

# Saul of Tarsus

Devotional Reading: [Philippians 3:1–14](#)

Background Scripture: [Acts 9:1–31](#)

## **Acts 9:9–17**

**<sup>9</sup> For three days he was blind, and did not eat or drink anything.**

**<sup>10</sup> In Damascus there was a disciple named Ananias. The Lord called to him in a vision, “Ananias!”**

**“Yes, Lord,” he answered.**

**<sup>11</sup> 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. <sup>12</sup> In a vision he has seen a man named Ananias come and place his hands on him to restore his sight.”**

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

**<sup>15</sup> 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. <sup>16</sup> I will show him how much he must suffer for my name.”**

**<sup>17</sup> 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.”**

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## **Key Text**

*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.*

—**Acts 9:17**

## **Jesus Calls Us**

# Unit III: The Birth of the Church

## Lessons 9–13

### Lesson Aims

After participating in this lesson, each learner will be able to:

1. Summarize Ananias’s objection and the Lord’s response.
2. Explain the significance of blindness as a possible spiritual metaphor.
3. Cultivate an attitude that seeks clearer spiritual sight.

### Lesson Outline

#### Introduction

A. “I Once Was Blind ...”

B. Lesson Context: Damascus

C. Lesson Context: Saul

#### I. Saul’s Waiting (Acts 9:9–12)

A. Days of Fasting (v. 9)

B. Disciple of Damascus (v. 10)

*Responsive? Hiding? Fleeing?*

C. Directive by the Lord (vv. 11–12)

#### II. Ananias’s Objection (Acts 9:13–16)

A. Fear of Saul (vv. 13–14)

B. Plans for Saul (vv. 15–16)

*Heads Up!*

#### III. The Lord’s Healing (Acts 9:17)

A. Obedience (v. 17a)

B. Facts (v. 17b)

## Conclusion

A. Conversion, Call, or Both?

B. Prayer

C. Thought to Remember

## How to Say It

Ananias An-uh-*nye*-us.

Cilicia Sih-*lish*-i-uh.

Damascus Duh-*mass*-kus.

Decapolis Dee-*cap*-uh-lis.

Gamaliel Guh-*may*-lih-ul or Guh-*may*-lee-al.

Josephus Jo-*see*-fus.

Judea Joo-*dee*-uh.

Levi *Lee*-vye.

Pharisees *Fair*-ih-seez.

Pentecost *Pent*-ih-kost.

rabbinic ruh-*bin*-ihk.

Sanhedrin *San*-huh-drun or *San*-*heed*-run.

Tarsus *Tar*-sus.

Zechariah *Zek*-uh-**rye**-uh.

## Introduction

### A. “I Once Was Blind ...”

John Newton was an eighteenth-century Englishman who served as captain for ships that transported captured Africans to North America as slaves. The horrendous nature of that occupation included not only the acceptance of slavery but also the imposition of the inhuman conditions on the ships. To do this, one needed a callous soul.

In 1748, Newton was in a terrifying storm in a ship off the coast of Ireland. Fearing for his life, he began praying in a way that led to his conversion to Christ, eventually becoming a minister in 1764. He began writing about his faith, and in 1772 he published the words to “Amazing Grace,” a semi-autobiographical account of how God had “saved a wretch like me.”

One of the most memorable lines in the hymn is “[I] was blind, but now I see.” While this phrase is drawn from the story of Jesus’ healing of the blind man in [John 9:25](#), it also fits the story of Saul in Damascus.

## B. Lesson Context: Damascus

Even in Paul’s day, Damascus was an ancient city, having been inhabited for at least 3,000 years (see [Genesis 14:15](#)). It figures prominently in Old Testament narratives, mentioned there 44 times in Hebrew. It lies about 150 miles north of Jerusalem.

