

Saul of Tarsus

Read: Acts 7:58b; 8:1-3; 9:1-31

Key Verse:
“You will be His witness to all men of what you have seen and heard.”

Acts 22:15

Extra: How do you explain the sudden turn-around in Saul’s life?

Level 5 lesson 13

Jesus said that there is rejoicing in Heaven over each sinner who repents of their sinful ways, (Luke 15:10), so we can imagine that there was special joy in Heaven when Saul of Tarsus became a Christian! Here was an avowed hater of the Gospel and a persecutor of Christians (followers of Jesus Christ)! So what caused this incredible change?

SAUL’S PERSECUTION: Saul was raised in a God-fearing household and trained to be a Pharisee under the renowned teacher Gamaliel (Acts 22:3). He was a fine citizen who lived an exemplary life in the community. He was zealous about his religion, and along with most Jewish religious leaders, considered Jesus Christ a blasphemous imposter and His followers a dangerous threat to Jewish society. After observing the stoning of Stephen, Saul joined the wave of persecution against the Christians. He wanted all Christians to renounce their faith in Jesus Christ and return to Judaism. If they didn’t, he would lock them up and even kill them. All the while, he thought he was pleasing God! Of course, God is never pleased with such behaviour. It is just religious fanaticism.

SAUL’S CONVERSION: Having gained permission to round up the Christians in far-away Damascus, Saul set off with a group of men, “breathing out murderous threats against them” as he went. Suddenly, he was surrounded by an incredibly bright light. He fell to the ground and heard a voice asking, “Saul, Saul! Why do you persecute Me?” Confused, Saul replied, “Who are you, Lord?” Imagine his shock when he heard, “I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting,” and looking up saw Jesus Christ in the glory of Heaven!

Saul needed no further proof that he had been terribly wrong about Jesus Christ. His ‘conversion’ was unique and immediate! Blinded and humbled by his experience, Saul was led into Damascus by his companions, his grand plans of persecution gone! There for three days, he quietly prayed for God’s help and direction and awaited whatever lay before him.

Like Paul, we all need to be truly ‘converted.’ This means admitting we are wrong and God is right;

turning from a life of sin and self-will to follow Jesus; and believing in Him as both Saviour and Lord. Have you ever done this?

A CHRISTIAN BROTHER: God instructed a man named Ananias to go and visit Saul, but knowing his reputation, he was understandably wary! However, God assured him that Saul was a changed man who would be a special witness to the glory of the risen Christ “before the Gentiles, and their kings and before the people of Israel.” So Ananias obeyed in faith and went to find him. Laying hands on him, he said, “Brother Saul, the Lord Jesus... has sent me so that you may see again and be filled with the Holy Spirit.” Saul’s sight was immediately restored and his heart was filled with God’s Spirit and love for Jesus Christ. Now he had a burning desire to tell others of his life-changing discovery: Jesus Christ was alive! Later, with his name changed to Paul, he became perhaps the greatest missionary of all time. Inspired by the Holy Spirit, he also wrote at least 13 of the 27 New Testament books!

A FAITHFUL PREACHER: In Damascus, Saul immediately began preaching in the Jewish synagogues that Jesus was the Son of God and that He was alive. The people were stunned! “Isn’t he the man who killed the Christians in Jerusalem and came here for the same purpose?” they asked incredulously.

A TESTED WITNESS: As word spread of Saul’s amazing conversion, some of the Jews in Damascus made plans to kill him. However, the Christians heard of it and helped Saul escape over the city wall at night. He hurried to Jerusalem and tried to join the Christians there, but they were fearful too. Was this just a crafty plan to trap them, they wondered? Barnabas though, believed Saul’s story and took him to meet Peter and the other apostles. He told them of Saul’s encounter with the risen Christ and how his life had changed. At this, the apostles accepted him and Saul continued preaching about the Lord Jesus. Again, the Jews in Jerusalem were incensed at Saul’s change of heart and plotted to kill him.

What is your attitude to this wonderful message about Jesus? Do you get mad too, or have you examined your heart and- asked Him to be your Lord and Saviour?

