

SESSION 6

# REDEEMED FROM AN UNBELIEVING PAST



*Why are some teams so fun to hate?*

**QUESTION #1**

#BSFLbeauty

## THE POINT

*Jesus can transform even the most hostile opponent into a faithful believer.*



## THE BIBLE MEETS LIFE

Sports fans can take it hard when someone changes sides. In baseball, for example, the classic rivalry between the Boston Red Sox and the New York Yankees was ignited when Boston sold Babe Ruth to New York. The Babe switched sides.

Similarly, Wayne Gretzky was a national treasure in Canada—which is why his countrymen were outraged when he went to play for the Los Angeles Kings. The Great One changed sides, as well.

Switching sides is often perceived negatively. That was the case in the apostle Paul's conversion to faith in Christ. Originally called Saul, he was a rising star in the ranks of Judaism, serving as an aggressive defender of the Jewish faith against the new movement of people who claimed the resurrected Jesus was the Messiah. But then Paul changed sides. Something had happened to him.

More accurately, *Someone* had happened to him.

# WHAT DOES THE BIBLE SAY?

## **Acts 26:9-20** (NIV)

**9**“I too was convinced that I ought to do all that was possible to oppose the name of Jesus of Nazareth. **10** And that is just what I did in Jerusalem. On the authority of the chief priests I put many of the Lord’s people in prison, and when they were put to death, I cast my vote against them. **11** Many a time I went from one synagogue to another to have them punished, and I tried to force them to blaspheme. I was so obsessed with persecuting them that I even hunted them down in foreign cities.

**12**“On one of these journeys I was going to Damascus with the authority and commission of the chief priests. **13** About noon, King Agrippa, as I was on the road, I saw a light from heaven, brighter than the sun, blazing around me and my companions. **14** We all fell to the ground, and I heard a voice saying to me in Aramaic, ‘Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me? It is hard for you to kick against the goads.’

**15**“Then I asked, ‘Who are you, Lord?’

“‘I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting,’ the Lord replied. **16** ‘Now get up and stand on your feet. I have appeared to you to appoint you as a servant and as a witness of what you have seen and will see of me. **17** I will rescue you from your own people and from the Gentiles. I am sending you to them **18** to open their eyes and turn them from darkness to light, and from the power of Satan to God, so that they may receive forgiveness of sins and a place among those who are sanctified by faith in me.’

**19**“So then, King Agrippa, I was not disobedient to the vision from heaven. **20** First to those in Damascus, then to those in Jerusalem and in all Judea, and then to the Gentiles, I preached that they should repent and turn to God and demonstrate their repentance by their deeds.”

**Chief Priests** (v. 10)—The chief priests were composed of the current high priest, former high priests, leaders of the 24 orders of priests serving in the Jerusalem temple, the captain of the temple police, the priest in charge of the finances of the temple treasury, and other high-ranking priests.

**Goads** (v. 14)—A goad was a rod, about eight feet in length and pointed on one end, used to direct and control oxen.

**Sanctified** (v. 18)—To be “sanctified” means to be made holy or set apart. At the moment of salvation, the believer is set apart (from sin, self, and the world) in service to God.



**What makes the gospel offensive to some people in today's world?**

**QUESTION #2****Acts 26:9-11**

It's becoming more common than ever to meet people who vehemently oppose Christianity and any belief in God. Such people reject the faith for many reasons:

- ▶ They're offended that the gospel of Christ would call them sinners.
- ▶ They don't like the exclusive claim that Jesus is the only way to God.
- ▶ They question any belief in a God who allows suffering, natural disasters, and violence—and who condemns people born into other religions.

At one time, Saul of Tarsus was deeply opposed to Christ and His followers. In fact, he'd been a ringleader seeking their destruction. Today, however, most people remember Paul as the apostle who wrote much of the New Testament. But Paul never forgot who and what he had once been.

By the time we get to Acts 26, Paul had been taken into custody (see Acts 21:33-36). He spent more than two years in custody before presenting his case before King Agrippa (see 26:1-3). Agrippa was the last of the Herods, a family given rule by Rome over the Jews. Because he was determined to keep order among the Jews, he was interested in Paul, who had been charged with causing chaos among the Jewish people.

