

SAUL OF TARSUS, UNLIKELY APOSTLE

Rashona was in the library, signing copies of her first published children's book. There were a handful of people in line, but she noticed one young girl was standing off to the side with her head down.

There was just something in her demeanor, the way she held her head, the way she occupied her space—or tried not to. Rashona wondered if the girl had faced some of the same messages she had internalized as a Black child, teen, and young adult.

When she was young, she had been called names because of her skin color, by both Black and white people. And as she grew, Rashona was often slighted too. She noticed that people often spoke first to her white coworkers or seemed not to hear her. As she looked around at the world—advertising, culture, and her own experiences—the message often portrayed Black skin as something short of “pretty.”

Over time, the Lord showed her that He was with her in the pain. Other women spoke words of life and healing to her as they guided her through Scripture. It was God who had made her, His creation was good, and His creation was beautiful.

It is why Rashona wrote her children's book. It was about her experiences and discovering her worth as God's beloved daughter. Rashona signed a book for the little girl, and sent a silent prayer to God. Maybe God would use the book to speak to the girl.

1 How has God reshaped your identity and the messages you might hear about what makes you valuable?

2 Since we have been talking about witnesses a lot this quarter, who has been your role model for this kind of expectant faith?

³ I am verily a man which am a Jew, born in Tarsus, a city in Cilicia, yet brought up in this city at the feet of Gamaliel, and taught according to the perfect manner of the law of the fathers, and was zealous toward God, as ye all are this day.

⁴ And I persecuted this way unto the death, binding and delivering into prisons both men and women. ⁵ As also the high priest doth bear me witness, and all the estate of the elders: from whom also I received letters unto the brethren, and went to Damascus, to bring them which were there bound unto Jerusalem, for to be punished.

⁶ And it came to pass, that, as I made my journey, and was come nigh unto Damascus about noon, suddenly there shone from heaven a great light round about me. ⁷ And I fell unto the ground, and heard a voice saying unto me, Saul, Saul, why persecutest thou me?

⁸ And I answered, Who art thou, Lord? And he said unto me, I am Jesus of Nazareth, whom thou persecutest. ⁹ And they that were with me saw indeed the light, and were afraid; but they heard not the voice of him that spake to me.

³ “I am a Jew, born in Tarsus of Cilicia, but brought up in this city. I studied under Gamaliel and was thoroughly trained in the law of our ancestors. I was just as zealous for God as any of you are today. ⁴ I persecuted the followers of this Way to their death, arresting both men and women and throwing them into prison, ⁵ as the high priest and all the Council can themselves testify. I even obtained letters from them to their associates in Damascus, and went there to bring these people as prisoners to Jerusalem to be punished.

⁶ “About noon as I came near Damascus, suddenly a bright light from heaven flashed around me. ⁷ I fell to the ground and heard a voice say to me, ‘Saul! Saul! Why do you persecute me?’

⁸ “‘Who are you, Lord?’ I asked.

“‘I am Jesus of Nazareth, whom you are persecuting,’ he replied. ⁹ My companions saw the light, but they did not understand the voice of him who was speaking to me.’”

That's One Way to Meet Jesus . . .

Paul finds himself in the midst of an uproar in the temple of Jerusalem (Acts 21:27–32). It is exactly what God had revealed would happen, but Paul went to Jerusalem fully aware that it might mean his death (Acts 21:10–14). The crowd seizes him for supposedly preaching against the law and temple. The crowds drag Paul from the temple courts, shut the gates, and plan to kill him.

Ironically, it is a Roman commander who arrives to stop the beating (Acts 21:32). As the soldiers prepare to take Paul to the barracks, Paul asks for the privilege to speak and to address his fellow Jews (Acts 21:39). Paul speaks to them in Aramaic, the common language of Judea. Hearing this, the crowd grows silent to hear his defense.

Instead of giving a point-by-point denial of the charges, Paul builds rapport with his audience and wants them to understand his Jewish credentials: raised in Jerusalem, a student of one of the finest rabbis of the day, an expert in the law. Paul uses the word “zealous” to describe his devotion to God (Acts 22:3). It means that he was willing to go to whatever lengths were necessary to defend what is right.

