



Walking Through the Scripture Together

May 4 - 10, 2008

Acts 9:1-19

## Kicking against the goads

**Text** Acts 9:1-19 (TNIV)

**1** Meanwhile, Saul was still breathing out murderous threats against the Lord's disciples. He went to the high priest **2** and asked him for letters to the synagogues in Damascus, so that if he found any there who belonged to the Way, whether men or women, he might take them as prisoners to Jerusalem. **3** As he neared Damascus on his journey, suddenly a light from heaven flashed around him. **4** He fell to the ground and heard a voice say to him, "Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?"

**5** "Who are you, Lord?" Saul asked.

"I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting," he replied. **6** "Now get up and go into the city, and you will be told what you must do."

**7** The men traveling with Saul stood there speechless; they heard the sound but did not see anyone. **8** Saul got up from the ground, but when he opened his eyes he could see nothing. So they led him by the hand into Damascus. **9** For three days he was blind, and did not eat or drink anything.

**10** In Damascus there was a disciple named Ananias. The Lord called to him in a vision, "Ananias!"

"Yes, Lord," he answered.

**11** The Lord told him, "Go to the house of Judas on Straight Street and ask for a man from Tarsus named Saul, for he is praying. **12** In a vision he has seen a man named Ananias come and place his hands on him to restore his sight."

**13** "Lord," Ananias answered, "I have heard many reports about this man and all the harm he has done to your people in Jerusalem. **14** And he has come here with authority from the chief priests to arrest all who call on your name."

**15** But the Lord said to Ananias, "Go! This man is my chosen instrument to proclaim my name to the Gentiles and their kings and to the people of Israel. **16** I will show him how much he must suffer for my name."

**17** Then Ananias went to the house and entered it. Placing his hands on Saul, he said, "Brother Saul, the Lord—Jesus, who appeared to you on the road as you were coming here—has sent me so that you may see again and be filled with the Holy Spirit." **18** Immediately, something like scales fell from Saul's eyes, and he could see again. He got up and was baptized, **19** and after taking some food, he regained his strength.

### Thought

Suddenly Saul's world turned upside down and inside out. Terror, ruin, shame, awe, horror, glory and terror again swept over him. Years later he would write of seeing "the glory of God in the face of Jesus the Messiah"...it confirmed everything Saul had been taught; it overturned everything Saul had been taught. The law and the prophets had come true; the law and the prophets had been torn to pieces and put back together in a totally new way. It was a new world; it was the old world made explicit. It showed him that the God he had loved from childhood, the God for whose glory he had been so righteously indignant, the God in whose name and for whose honour he was busy rounding up those who were declaring that Jesus of Nazareth was Israel's Messiah, that he was risen from the dead, that he was the Lord of the world...it showed him that the God he had been right to serve, right to study, right to seek in prayer, the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, had done what he had always said he would, but done it in a shocking, scandalous, horrifying way. The God who had always promised to come and rescue his people had done so in person. In the person of Jesus.

And Saul sank to the ground, blinded by the light, with the words ringing in his head. "I am Jesus, and you are persecuting me." *Me?* Somehow these men and women Saul was dragging off to prison were Jesus' people; his family; his own extended self. It was all too much. They led him by the hand and brought him to Damascus. It was three days before he could do anything except recoil from the horror of what had happened and gasp at its glory. We call this event a "conversion," but it was more like a volcanic eruption, thunderstorm and tidal wave all coming together. If the death and resurrection of Jesus is the hinge on which the great door of history swung open at last, the conversion of Saul of Tarsus was the moment when all the ancient promises of God gathered themselves up, rolled themselves into a ball, and came hurtling through the open door and out into the wide world beyond.

**NT Wright**, Acts for Everyone

## Small Group Discussion Guide

### Lean In

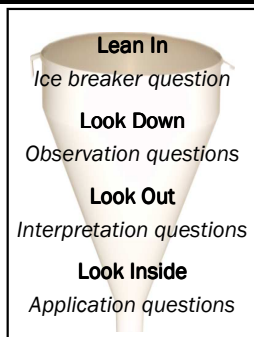
- Share a time when you had a major “wake up call” in life. What happened?

### Look Down / Look Out

- What do you think was driving Saul’s obsession to obliterate Christianity?
- Take a moment to take in the whole scene of Saul’s encounter with Jesus. Watch it unfold. What does Saul see? What does he do? What does he hear? What does he say? What do you think was going through his mind at this moment of sudden revelation?
- Which of the following do you think best describes Saul’s state during his three days of blindness: a. humbled; b. terrified; c. confused; d. remorseful; e. angry; f. repentant or \_\_\_\_\_
- What mission does Jesus give to Ananias? How does Ananias respond to Jesus’ orders?
- What is the most significant thing that happened when Ananias came to see Saul?