QUESTIONS & ANSWERS

1. What was it that changed Paul’s life?	.....
2. What is a true conversion?	.....
3. What made Saul a ‘brother’ in the Christian family?	.....
4. What message did Paul preach in the Jewish synagogues?	.....
5. How did the Jews in Jerusalem react to Paul’s preaching?	.....

My Name is Age

Peter at Lydda and Joppa

Key Verse:

“Our people must learn to devote themselves to doing what is good...provide for daily necessities and not live unproductive lives.”

Titus 3:14

Extra: If you had been living during that period in history, what would your response have been?

Level 5 lesson 14

Read Acts 9:32-43

Further Reading: Philippians 4:10-13

We don't know exactly what Saul did when he returned to his home-town of Tarsus, but we can be sure he witnessed to his family and friends about his conversion and life transformation. Sometimes it seems easier to tell strangers about Jesus than our family and friends. Though we need to be witnesses for the Lord in every situation, we need to first be missionaries at home before we become missionaries anywhere else! This prepared Saul for the enormous work God had in mind for him (Acts 9:15). Let's now leave Saul for a while and focus on the Apostle Peter.

BECOMING A SAINT:

In verse 32, a travelling Peter arrives in Lydda. Notice the Christians there are described as "saints." Many people have wrong ideas about "saints." They have often been taught that a "saint" is a very pious and religious person who has won a high place in Heaven for doing miracles and living a holy life on earth. This is not what we read in Scripture. A saint is simply a believer in the Lord Jesus Christ. When a person is saved through faith in Christ, that person immediately becomes "a saint." Actually, these "saints" in Lydda were just ordinary people going about daily life, but with faith in God. We don't become saints as the result of living saintly lives; instead, we should live saintly lives because we are saints!

HEALING THE SICK:

Peter found out that a man named Aeneas was very sick. He was paralysed and hadn't been able to get out of bed for eight years. Peter said to him, "Jesus Christ heals you. Get up and tidy up your mat." Aeneas was immediately, completely healed and got up! Note Peter's words carefully: Jesus Christ healed the man, not Peter. Surely this proved that Jesus Christ had risen from the dead, because He healed this paralytic just as He had healed people before He was crucified (see Mark 2:10-11)! It is no wonder that "all who lived in Lydda and Sharon saw him and turned to the Lord!"

RAISING THE DEAD:

Just near Lydda, in a coastal town called Joppa, lived a Christian lady named Tabitha (or Dorcas in Greek). She was greatly loved because of her kindness, as she "was always doing good and helping the poor." What a wonderful testimony! Sadly, Dorcas became ill one day and died quite unexpectedly. The other believers in Joppa were naturally very upset. Hearing that the Apostle Peter was in nearby Lydda, they sent an urgent message for him to come to Joppa. This showed their great faith, as Dorcas was already dead at this time!

When he arrived, Peter was taken to the upstairs room, where her body lay. Her friends gathered round, and with tears flowing down their cheeks, showed him coats and garments which she had made. After a while, Peter asked them all to leave the room; he needed to be alone with God. Knowing that he could do nothing and depending on the Lord to give life, Peter knelt down and prayed earnestly to God. Then he said, "Tabitha, get up!" Immediately, she opened her eyes and sat up! Peter took her by the hand and to the amazement of all, presented her alive to those anxiously waiting outside.

As you can imagine, news of this miracle spread like wildfire! "Many people believed in the Lord," though notice it says "many," not "all." Some people won't turn to the Lord even if they see a dead person raised to life (see Luke 16:31), and even though Jesus Himself is the greatest resurrection example! Peter stayed on in Joppa for quite awhile, living at the home of Simon the Tanner, a man who cured and sold animal skins. This was a business Jews didn't like, so it's good to see Peter broadening his understanding. Next study, we'll see how Peter learned a lesson at the tanner's place that opened his mind even more!

