

Living Word Small Group Study Guide

April 19-April 25, 2020

Sermon Series: This Changes Everything

Week Seven: “From Saul to Paul”

Study groups can choose to use the daily Scripture readings and associated questions from either the current or previous week’s Daily Study Guide, or to focus on the Scripture reading from Sunday’s sermon. This study guide delves more deeply into the Scripture from the Sunday sermon.

Suggested Opening Prayer:

Both the opening and closing prayer are offered as suggestions. Feel free to offer spontaneous prayer instead.

O God, who through the grace of Your Holy Spirit pours the gift of love into the hearts of Your faithful people, grant us health, both of mind and body, that we might love You with our whole strength, and with glad hearts might perform those things which are pleasing to You. Through Jesus Christ our Lord, Amen.

Sermon Series Theme:

Throughout the Gospels we find that when people encountered Jesus they were changed, and for the better. That same transformation is available to you, a change for the better, when you encounter Christ in your life.

This Week’s Sermon Theme:

From a zealot opposing Christ to a zealot for Christ, Saul’s nature doesn’t change – but his predisposition does. Where do your passions lie? How can you allow Christ to use your passions to change the life of another?

Sunday Scripture Reading: Acts 9:1-7 (A group member should read the passage aloud)

For Group Discussion:

What does the text actually SAY?

The goal of this discussion is to make sure group members understand the actual content of the passage.

What are Saul’s initial intentions toward the Christian disciples? (9:1)

Why does Saul go to the high priest? (9:2)

What name are followers of Jesus known by at this time? (9:2)

What town was Saul approaching when he saw a blinding light? (9:3)

What question did Saul hear while he fell to the ground? (9:4)

How does Saul address the speaker whose voice he hears? (9:5)

Who does the speaker say he is? (9:5)

What is the first command the speaker gives to Saul? (9:6)

Will Saul be asked to do more beyond this first command? (9:6)

How do the men traveling with Saul react to all this? (9:7)

What questions does the text raise for us?

The goal of this discussion is to allow group members to respond to their own emotions and reactions related to the passage. Questions are suggestions, but open discussion is encouraged. These are "I wonder" questions that the group might want to pursue together.

We might wonder, why was Saul angry enough about the Christian movement to make "murderous threats"?

We might also wonder what kind of authority the high priest had that would allow Saul to actually take members of the movement as prisoners.

We could wonder just how we are to picture this scene – how bright WAS this light? In verse 8 it seems to have blinded Saul but not the other men with him. Was it somehow brighter to him than to them?

We might wonder why Saul would address the speaker as "Lord," when he didn't know who it was, and when he certainly did not acknowledge Jesus as Lord at this time. Who did he THINK was speaking?

Certainly a major question we could have would be, why on earth would Jesus recruit someone so vehemently opposed to Him to become His spokesperson?

Finally, we could easily wonder what kind of conversation Saul and the other men had as they led him the rest of the way to Damascus!

Commentary on the text:

The goal of this section is to provide further background that provides context for the content of the passage.

See also: Acts 7:58-8:1; Exodus 19:16; Ezekiel 1:4-14; Daniel 10:6; Luke 9:29; 1 Corinthians 9:1; 1 Corinthians 15:8; Galatians 1:15-16; Acts 22:9; Acts 26:13

Saul had previously been seen in the story in Acts briefly, as an approving witness at the stoning of Stephen in Acts 7:58-8:1. Now, he emerges as the person who will dominate the rest of the book. He is still vehemently opposed to the Christian movement, even taking the initiative to get authority from Jewish leaders to go to Damascus to take prisoners. Historically, it isn't actually clear that the chief priest had these kinds of powers of extradition – but as the story of Stephen's stoning shows, the Jewish leadership sometimes pushed their actual powers to the limit in their attempts to extinguish the movement. But it is also possible that the Roman government would have seen this as a religious matter

they did not care to get involved in, and allowed the high priest to demand that synagogue leaders elsewhere send members violating religious law back to Jerusalem for a religious trial.

It is also interesting that nowhere has Luke, the author of Acts, described the spread of Christianity from Jerusalem to Damascus, where Saul is headed to arrest Christians. From the story itself, we might be surprised to read that there are Christians in Damascus, since we have only read about Christians in Jerusalem and beginning to spread into Samaria. What this implies is that the author, Luke, has been selective in determining what parts of the story he will write about! Acts clearly is not an all-inclusive description of the spread of the gospel – we are to understand that the movement is already spreading throughout the region, even to places Luke never writes about!