As for the New Testament era, the book of Acts mentions the city of Damascus 13 times. It was a city of many ethnicities. It had become part of the Greek world after the conquest by the forces of Alexander the Great (356–323 BC). Under later Roman influence, Damascus was designated as one of the cities of the Decapolis, meaning “10 cities” (see [Matthew 4:25](#); [Mark 5:20](#); [7:31](#)). Jesus performed miracles near those cities ([Matthew 8:28–33](#); [Mark 5:1–17](#); [7:31–37](#)), although not in Damascus itself. Greco-Roman ruins are extant in Damascus today. These

include a section of an impressive boulevard that is likely “Straight Street” of [Acts 9:11](#).

Damascus had many Jewish residents and synagogues in the first century AD. The historian Josephus (AD 37–100) records that thousands of Jews were killed by the Romans in Damascus during the first Jewish Revolt (about AD 66). This testifies to a large presence with many houses of worship in that city. It is no wonder that Saul would travel there, expecting to find synagogues where Jews had embraced Christianity.

We are not told how or when the gospel message reached Damascus. A reasonable speculation is that it occurred as a result of the Day of Pentecost, as people returned home (see [Acts 2:5–11](#)). By the time of today’s lesson, at least a couple of years had passed since that event, the stoning of Stephen, and the beginning of Saul’s persecution. [Acts 8:1](#) records that the Jerusalem church was scattered at that time, although only the destinations of Judea and Samaria are mentioned there.

### C. Lesson Context: Saul

We first meet Saul—later known as Paul, beginning in [Acts 13:9](#)—when he acted as a witness to the stoning of Stephen in [Acts 7:58; 8:1](#) (see also [22:20](#)). He is presented elsewhere as an ambitious young man who was building a career in the rabbinic tradition of Jerusalem and as a trusted servant of the temple officials and religious leaders ([Galatians 1:14; Philippians 3:4–6](#)). He could never have been a priest, because he was from the tribe of Benjamin rather than the priestly tribe of Levi (see [Deuteronomy 18:1; Hebrews 7:5](#); etc.). But he could have become one of the greatest of the Pharisees, like his teacher Gamaliel ([Acts 5:34; 22:3](#)).

The climb up this career ladder accelerated when Saul oversaw a

direct assault on the believers in Jerusalem, where he searched for them house to house and threw into prison those he found ([Acts 8:3](#); [26:10](#)). He apparently did effective work at that, for the high priest agreed to authorize him to go to Damascus to find Christians and bring them back to Jerusalem for trial and punishment ([9:1–2](#); [22:19](#); [26:9–11](#)). His ambitious trip to Damascus was the occasion of the resurrected Jesus appearing to Saul and asking, “Why do you persecute me?” ([9:4](#)).

This Damascus Road story is told three times in Acts: once as narrated by author Luke ([Acts 9:1–19](#)) and twice as told by Saul/Paul himself ([22:3–16](#); [26:9–18](#)). As today’s text opens, Saul had been struck blind by the Lord on that road. Subsequently, Saul was led by the hand into the city ([9:1–8](#)).

## I. Saul’s Waiting

([Acts 9:9–12](#))

### A. Days of Fasting (v. 9)

#### **9. For three days he was blind, and did not eat or drink anything.**

We certainly can imagine what Saul was thinking for the *three days he was blind* and went without food or drink! [Acts 9:11](#) (below) fills this in, but only in general terms.

#### **What Do You Think?**

Do you practice fasting as a spiritual discipline? Why or why not?

#### **Digging Deeper**

What value do you experience or can you imagine from incorporating fasts into your spiritual walk?

## B. Disciple of Damascus (v. 10)

### **10a.** In Damascus there was a disciple named Ananias.

Luke, the author of the Gospel of Luke and the book of Acts, uses the word *disciple* dozens of times in his two works. In Luke's Gospel, a disciple is a dedicated student of Jesus the teacher. In Acts, a disciple is a committed follower of the risen Lord. In that regard, *Ananias* may be much like many Christians today who serve the Lord faithfully in relative anonymity.