QUESTIONS & ANSWERS

1. What is a 'saint'?	.....
2. Who did Peter say healed Aeneas?	.....
3. Why do you think the people of Lydda and Sharon turned to the Lord?	.....
4. Why was Peter called to Joppa?	.....
5(a) How did Peter show his dependence on the Lord at Joppa?	(a)
5(b) Who is the only One who can raise the dead?	(b)

The Visions of Cornelius and Peter

Read Acts 10:1-22

Further Reading: Ephesians 2:11-22

Key Verse:

“He [Jesus] said to them, ‘Go into all the world, and preach the good news to all creation.’ “

Mark 16:15

Extra: Think specifically about how you can share the Gospel with others.

Level 5 lesson 15

Cornelius was an important Roman soldier, a Centurion in fact, who lived in Caesarea. This meant he was in charge of a regiment of one hundred soldiers in the mighty Roman Army. It’s good to see that he was also a religious, God-fearing, generous, and prayerful man (v2). Now Peter and Cornelius were to meet, which was no easy matter as Peter was a strict Jew and Cornelius a Gentile - two groups that didn’t normally mix!

Why did they need to be brought together? To further ‘inter-racial’ harmony and understanding’ in the provinces? To strengthen Roman ties with the Jewish community? To resolve some outstanding issues between the Jews and the Romans? No! The simple answer is so that Cornelius, who feared God and knew some truth about Jesus (vv 22 & 36), could be saved (Acts 11:14) and receive the Holy Spirit and be baptised (Acts 10:47-48)!

CORNELIUS’S NEED:

Some people may find it a little surprising that Cornelius needed to be saved, but he did! Religious works and generous deeds by themselves can never save anybody. Only Christ and His work can save us and give us eternal life. This is what changes dead religion to a living relationship with God! Cornelius also felt his need of something more. He prayed a lot, no doubt realising his sinfulness and need for further truth about God’s salvation.

One afternoon about 3 o’clock, an angel of God appeared to Cornelius in a vision. He was afraid, but the angel reassured him, “Your prayers and gifts to the poor are remembered by God.” The angel continued, “Send men to Joppa to bring back a man named Simon Peter. He is staying with Simon the Tanner.” Cornelius obeyed exactly as the angel instructed, sending off two of his servants, and one of his soldiers to contact Peter. They travelled during the night and arrived at Joppa about mid-day the following day.

PAUL’S LESSON:

About this time, Peter was praying on the house rooftop when he too received a remarkable vision from God. He saw a great sheet, holding a variety of

animals and birds, descending from Heaven toward him. A Voice called out, “Get up Peter; kill and eat!” Now Peter thought that the animals in sheet were unclean, and touching unclean things was strictly forbidden in the Law of Moses! Could this be right? “Surely not, Lord,” he objected, “I have never eaten anything impure or unclean!” Again the Voice spoke, “Do not call anything impure that God has made clean!” Three times the whole procedure was repeated, and then the sheet and its strange contents disappeared back to Heaven.

Peter was deeply puzzled by the vision! Naturally it caused him to do a bit of hard thinking. However, he didn’t have time to wonder long, because the three men from Cornelius arrived at the gate of the house. God the Spirit informed Peter of their arrival and instructed him to welcome them. Peter obediently did so, and asked them the reason for their visit. The visitors proceeded to tell Peter about Cornelius and his recent vision, along with the instructions he had received.

Around this time, no doubt, the meaning of the vision became clear to Peter. Through the example of food, traditionally banned as unclean by Jews, Peter understood that God was now saying it was clean. Thus, if the Jewish customary laws no longer applied against food, then they no longer applied against Gentiles! So the overall meaning of the vision is clear: Peter had to associate with and preach the Gospel to the Gentiles, not just the Jewish community. It was no longer about whether someone was considered culturally clean or unclean (v28), but that God can spiritually cleanse all people!

This was a new lesson for Peter, who had always considered the Gentiles excluded from any dealings with God. Now God was clearly telling him that there were to be no more differences or favouritism (vv34-35). Yes, the Gospel is for everyone, and God can save and make everyone clean in His sight! This includes you and me. Have you ever believed that Jesus Christ died to save you? That is the Good News Cornelius needed to believe, and so must we!

