

WHO ARE WE REACHING?



STUDY 2

Reaching through Barriers (Acts 9:1-19)

“Saul’s conversion teaches that the gospel message isn’t only for “the right kind of person”. Saul was deeply opposed to Jesus and deeply committed to his own path, but none of that stopped God’s plan. God works through all kinds of people and situations to bring people to himself.”

The Jesus Bible commentary

At this time of the early Church, there was probably no opponent to Christianity that seemed more dangerous to followers of Jesus than Saul of Tarsus. It was his mission, as a deeply devout Jew and the strictest of Pharisees, to protect God’s honour and remove any spread of what he considered to be false teaching. His figure is darkly present in the stoning of Stephen in Acts 7. Saul was undoubtedly seen as a barrier to the spread of the Gospel and a direct threat to Christians.

With the growing spread of Christianity, Saul’s work had to expand beyond Jerusalem. Under the authority of the high priest, Saul traveled to Damascus to capture more followers of Jesus. It was as Saul was traveling to Damascus with this singular mission that he had a shocking and direct encounter with Jesus Christ, Messiah. Saul’s conversion serves as an encouraging reminder that even those most hostile to Christianity can be reached with the love of Christ Jesus.

Read Together:

Acts 9:1-19 (NIV): *Meanwhile, Saul was still breathing out murderous threats against the Lord’s disciples. He went to the high priest 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. As he neared Damascus on his journey, suddenly a light from heaven flashed around him. He fell to the ground and heard a voice say to him, “Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?” “Who are you, Lord?” Saul asked. “I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting,” he replied. “Now get up and go into the city, and you will be told what you must do.” The men traveling with Saul stood there speechless; they heard the sound but did not see anyone. 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. For three days he was blind, and did not eat or drink anything. In Damascus there was a disciple named Ananias. The Lord called to him in a vision, “Ananias!” “Yes, Lord,” he answered. 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. In a vision he has seen a man named Ananias come and place his hands on him to restore his sight.” “Lord,” Ananias answered, “I have heard many reports about this man and all the harm he has done to your holy people in Jerusalem. And he has come here with authority from the chief priests to arrest all who call on your name.” 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. I will show him how much he must suffer for my name.” 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.” Immediately, something like scales fell from Saul’s eyes, and he could see again. He got up and was baptized, and after taking some food, he regained his strength. Saul spent several days with the disciples in Damascus.*

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Explore Together:

1. Explosive Encounter (Acts 9:1-6) - *“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 that open door and out into the wide world beyond.” N.T. Wright*

Discuss: Not all conversions are this dramatic. Yet each and every time a human being encounters Jesus Christ, the King of kings, it carries explosive significance. Share your own experience of facing the reality that Jesus, the incarnate God, loves you and wants to be your Saviour and Lord.

2. Radical Transformation (Acts 9:7-9) - In some ways, Saul’s seemingly instant flip from a devout persecutor of Christians to a devout Christian, might be difficult to grasp. Yet in so many ways he was ready to meet Jesus. He was, after all, a serious lover of God. Because he already loved the LORD, when he realised that Jesus was Lord, his only response was to repent. (Romans 10:9)

Many religions revere God but completely miss who Jesus is. “Islam denies the death, deity, and resurrection of Jesus. Jesus has to be God, he has to die on the cross and then rise from the dead, for Christianity to be true... The death of Jesus is the most solid fact, historically speaking, and that, alone, challenges the truth of the Qu’ran.” Nabeel Qu’reshi

Discuss: Consider the testimonies of once-devout Muslims (such as Nabeel Qu’reshi) who became Christians because a committed friend saw what looked like an insurmountable barrier as, actually, a bridge to the full truth of the triune God. How might you see barriers more as bridges in your friendships with those who seem to be antagonistic toward Christians?

3. Reluctant Outreach (Acts 9:10-16) - This is the only mention of Ananias in scripture. We know his name but we know so little about him. All that we really know is that he listened to God and then obeyed. And he continues to be a source of encouragement and inspiration to followers today, people who want to dare to reach through barriers to those who might seem unreachable — those who look down in disgust upon people of any faith, those who are hateful toward followers of Jesus Christ, those who are enemies of the cross of Christ.

Discuss: What fears might have gripped Ananias as he walked to meet Paul? Describe a time you struggled with obeying God when you knew you needed to reach across barriers even when it carried risk. How was Ananias able to obey God? How are we able to obey?

4. Astounding Acceptance (9:17-19) - “Brother Saul!” These are the astonishing first words that Ananias spoke to Saul. And he said them as he laid his hands on Saul as he would do with any brother in Christ. Then, with no evidence of fear, Ananias ministered to Paul, meeting his very obvious needs.

Discuss: What were Saul’s immediate needs, both physical AND relational/spiritual? How was Ananias able to set his fears aside and minister to this new brother in Christ? Discuss the significance of the somewhat understated final statement in this passage — “Saul spent several days with the disciples in Damascus.”

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Pray Together:

Oh, Lord! Some days we are heavy-hearted about the state of humanity with so many pockets around the globe that are hostile to Christianity.

Give us Your eyes and Your heart to truly see the deep void beneath the hostility.

*Spirit of God, please help us to build bridges that dissolve barriers so that the message of salvation reaches each precious soul.
Amen*

SUGGESTED RESOURCES:

- **Book:** Tom Wright - *Acts for Everyone: Parts 1 & 2*
- **Book:** Timothy Keller & John Inazu - *Uncommon Ground: Living Faithfully in a World of Difference*
- **Book:** Nabeel Qu'reshi - *Seeking Allah, Finding Jesus*
- **Book:** Richard J. Mouw - *Uncommon Decency: Christian Civility in an Uncivil World.*
- **Video:** *Why a Hindu Priest Left the Religion to Follow Christ;* <https://youtu.be/09n8WRCcb78?si=qKObO3STVVe9t6eD>