We gain a bit more information about this *disciple* in [Acts 22:12](#). There Paul (formerly the Saul of today's lesson) described Ananias as "a devout observer of the law and highly respected by all the Jews living there." We take care, of course, not to confuse this Ananias with two others by the same name in [Acts 5:1](#) and [24:1](#).

Regarding the city of *Damascus*, see [Lesson Context: Damascus](#), above.

### **10b.** The Lord called to him in a vision, "Ananias!" "Yes, Lord," he answered.

How surprised *Ananias* must have been to experience *a vision* in which *the Lord* communicated with him personally! The word *vision* implies a supernatural origin. It involves seeing things not normally seen, but it may also consist of hearing things not normally heard, as in the calling of Samuel ([1 Samuel 3:1–14](#)). The same may be the case here. But unlike the calling of young Samuel, Ananias recognized what was happening immediately. So he answered *Yes, Lord*, implying that Ananias was listening.

### **What Do You Think?**

How do you express your availability for God's unexpected ministry

opportunities?

### **Digging Deeper**

What responsibilities, fears, etc., prevent you from being fully available?

## **Responsive? Hiding? Fleeing?**

When my youngest was a teenager, he would hide whenever some chore needed to be done. It didn't matter if it was cleaning his room, doing the dishes, or pulling weeds—I would call his name and get cricket chirps in return. My oldest son, however, was quite the opposite. More often than not, whenever I called his name, he would answer. And even though he really didn't want to do those chores, he would come running when I called him. It was responsiveness, plain and simple.

The Scriptures describe varying responses to calls from the Lord. The responses recorded in [Exodus 4:13](#); [Judges 6:15](#); [1 Samuel 10:21–22](#); [Isaiah 6:8](#); [Jeremiah 1:6](#); [Jonah 1:3](#); [Matthew 1:24](#); [2:14](#); [Luke 1:34, 38, 46–55](#); and [Acts 10:7–8](#) are quite instructive when compared and contrasted in their respective contexts. The Scriptures also tell of individuals who claimed to be obeying a call from the Lord when no such call existed; see [Numbers 12:2](#); [Jeremiah 14:14–16](#); [23:25–26](#); and [Ezekiel 13](#) as examples.

Let's make clear at this point that there are two categories of callings by the Lord. First, there are the high-profile callings of specific individuals to specific tasks. Then there are the general callings given to all Christians; [Matthew 28:18–20](#) and [John 14:15](#) are examples. My child who hid from either kind of "calling" in a family-household sense always ended up with unwanted consequences for doing so. Similarly, it's easier (and better) in the long run to obey the Lord than it is to disobey (see

Matthew 11:30).

Before concerning yourself with any specific calling you may be sensing from the Lord, how responsive are you to the general callings all Christians receive?

—P. M.

### C. Directive by the Lord (vv. 11–12)

#### **11a. The Lord told him,**

*The Lord* may refer to God in the general sense that does not distinguish among members of the Trinity. In this case, however, it refers to the risen Jesus in particular, as [Acts 9:17b](#) (below) makes clear.

**11b. “Go to the house of Judas on Straight Street and ask for a man from Tarsus named Saul, for he is praying.**

The instructions are detailed—there can be no doubt regarding where and to whom Ananias is to go. *Straight Street* is the grand boulevard of Damascus. This may indicate that this particular *Judas*, the homeowner, is a well-connected person of some wealth. His may have been the sort of place with whom a person authorized by the high priest for his task (like *Saul* was; [Acts 9:1–2](#)) might find lodging.

Saul’s hometown of *Tarsus* was a well-known city about 250 miles north-northwest of Damascus and 355 miles due north of Jerusalem (straight line). Tarsus became the capital city for the Roman province of Cilicia in AD 72 (about 40 years after the events under consideration). Saul (as Paul) would later mention his civic pride in his hometown ([Acts 21:39](#)).