But that very tenacity and zeal is what led Paul to persecute followers of “this Way”—a nickname for followers of Jesus (v. 4). With permission from the high priest, Paul sent men and women to prison and sought their deaths. He was there, supervising the stoning of Stephen from last week’s lesson (Acts 7:58).

All of this setup helps listeners understand what a change and a turnaround had happened. On the way to obtain more prisoners, Paul was confronted by a light that shone from heaven (Acts 22:6). What he heard next was the voice of Jesus—the very person he had opposed. Jesus spoke to him saying, “I am . . . whom you are persecuting” (Acts 22:8). To show that this message was for him, Paul’s companions on the road are able to see the light but can’t understand the voice (v. 9).

1 Why does Paul emphasize his Jewish background when telling his story?

2 Why would Jesus say that Paul was persecuting Him and not just His followers?

3 When has God needed to send a proverbial blinding light to get your attention? How did you respond?

¹⁰ And I said, What shall I do, Lord? And the Lord said unto me, Arise, and go into Damascus; and there it shall be told thee of all things which are appointed for thee to do. ¹¹ And when I could not see for the glory of that light, being led by the hand of them that were with me, I came into Damascus.

¹² And one Ananias, a devout man according to the law, having a good report of all the Jews which dwelt there, ¹³ Came unto me, and stood, and said unto me, Brother Saul, receive thy sight. And the same hour I looked up upon him.

¹⁴ And he said, The God of our fathers hath chosen thee, that thou shouldest know his will, and see that Just One, and shouldest hear the voice of his mouth.

¹⁵ For thou shalt be his witness unto all men of what thou hast seen and heard.

¹⁰ “What shall I do, Lord?” I asked.

“‘Get up,’ the Lord said, ‘and go into Damascus. There you will be told all that you have been assigned to do.’” ¹¹ My companions led me by the hand into Damascus, because the brilliance of the light had blinded me.

¹² “A man named Ananias came to see me. He was a devout observer of the law and highly respected by all the Jews living there. ¹³ He stood beside me and said, ‘Brother Saul, receive your sight!’ And at that very moment I was able to see him.

¹⁴ “Then he said: ‘The God of our ancestors has chosen you to know his will and to see the Righteous One and to hear words from his mouth. ¹⁵ You will be his witness to all people of what you have seen and heard.’”

Meeting Jesus Changes Everything

Paul continues his testimony of meeting Jesus in verses 10–15. His humble question of “What shall I do, Lord?” marks a transformation from persecutor to disciple. The simple plea reveals the heart of true change through submission to Christ’s authority. Like Abraham before him, Paul will “go” in accordance with God’s plan and to a place that God directs him (compare Gen. 12:1).

The Messiah whom Paul had been persecuting gives him directions to continue into Damascus (v. 10). But Jesus asks him to wait to receive word of what he shall do next. Paul had been operating with what might be called “blind zeal” for God’s reputation. Thus, the bright light from heaven had left him physically blind and dependent upon others to guide him (v. 11).

As a reminder, since Paul is retelling this story from Acts 9, he is selecting critical details that demonstrate the validity of his message

to Jewish listeners. Ananias, the man who came to him in Damascus, is “a devout observer of the law and highly respected by all the Jews living there” (v. 12). And it is by the power of “the God of our ancestors” that Paul will be commissioned (v. 14). Paul is undercutting the false accusation that his ministry would encourage people to ignore the law (see Acts 21:28). At the same time, Paul is describing why Jesus—whom he calls “the Righteous One” (v. 14; compare Isa. 53:11)—is the fulfillment of what Israel had longed to find. The Righteous One of Israel was able to call Paul to a new life and a new direction. What zeal for God had led him to oppose Jesus’ followers would give way to a courageous ministry as Jesus’ apostle.

