospel of Jesus. But Ananias was fearful of the man who had been sent to arrest and punish Christians. Perhaps Ananias could have understood a call to go rebuke and announce condemnation upon Saul, but he was being sent because God had plans to draft Saul, a top persecutor, as a top pick for the next extension of the gospel mission. God had a calling for both Ananias and Saul, and both would need to obey and go in spite of the suffering to come.



What are some ways believers may experience suffering as a part of their calling?

## Point 3: United with Believers (Acts 9:17-20)

<sup>17</sup> Ananias went and entered the house. He placed his hands on him and said, “Brother Saul, the Lord Jesus, who appeared to you on the road you were traveling, has sent me so that you may regain your sight and be filled with the Holy Spirit.”

<sup>18</sup> At once something like scales fell from his eyes, and he regained his sight. Then he got up and was baptized. <sup>19</sup> And after taking some food, he regained his strength.

Saul was with the disciples in Damascus for some time. <sup>20</sup> Immediately he began proclaiming Jesus in the synagogues: “He is the Son of God.”

Ananias is not widely featured in the New Testament, appearing only here in the Scriptures, but Acts 9 suggests that he was a **tipping-point Christian** nonetheless. Ananias’s obedience to the strange call of God unleashed the mission to the Gentiles and resulted in the Bible books of Ephesians, Galatians, Romans, and more later written by Saul. This seemingly small step of faith blessed a man, the church, and the world.

Of all the terms Ananias could have chosen to describe Saul, he chose one that reflected his own faith that what God said about Saul was true—he called Saul “brother”! Saul, who was the angel of death, was now called a close intimate relative. Only the gospel can do that, truly. These two people had little in common to bring them into a unified mission, except that the Lord Jesus had called both of them into His grace and salvation. Thank God that He unites us with other believers in His church. We all need brothers and sisters who welcome, encourage, and show us the way of faith.



### Voices from Church History

“We who formerly hated and murdered one another and did not even share our hearth with those of a different tribe because of their customs, now, after Christ’s appearance, live together and share the same table. Now we pray for our enemies and try to win those who hate us.”<sup>1</sup>

—Justin Martyr (c. 100-165)

**Unity of the Church:** Christ’s desire for the church is that we be united as one in Him by the \_\_\_\_\_, reflecting the oneness of our trinitarian God. As such, we are to allow for no divisions to separate us, such as ethnicity, socioeconomics, nationality, language, politics, or secondary doctrinal beliefs, but to celebrate the \_\_\_\_\_ of God’s people made one in Christ.



What are some ways believers can demonstrate their unity in Christ with other believers?

# My Mission

Because we were once estranged from God but are now His children through Jesus, we pray for the salvation of others with full confidence that God can transform even the hardest heart.

- **What has God spoken to your heart through Saul’s conversion that will motivate you to belief and action?**
- **What are some ways your group/ church should welcome and minister to new believers?**
- **For whom will you pray regularly that God will call him or her to salvation and reach with His grace?**



## Voices from Church History

“For this passage indicates the ardent desire that Christ has for the salvation of all humankind, revealed and proclaimed to all—especially in seeking the lost sheep ... This brings us consolation intertwined with instruction, that we should work rather to save sinners than to destroy them, and not follow those who, when glorying in their fervent zeal of God’s glory, rashly reject and condemn all those whom they see once to have swerved from the way of truth.”<sup>2</sup>

—Rudolf Gwalther (1519-1586)

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# Daily Study

## Day 1: Read Acts 9:1-9

God can change you. I know what you're thinking: You don't know me. You have no idea how far from God I am. That may be true. I probably don't know you. What I do know is that no one is beyond the reach of our Lord.

Your rebellion should one day fall exhausted at the feet of Jesus. You don't have enough rebellion to outrun God's grace to forgive you. So, admit it and believe it: The resurrected Jesus knows you. He is not afraid of or put off by your rebellion. The fact that you are reading these lines is evidence that He has arranged your meeting. The call of this passage is for the willful surrender of your life to His work. Give God what He wants, friend. You don't need to be knocked to the ground to realize that the resurrected Jesus is in control. Just read Saul's story and submit to God's great call.

If you have already submitted to God's call of salvation through faith in Jesus, then marvel at the grace of God to reach out to sinners—enemies. Such were you and I, once upon a time, and so are all those who are far from God now. God's grace reached you, and it can reach others through you too.



What areas of your life need to be surrendered willfully to Jesus Christ today?



### Voices from Church History

"In every true conversion the will of man comes into line with the will of God."<sup>3</sup>

—Billy Graham (1918–2018)

## Day 2: Read Acts 9:10-16

Do you wholeheartedly believe that God can change your worst enemy? Try not to answer too quickly. By change, I do not mean that God makes them like you but that God can fashion them for His service whether you like the finished product or not.