**12. “In a vision he has seen a man named Ananias come and place his hands on him to restore his sight.”**

With this information, *Ananias* learned he was not the only one to

have received *a vision*. Saul himself had preceded Ananias in that regard, even though Saul had been blinded ([Acts 9:8–9](#)). Ananias learned something else as well: he was to be God’s chosen instrument for Saul to *restore his sight*. The picture is remarkable: powerful Saul, a Roman “citizen of no ordinary city” ([21:39](#); compare [22:26–29](#)), in the house of wealthy Judas, praying and blind.

The outcome determined by the Lord could have been accomplished easily by the Lord himself in some other way. But he chose instead to work through a human as he often did—and still does (compare and contrast [Ezekiel 22:30](#)).

### **What Do You Think?**

When have you been part of God’s answer to someone else’s prayers?

### **Digging Deeper**

What texts suggest that God frequently desires to work through his people and not more supernatural interventions?

## **II. Ananias’s Objection** ([Acts 9:13–16](#))

### **A. Fear of Saul (vv. 13–14)**

**13–14.** “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.”

Saul’s reputation had preceded him—*Ananias* knew all about the notorious persecutor of the church and his plans. And Ananias was exactly the type of person Saul had come to arrest and haul back to

Jerusalem.

We note in passing that Ananias referred to Jesus' disciples as *holy people* and *all who call on your name* rather than "Christians" at this point in time; the latter designation was not to become reality until [Acts 11:26](#). Ironically, the designation *holy people* eventually became a favorite of Saul's (when better known as Paul) when referring to Christians in his letters (see [Romans 1:7](#); [1 Corinthians 1:2](#); [Ephesians 1:1](#)).

[Acts 22:19](#) and [26:9–11](#) shed light on what *to arrest all who call on your name* entailed. Saul entered synagogues to find believers in Jesus in order to have them beaten, imprisoned, and/or put to death. So zealous was Saul that he went out of his way to punish this new and (to his prior way of thinking) heretical sect.

### What Do You Think?

When have you acted timidly because of your knowledge of the risk involved in acting boldly?

### Digging Deeper

What fears still hold you back from bold obedience to God?

## B. Plans for Saul (vv. 15–16)

**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.

*The Lord* could have chosen to discipline Ananias for questioning the directive given to him. Instead, the Lord revealed part of his plans for Saul. Henceforth, Saul was to be a *chosen instrument to the Lord* rather than a vessel of the religious authorities in Jerusalem. That reassign-

ment would involve being the apostle to *the Gentiles* (see [Acts 13:46; 14:27; 18:6; 22:21; Romans 11:13; 15:16; Galatians 1:16; 2:8; Ephesians 3:8](#)), including *their kings* ([Acts 25:13–26:23](#)). The book of Acts ends with Paul’s awaiting his hearing before the Roman emperor himself.

Even so, the regular practice of Saul (as Paul) would also be to try to convince his fellow Jews—*the people of Israel*—that Jesus was their promised Messiah (example: [Acts 13:14–45](#)). Indeed, preaching Jesus to fellow Jews would be his first order of business wherever Saul went ([13:46–48; 18:5–6](#)). By contrast, the task of the apostle Peter was something of a mirror image of that practice: Peter was the designated apostle to the Jews ([Galatians 2:8–9](#)), although he witnessed also to Gentiles ([Acts 10:1–11:18](#)).

As if receiving a vision from the Lord wasn’t enough of a shock to Ananias in and of itself, the revealed mission to the Gentiles was probably incomprehensible to him (compare [Acts 11:18](#)). Even more so was the predicted mission to kings, who were all Gentiles.

Visual for [Lesson 13](#). Ask volunteers to share their experience of receiving the Spirit and spiritual sight. In what ways is the experience ongoing?

## **Heads Up!**

One of our favorite pastimes when we were young was tossing a Frisbee while at the beach. The sea breeze was often strong enough to carry the plastic disc far afield from its intended destination. And there were usually so many people at the beach that the disc would sooner or later strike an unsuspecting beachgoer. It was not unusual to hear “Heads up!” shouted throughout the game. Some bystanders would hear and react appropriately. Others would turn around in confusion and look for

the source of the warning first—and such bystanders would be the ones to experience an unwanted Frisbee to the head!