### Look Inside

- How did the Lord first get your attention? Was it something dramatic or much more subtle? What call have you heard upon your life?
- Who has been an Ananias in your life — someone who risked helping you in your spiritual journey?
- Is there anyone around you know to whom you are afraid to reach out? What can help you overcome that fear?



## Family Discussion Guide

### Day One Acts 9:1-2; Acts 26:9-11 (James 1:26-27)

What is it that can make people imprison, beat, or even kill others in God’s name? What is the real meaning of true, godly religion?

### Day Two Acts 9:3-6; Acts 26:16-18

After all the terrible things Saul had done, why does the Lord show mercy to him? Was this fair to the people he had hurt? How easy is it for you to show mercy to others?

### Day Three Acts 9:7-9; 1 Timothy 1:12-14

What do you usually do when you realize that you did or said something really wrong? Do you hide? Make excuses? Deny it? Own up to it? Or what? Why?

### Day Four Acts 9:10-14

Why do you think it was hard for Ananias to go to Saul? When is it hard for you to reach out to someone who needs help? What can make us afraid to?

### Day Five Acts 9:15-19

What difference did Ananias make in Saul’s life? What do you think was the most important thing that happened to Saul during Ananias’ visit?

How can you make a difference in someone’s life today as Ananias did?

## Looking Closer

### Inside the Mind of Saul of Tarsus

The past generation of commentators, particularly those of the English-speaking world, often read...a mental and spiritual struggle on the part of Saul that was, either consciously or unconsciously, fighting fervently against the logic of the early Christians’ preaching, the dynamic quality of their lives, and their fortitude under oppression. Therefore his “breathing out murderous threats” was taken as his attempt to slay externally the dragons of doubt he could not silence within his own heart. But the day of the psychological interpretation of Paul’s conversion experience appears to be over, and deservedly so. Indeed, Luke connects historically the martyrdom of Stephen, the persecution of the Hellenistic Jewish Christians, and the conversion of Saul.

It is, of course, impossible to speak with certainty about what was going on in Saul’s subconscious mind at the time, for psychoanalysis two millennia later is hardly a fruitful exercise. His own references as a Christian to this earlier time in his life do not require us to view him as struggling with uncertainty, doubt, and guilt before becoming a Christian. They rather suggest that humanly speaking, he was immune to the Christian proclamation and immensely satisfied with his own ancestral faith. While he looked forward to the full realization of the hope of Israel, Paul seems from his reminiscences of those earlier days to have been thoroughly satisfied with the revelation of God that was given through Moses and to have counted it his chief delight to worship God through those revealed forms. Nor need we suppose that the logic of the early Christian preachers greatly affected Paul. His later references to “the offense of the cross” show that for him the cross was the great stumbling block to any acknowledgment of Jesus of Nazareth as Israel’s Messiah—a stumbling block no amount of logic or verbal gymnastics could remove.



## details, details...

### Breathing out threats and murder

In days when the rabbis viewed the keeping of the Mosaic law as the vitally important prerequisite for the coming of the Messianic Age, Paul could validate his actions against the Christians by reference to such godly precedents as (1) Moses’ slaying of the immoral Israelites at Baal Peor (cf. Nu 25:1-5); (2) Phinehas’s slaying of the Israelite man and Midianite woman in the plains of Moab (cf. Nu 25:6-15); and (3) the actions of the Maccabees and the Hasidim in rooting out apostasy among the people. With such precedents and parallels, coupled with the rising tide of messianic expectation within Israel, Saul could very well have felt justified in mounting a further persecution against the Christians.

### Damascus

Damascus was a large and thriving commercial center at the foot of the Anti-Lebanon mountain range. Since 64 B.C. it had been part of the Roman province of Syria and was granted certain civic rights by Rome as one of the ten cities of eastern Syria and the Transjordan called the Decapolis. It had a large Jewish population.

### Saul, Saul

It was common in antiquity for a person in a formal setting to be addressed by the repetition of his name. Saul understood the voice to be a message from God himself, for to the rabbis to hear a voice from heaven connoted a rebuke or a word of instruction from God. Therefore when the voice went on to ask the question “Why do you persecute me?” Saul was without doubt thoroughly confused. He was not persecuting God! Rather, he was defending God and his laws!

### Street called “Straight”

Straight Street was an east-west street and is still one of the main thoroughfares of Damascus.