The bright flash of light that Saul experiences is a typical sign of theophanies (appearances of God) in both the Old and New Testaments. Flashes of lightning accompany God's appearance on Mount Sinai (Exodus 19:16), in Ezekiel's vision of God (Ezekiel 1:4-14), in Daniel's vision of God (Daniel 10:6), and at the Transfiguration of Jesus in Luke 9:29. Clearly, Saul himself recognizes that what is happening is an appearance of God, calling the speaker "Lord," the language of addressing God. While Saul may not realize yet that Jesus IS Lord, he recognizes that he is involved in a theophany! For students of Scripture, even the words spoken to Saul are recognizable as the voice of God. The words recall the voice of God speaking to Moses from the burning bush in Exodus 3:3! There, it is "Moses! Moses!", while here, it is "Saul! Saul!"

When the voice replies, "I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting," it is clear that the risen Christ is still an active character in the story! The voice does not say, "I am the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob," or "I am who I am," but "I am Jesus." The statement reinforces the Resurrection of Jesus, and the belief that Jesus is still alive and present with the church in a new and unique way. What's more, the modifying phrase "whom you are persecuting" reveals the way the risen Christ personally identifies with the church itself. It is the CHURCH that Saul has been persecuting – and yet Jesus says, "you are persecuting ME!"

The point of this theophany, though, is not to reveal new information about Jesus, but to give Saul a commission. For now, Saul is simply to get up and complete his journey to Damascus – but it is clear that upon his arrival, there will be much more to his assignment. When we compare Saul's theophany and Jesus' accompanying words of command to the experiences of Ezekiel and Daniel noted earlier, we see that just as their theophanies were part of a call to serve God as prophets, in the same way Saul is now being called by Jesus to serve as HIS prophet. It is clear from the writings of Saul himself (later known as Paul) that he understood his experience in these terms. He knows and believes the experience was an encounter with the risen Christ (see 1 Corinthians 9:1, 15:8, and Galatians 1:15-16). Furthermore, he acknowledges the authority and power implicit in the encounter – His voice says "Get up and go!", and he gets up and goes!

It would be remiss not to point out that the details of this encounter differ as they are reported in three different places in Acts. Here, Paul's companions hear the voice, but see nothing, while in Acts 22:9, in telling the story to the crowds in Jerusalem, Paul says his companions "saw the light, but they did not understand the voice!" Similarly, in Acts 26:13, in telling the story to King Agrippa, Paul suggests that the light fell on all of them, but only he even heard the voice. There, Paul says they ALL fell to the ground in awe, whereas in the earlier versions, it is only Paul who does so. Although the details themselves vary, the fact that the story is told three times in Acts vividly demonstrates how important

the episode was to the early church's testimony. That the church's biggest persecutor could not stop the movement, but was in fact transformed into its biggest advocate was proof of the power of God in the risen Christ. The crucified Messiah was indeed Lord – and a personal encounter with Him was so powerful that it utterly transformed the life of Jesus' strongest opponent.

Final Thoughts for Discussion:

The goal of this section is to get people thinking and talking about how the passage should affect their behavior after they leave the group.

Have you had a "road to Damascus" moment personally? Some people can point to a certain moment when they know they encountered Christ and came to faith, while others have grown up in the faith and can't always identify a specific moment. If you are in the latter group, can you point to a time when you felt particularly close to Christ?

Are you ever skeptical of people who seem to be utterly changed by their claim of an encounter with Jesus? What do you think gives rise to such skepticism? Why do we have trouble believing people can change in a deep way? Think about idioms like "a tiger can't change its stripes."

How is your answer to the previous question nuanced by the fact that Paul's PASSION didn't change, but what he was passionate ABOUT changed?

Can you identify things about yourself that you know are deeply different from how you used to be? If so, can you draw a correlation between those changes and your faith in Christ? If not, can you identify things you wish would change?

If the answer to the previous question was "yes," have you shared your story of transformation with anyone? One of the biggest things Paul had to overcome was his deep shame over who he used to be. He always found it necessary to include in his testimony the embarrassing fact that he had been a persecutor of Jesus (see, for example, 1 Corinthians 15:8, Galatians 1:11-17, Philippians 3:6, 1 Timothy 1:13). His past made his testimony all the more difficult for people to accept. Have you ever worried that your past would make your witness difficult to believe?

Or, conversely, have you ever worried that your past is too scandalous for Christ to truly transform? If so, what hope do you find in the story of Saul's transformation into Paul?

Are you open to Jesus using your story of transformation, in unison with your passions, to change the life of another person?

Suggested Closing Prayer:

Holy and loving God, open us to the possibility of change. Transform our hearts to reflect Your heart, and our goals into Your goals. Then, lead us into the places where our passions and the world's needs intersect. Send us, as people truly changed by Your love, into world-changing mission. In the name of Jesus Christ, Amen.