But back to Paul’s retelling. He remains physically blind in the city of Damascus when Ananias comes to him. From Acts 9:10–16, readers know that Ananias received a vision of his own from Jesus. When he arrived to greet Paul, Ananias addresses “Brother Saul,” which uses Paul’s Jewish name (v. 13). Paul says it is that moment that his sight was restored. For the first time, he is looking with eyes attuned to what he had been too blind to see.

It is a fellow Jew and faithful follower of Jesus who welcomes Jesus’ newest witness. With a remarkable show of grace to a previous enemy, Ananias alludes to Paul’s new role as a witness for Jesus. Paul has been chosen to “know [God’s] will and to see the Righteous One and to hear words from his mouth” (v. 14). Paul’s testimony will be heard far and wide, as the good news of Jesus goes forth. No doubt, Paul hopes this message would grip the hearts of his current listeners.

1 Why is it important for Paul to connect his message to the hope of Israel?

2 What does Paul’s temporary blindness show about him? And what does it show when his sight is restored?

3 When have you witnessed someone make a dramatic turnaround after becoming a follower of Jesus?

The Lord of All

The hardest year of my marriage came while I was in seminary. My wife and I were both working full-time jobs, trying to balance all the things of life: work, children, commutes, studies, and you name it. Many days she and I felt like ships passing in the darkness. But worst of all, she was facing a boss who was driving her to the breaking point. This person was demanding, demeaning, even cruel—not at all what we needed. We shared some desperate prayers about this person who had become almost like an enemy to us. *Lord, if you reign over all, you can turn this person around.*

It's probably not too far off from the kind of desperate prayers that early Christians might have prayed about Saul, the persecutor. The Lord shattered Paul's hatred for followers of Jesus. He turned the murderous persecutor into an exceptional missionary. Paul's encounter with Jesus proves that no person is beyond reaching. At the same time, what stands out in Paul's own testimony is the theme of blindness and misdirection. Paul was doing what he thought was right and good, and he discovered that he had been persecuting God's Son in the process. What was the key that unlocked this new understanding? It was a clear understanding of Jesus as lord.

You might respond to Paul's testimony the way that I do, taking comfort that Jesus can change enemies into allies. Or perhaps you respond to his testimony by examining yourself for any ways that you have been misdirected and blind to spiritual realities. Whether in your relationships, your commitments, or your presentation of yourself, make room to ask the question that Paul asked when he saw what he had done: "What shall I do, Lord?" (Acts 22:10).

1 What changes in us when we are able to confess that Jesus is Lord?

2 How did Paul stay the same, and how did he change?

3 How might we gain new vision to see realities that we might have been missing?

Unlikely Apostles

Saul was the least likely candidate for helping to spread the gospel, but the Lord had great plans for this one-time opponent of the faith. Who are some people in your life that seem too antagonistic, too close-minded, too wounded to find Jesus? Pray for them by name, asking the Lord to break down whatever walls are preventing them from receiving the gift of salvation.

Jesus, I confess that you are Lord.

I trust that You can save not just me, but those I see as enemies.

Key Text

And he said, The God of our fathers hath chosen thee, that thou shouldest know his will, and see that Just One, and shouldest hear the voice of his mouth. For thou shalt be his witness unto all men of what thou hast seen and heard. —Acts 22:14–15 KJV

“Then he said: ‘The God of our ancestors has chosen you to know his will and to see the Righteous One and to hear words from his mouth. You will be his witness to all people of what you have seen and heard.’” —Acts 22:14–15 NIV

Quiet Hour® and Cross Daily Bible Readings

Week of August 17 through August 22

- Mon.** Acts 16:1–5—A Protege with Promise.
- Tue.** Proverbs 1:1–9—Receive Instruction.
- Wed.** Proverbs 23:22–25—Learn from Your Parents.
- Thu.** Philippians 2:19–24—A Worthy and Trusted Minister.
- Fri.** Deuteronomy 4:9–13—Teach Your Children God’s Ways.
- Sat.** 2 Timothy 1:1–16—A Father’s Message.

Next Week: 2 Timothy 1:1–6; 3:14–16

Paul’s legacy includes followers who looked up to him as much as a biological parent. Pray for the young leaders of your church community as you prepare to discuss Timothy.