QUESTIONS & ANSWERS

1. Why did Peter and Cornelius need to meet?	.....
2. What do you think Cornelius particularly prayed for?	.....
3. What did Peter see in the vision?	.....
4. What clear lesson did Peter learn from the vision?	.....
5. What do you think the Key Verse means you need to do?	.....

Salvation for the Gentiles!

Key Verse:
“There is no difference, for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.”

Romans 3:22b,23

Extra: What is the importance of studying the Bible?

Level 5 lesson 16

Read Acts 10:23-48

Further Reading: Ephesians 2:1-10

Peter invited the men to stay the night, which indicated that Peter had grasped the significance of the vision, as it was unheard of for Jews and Gentiles to mix like that. In the morning they set off for Caesarea, accompanied by Peter and some Christians from Joppa. The following day they reached Caesarea where Cornelius was anxiously waiting for them.

PETER’S WELCOME:

The welcome Peter got from Cornelius was rather embarrassing; Cornelius, in his ignorance, fell down at Peter’s feet and began to worship him (v25). Horrified, Peter said, “Stand up! I myself am just a man.” Peter’s attitude toward Cornelius shows clearly that he would never allow any human to worship him, then or now! After this mistake by Cornelius had been corrected, the two men explained their positions.

Peter told how God had taught him the great lesson that all men are equal before God and that he should visit Cornelius. “That’s why I am here,” he said, “but why did you send for me?” Cornelius recounted his story and finished by stating simply, “We are all here in the presence of God to listen to everything the Lord has commanded you to tell us” (v33). What a great statement for Peter’s ears! Here is a group of people ready for the Gospel message. They wanted to know what God had to say through His servant Peter. Does this reflect your thinking at this point? Do you want to know God’s way of salvation? If so, then listen carefully to Peter’s message. The way of salvation for them is still the same for us!

PETER’S MESSAGE:

Peter began by saying, “I now realise that God does not show favouritism.” Black, yellow, white, rich and poor, high and low - all are equally sinners before God, and His salvation is equally available for all. So Peter got right down to the ‘nitty-gritty’, saying, “God sent the Good News of peace through Jesus Christ!”

Then, commencing with Jesus’ baptism by John, he told them about the Lord Jesus with these beautiful words, “He went around doing good, and healing all who were under the power of the Devil, because God was with Him.” Peter even testified, “We saw all the wonderful things Jesus did!”

Then Peter told his rapt audience of the awful crime his own people, the Jews, had committed, “They killed him by hanging him on a tree!” We can imagine the effect this news had on those listening intently. How terrible! This is what mankind did to Jesus, but, “God raised him from the dead on the third day,” Peter continued, “and showed Himself to chosen witnesses who ate and drank with Him after He rose from the dead!” So Peter told the wonderful story of the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Further, he said that Jesus commanded the apostles to preach to the people and to tell them that He was God’s appointed Judge of the human race.

BELIEVE AND BE SAVED:

Verse 43 is the climax of all that Peter said. “All the prophets testify about Him [Jesus Christ] that everyone who believes in Him receives forgiveness of sins through His name.” This was the way of salvation for Cornelius and his friends, and it is the way for you and me also. Forgiveness of sins is what we all need, and it is here offered to “everyone who believes” in the Lord Jesus Christ, who died and rose again!

Immediately the Holy Spirit blessed God’s Word to those people. They all believed it for salvation, and the Holy Spirit came on them. The Jewish believers beside Peter were astonished when they saw that God had blessed the Gentiles just as He had done to the Jews on the day of Pentecost. In view of this, Peter wanted to know if anybody could deny the right of Christian baptism to these Gentiles. Of course no-one could and so they were all baptised in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ. So the Gospel door was opened to the Gentiles and it remains open today. Be sure to let the words of v43 sink deep into your heart and respond to the Saviour before it is too late!

QUESTIONS & ANSWERS

1 .Why would Peter not receive Cornelius’ worship?	.....
2. What great lesson had Peter realised?	.....
3. What shows Cornelius and his friends were ready for the Gospel?	.....
4. What wonderful story did Peter tell the people?
5(a) How does anyone receive forgiveness of sins?	(a)
5(b) Have you?	(b)

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