Surely Ananias didn't presume that the Lord lacked knowledge about Saul! But providentially, the Lord did not see fit to "throw a Frisbee" at Ananias's head. Instead, the Lord patiently provided an explanation that should have been unnecessary for Ananias's obedience.

The same may not be the case regarding you or me the next time we hesitate to obey. When God calls on you, will your obedience depend on receiving an answer you deem satisfactory, or will you obey without question? Remember: Ananias could have experienced the Lord's "Frisbee" to his head as did Zechariah in [Luke 1:18–20](#).

—P. M.

**16. "I will show him how much he must suffer for my name."**

We continue to be in awe of God's revealing his plans for Saul to Ananias, a revelation that God was certainly not obligated to provide. The fulfillment of the prediction in this verse is seen in [2 Corinthians 6:3–10](#); [11:23–29](#); and elsewhere. Paul's suffering culminated in his execution (see [2 Timothy 4:6–7](#)).

### III. The Lord's Healing

([Acts 9:17](#))

#### A. Obedience (v. [17a](#))

**[17a](#). Then Ananias went to the house and entered it. Placing his hands on Saul, he said,**

The actions of *Ananias* in this half verse harmonize with actions required of him in [Acts 9:11b](#), considered above.

## B. Facts (v. 17b)

**17b.** “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.”

This half verse ties things together and clarifies. *The Lord* of the visions had been none other than *Jesus* himself. It was none other than he who had *appeared* to *Saul* on the road (compare [Acts 9:5](#); [22:8](#); [26:15](#)) and who had spoken to Ananias in Damascus.

As Saul was just about to *see again*, Ananias announced something we have not yet read about in the visions from the Lord: Saul was to *be filled with the Holy Spirit*. This phrase occurs eight times in the New Testament, all in the writings of Luke. Persons involved in the other seven cases are John the Baptist ([Luke 1:15](#)), his mother and father ([1:41](#), [67](#)), the apostles on the Day of Pentecost ([Acts 2:4](#)), Peter before the Sanhedrin ([4:8](#)), a gathering of believers ([4:31](#)), and Saul himself ([13:9](#)).

Saul’s first action after having his sight restored was to be baptized, even before he broke his three-day fast from food (see [Acts 9:18–19](#)). He was strengthened in his soul and in his body. Later texts tell us that others sought to kill Saul, even enlisting the support of the city’s governor to arrest him (see [2 Corinthians 11:32](#)). Instead, Saul’s life was saved in a surprising way (see [Acts 9:25](#); [2 Corinthians 11:33](#)).

Regarding our current lesson, that final case is particularly interesting for at least two reasons. First, it was the time when Saul began to be referred to as Paul. Second, it is ironic in that the one who had been struck blind as an enemy of Jesus became the instrument by which a “child of the devil” and an “enemy of everything that is right” ([Acts 13:10](#)) was himself struck blind ([13:11](#)).

# Conclusion

## A. Conversion, Call, or Both?

The story of Saul's experience on the way to Damascus is usually portrayed as his "conversion." That is a valid description in that the episode shows a life transformed from an unbeliever into a believer, one who was baptized and received the Holy Spirit. But was that Luke's intent in documenting this story? Is Saul's conversion experience, with its spectacular visions and drama, intended to be some sort of model or expectation for conversions today?

Certainly many conversions over the centuries have been dramatically sudden and powerful. I have heard the stories, and so have you. But I have never heard of an unbeliever being called in a vision to the sort of mission to which Saul was called. He was a young man ([Acts 7:58](#)) whom Jesus simply had to have as his servant. Jesus did not have to stir up passion in Saul; he was already passionate. Jesus did not have to infuse Saul with a great knowledge of Scripture; he already had it. Jesus did not have to put an obedient spirit in Saul; he already had one. Unbeknownst to Saul, he had been preparing his whole life to be redirected and used by Jesus!