I recently read of an elderly woman who had to move from her longtime residence. She was encouraged by the memories of a great life with her husband and children in that space. Simultaneously, she was broken by having to discard treasures that appeared to be trash to everyone else. Those old cups and bowls—they were to her what they were to no one else: priceless.

In the kingdom of God, both the commissioner and the commissioned are valuable vessels in the hands of God. To some we appear to be trash, but in the hands of God, we are treasure. Ananias was changed, elevated beyond his fear and misconceptions, when God called him to lay hands on Saul. Furthermore, Saul would soon be rejected by the religious elite and viewed with suspicion by the fledgling church. Yet these two were connected by the promise of the gospel: God can change anybody, even the people who already think they've been transformed.



Have you told God no lately? What limits have you placed on God's call for your life? Repent and pray about that right now.

## Day 3: Read Acts 9:17-20

One act of radical obedience can advance the gospel. We know that. What we might struggle with is how little prominence or credit we might receive in the transaction of our obedience. Aim to be the kind of Christian who can play a bigger role in God's grand narrative even if you have a smaller part. Ananias does not get many lines on the pages of Scripture, but about half of the New Testament comes from the pen of the man God used him to commission. We need more people willing to serve like Ananias, more agents of confirmation to those whom God has called. You too can devote your life to the obscure assignments of God while knowing He will accomplish His will through you in an exponential way.



What act of obedience is God expecting of you today?

## Day 4: Read Acts 9:21-25

Is gospel transformation evident in your life? Our progress in the gospel should be identifiable, both as individuals and as churches. We recently ordained some leaders in our church. I was taken especially by this last group—a mix of professions, age, and, best of all, backgrounds. The church represents Christ well when the change we demonstrate is authentic and antithetical to the lives we once lived. These new deacons serving the church testifies to the great and awesome power of God to change the human heart. This is especially the case for those who knew them before they came to Christ in faith, whether believers in the church or unbelievers in the world.

Now imagine the Christians in Damascus; surely they were dumbfounded and amazed at what they witnessed from Saul. And the Jewish religious establishment was angry. By its genuine force, may your Christian witness encourage the church and threaten the comfort of those who are enemies of the cross of Christ.



How are you encouraging the church? How are you causing unbelievers to evaluate the claims of Christ?

## Day 5: Read Acts 9:26-30

Everybody needs a Barnabas. I pray that my children have several of them across their lifetime. Barnabas's name means "son of encouragement." Who was and is willing to take a chance on you? Who has stood to vouch for and support your ministry? Even better, for whom are you willing to take a risk and support their ministry? Who can count on you for encouragement? Part of our devotion to God is devotion to one another. We honor the head of the church—Jesus Christ—as we care for His body and its members—the church. We see this truth illustrated in how the early church cared for its very recent antagonist. If not for the grace of God demonstrated through Ananias or the affirming power of God as demonstrated through Barnabas, we would have no apostle Paul. Be a Barnabas!



What person has God placed in your life for whom you need to affirm their sense of calling or ministry?



# Encourage One Another

*Join together with 2-4 people from your group, or with your family, sometime during the week to reflect on the session and to share how God is working and you are responding.*

Share your thoughts and reflections on the truths from Scripture in this session:

- Confronted by the Savior (Acts 9:3-9)
- Called for a Mission (Acts 9:10-16)
- United with Believers (Acts 9:17-20)



How have you responded to these truths from Scripture?



When have you seen someone who was known to be antagonistic toward the gospel become a radically transformed follower of Jesus?



What can we do to help remind one another that no sinner on earth is beyond God's saving reach?

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2. Martin Luther, quoted in *The Oxford Handbook of Martin Luther's Theology*, eds. Robert Kolb, Irene Dingle, and Lubomír Batka (OUP Oxford, 2014) [eBook].
3. St. Basil the Great, *On the Holy Spirit*, trans. David Anderson (Crestwood, NY: St Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1980), 97.

## SESSION 2

1. A. W. Tozer, *How to Be Filled with the Holy Spirit, in Life in the Spirit* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2009), 24.
2. Andrew Murray, in *Andrew Murray On Prayer* (Whitaker House, 1998) [eBook].

## CHRISTMAS SESSION

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## SESSION 3

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2. Jen Wilkin, *None Like Him* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2016) [eBook].
3. Karen H. Jobes, *1 Peter*, in *Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2005) [Wordsearch].

## SESSION 4

1. Jerry Bridges, *The Pursuit of Holiness* (Colorado Springs, CO: NavPress, 2006), 111.
2. David Platt, "Is Your Definition of Faith Biblical?" *Radical*, July 27, 2018, [radical.net/is-your-definition-of-faith-biblical](http://radical.net/is-your-definition-of-faith-biblical).
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3. Timothy Keller, *Generous Justice* (New York: Riverhead Books, 2010), 91.

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