So how did Paul defend himself against the charges? First, he confessed that he'd formerly supported the Jewish animosity toward Christ. He'd been consumed with hatred and rage toward the followers of Jesus. He openly admitted to casting believers in prison and seeking their deaths. By acting on the authority of the Jewish chief priests, Paul believed he was doing the will of God.

It's strange to think of someone opposed to Christianity ultimately falling in love with Jesus. But as we've seen with Paul, it happens. That's why I want to view people—*all* people—with the eyes of Jesus. All people are image-bearers of God, fallen, broken, and in need of His grace. They may oppose the gospel now, but they can just as readily convert to faith in Him and become great witnesses of His power.

Just like Paul.

# SWITCHING SIDES

*Use the space below to record the goals and motivations that defined you before you encountered God, and after.*

*My goals and motivations before God:*

*My goals and motivations after God:*

*Whom could you speak with this week to share your changing goals and motivations as an expression of your testimony?*

## Acts 26:12-18

Still speaking to Agrippa, Paul described the unmistakable nature of his encounter with Jesus. He reported seeing a bright light, hearing a clear voice, and being asked a simple question. All three came from Christ.

**What's your first impression of the mission Jesus gave to Saul?**

### QUESTION #3

I can't help but wonder what went through Paul's mind during His encounter with the Savior. Perhaps, *I was definitely wrong about Jesus being dead. Or, Jesus has come to kill me as revenge for my acts of violence and persecution against His followers.*

Instead of a death sentence, however, Paul received:

- ▶ **A rebuke.** "It is hard for you to kick against the goads" (v. 14). This was a common phrase in both the Greek and Roman cultures, an analogy of someone kicking against a pointed spike. To do so is pointless and painful!
- ▶ **A call.** "Now get up and stand on your feet. I have appeared to you to appoint you as a servant and as a witness of what you have seen and will see of me" (v. 16).

I hope you hear God's grace in those words. No matter what you have done or how sinful you've been, you can never be so bad that Jesus can't change you. You cannot make Him stop loving you regardless of your failures or opposition to Him.

Jesus knows your name and He chooses to pursue you even in your rebellion and stubbornness. Why? Because He loves you. Because He wants to save you. And because He has a purpose and plan for your life—just like He had for Paul.

**When have you kicked against God's direction in your life?**

### QUESTION #4



## **Acts 26:19-20**

To say Paul underwent a radical transformation would be a real understatement. The man who previously opposed Jesus was now obeying Jesus. He became the most influential Christian in the history of the faith. He wrote nearly half of the New Testament. A majority of what we know about church doctrine, leadership, and structure came from him.

I don't want us to overlook one particular detail in Paul's testimony. Paul described himself to the Philippians this way: "circumcised on the eighth day, of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews; in regard to the law, a Pharisee; as for zeal, persecuting the church; as for righteousness based on the law, faultless" (Phil. 3:5-6). His Hebrew pedigree was second to none.

Yet when Jesus called Paul, He sent him to the Gentiles! Paul was sent "and then to the Gentiles, I preached that they should repent and turn to God and demonstrate their repentance by their deeds" (Acts 26:20). For the Jews, this was the most scandalous element of Paul's testimony. Not only did Christianity's greatest enemy become its greatest evangelist, but the gospel compelled a Jew to reach out to Gentiles.

If God can use Paul, He can use you. If He can turn a murderer into His messenger, then He can redeem your brokenness for His glory. When Jesus transforms you from the inside out, you will discover, as Paul did, that you can't keep it to yourself.

The news of what Jesus Christ has done for you is too good to hide.

***How would you describe the mission Jesus has given you?***

**QUESTION #5**

## LIVE IT OUT

How will this study make a difference in your life? Consider the following options as you move forward, both this week and beyond:

- ▶ **Pray.** Ask God to reveal any negative attitude that you may have against non-believers or other groups of people. Ask God to help you see them as He does.
- ▶ **List.** Make a prayer list with specific names of friends, family members, coworkers, and acquaintances who need to meet Christ, as Paul did. Lift them up daily to God for salvation.
- ▶ **Share.** Look for an opportunity to share your own story of redemption with a non-believer. As God gives you the opportunity, talk about how Christ saved you and how your life is different now.

The practice of switching sides has a stigma in our society, but there is one switch that all people need to make: the switch from death in sin to life in Christ. The apostle Paul made that switch, and we have all benefitted from it. If you've made that switch as well, it's time to help others do the same.



My thoughts