Jesus can still redirect a person's life while using all that person's life experiences in kingdom service. We should be on the lookout for such people—people whose life experiences, education, etc., could result in their being massively influential in service to the risen Lord! Which would be easier: (1) to create zeal in an apathetic person or (2) to take an already zealous person and redirect that zeal for Christ? Think of people you know or have heard about whose lives were transformed by the gospel and redirected to do great things for Christ. How does your own

story mesh with theirs? How might it?

### **What Do You Think?**

What experiences illustrate the Holy Spirit's bringing you from spiritual blindness to sight?

### **Digging Deeper**

What practices help you be aware of times when the Holy Spirit is at work further clarifying your vision?

## **B. Prayer**

Heavenly Father, it is sobering to think how well you know us. Thank you for the inspiring stories of your zealous ones! Empower and guide us to have similar zeal in doing great things for you. We pray in the name of Jesus Christ. Amen.

## **C. Thought to Remember**

Christ calls us not only *to* him but also *for* him.

# Involvement Learning

*Enhance your lesson with NIV Bible Student (from your curriculum supplier) and the reproducible activity page (at [www.standardlesson.com](http://www.standardlesson.com) or in the back of the NIV Standard Lesson Commentary Deluxe Edition).*

## **Into the Lesson**

Begin your session by using one of these ideas to explore the concept of blindness.

*What is blindness?* Prepare (or ask a class member to prepare) a brief presentation on blindness. How is blindness defined? What causes blindness? How many people live with blindness in your country? in the world? Can blindness be reversed? After your report, ask class members to share any experiences they have had with blindness in their family or among their acquaintances.

*Blindman's buff.* Play this updated version of the old game. Blindfold a volunteer to be "It." Ask the rest of the class to sit in a circle with It sitting in the middle. Everyone sitting in the circle changes places. It points to a participant who says, "Great things." It guesses who the participant is. If correct, that person becomes It. After a couple of rounds, encourage those who were It to share how they tried to figure out who talked.

After either activity, lead to Bible study by saying, "Blindness in everyday life is a serious problem. Today we'll read the story of one man who was blinded by God and another who was initially blind to God's plan and purpose. In both cases their blindness was reversed."

## Into the Word

Divide the class into groups of four to six. Distribute a handout (you create) with the following instructions:

1—Read [Acts 9:1–9](#). Consider Saul's dramatic experience. What do you imagine he was thinking about during the three days reported in verse 9?

2—Read [Acts 9:10–12](#). What do we learn about Ananias? What can we surmise about the place where Saul was staying? Put yourself in the place of Ananias. What would you tell someone about what you just

experienced?

3—Read [Acts 9:13–14](#). What is Ananias’s objection? How does his initial questioning compare with other examples of Bible heroes initially hesitant to answer God’s call?

4—Read [Acts 9:15–16](#). Do you believe Ananias was convinced by the Lord’s answer? What about Saul’s prophesied future is appealing? What is frightening?

5—Read [Acts 9:17](#). What shows that Ananias believed what God had told him? How was Saul’s blindness cured? How was Ananias also “healed of blindness”?

Read through today’s text, stopping after each verse or group of verses indicated on the handout. Give two or three minutes for groups to answer each set of questions. Then move to the next verse(s) and questions, following this pattern until the class has worked through the text.

*Option 1.* To extend the above study, distribute copies of the “Before and After” exercise, which you can download. Have groups work to complete as indicated.

*Option 2.* Distribute copies of the “Called to Suffering” exercise from the activity page. Have small groups complete as indicated before sharing conclusions with the whole class.

Allow a few minutes for groups to share specific learnings about Saul with the whole class.

## Into Life

Write the following jumbled sentence on the board: but blind now see was I once I.

The correct sentence is, “I once was blind but now I see.” Divide the class into pairs to discuss how this statement applies to their own faith

journeys. After several minutes, have the pairs give thanks for sight that has been received and petition the Lord for awareness of their blindspots and need for further vision correction. Ask volunteers to share any praises or petitions that come up in this exercise, which they would like the whole class to pray for in the upcoming week.