



Applied Faith Men's Bible Study

South Hills Baptist Church

7350 Granbury Rd.

Fort Worth, TX 76123

Paul, When Bad People Turn Good

Lesson #1

Acts 7:58-59, 9:1-2

It is difficult to overestimate the influence of the apostle Paul. He is known worldwide as one of the greatest Christian missionaries. His inspired writings cover a large portion of the New Testament, and it is safe to say that he remains one of the most read authors in human history. His abrupt turnaround from zealous persecutor of Christians to one of Christianity's greatest proponents surely shaped the history of the early Christian church. But who was Saul of Tarsus before he became the apostle Paul? What do we know about his life prior to meeting Christ on the Damascus Road?

Saul of Tarsus was born in approximately AD 5 in the city of Tarsus in Cilicia (in modern-day Turkey). He was born to Jewish parents who possessed Roman citizenship, a coveted privilege that their son would also possess. In about AD 10, Saul's family moved to Jerusalem. Sometime between AD 15—20 Saul began his studies of the Hebrew Scriptures in the city of Jerusalem under Rabbi Gamaliel. It

was under Gamaliel that Saul would begin an in-depth study of the Law with the famous rabbi.

There has been some debate over whether Saul was raised in Jerusalem or in his birthplace of Tarsus, but a straightforward reading of his own comments indicate that Jerusalem was his boyhood home (Acts 22:3). We know that Paul's sister's son was in Jerusalem after Paul's conversion (Acts 23:16), which lends weight to the idea that Paul's entire family had moved to Jerusalem when he was young.

It is quite possible that Saul was present for the trial of Stephen—a trial that resulted in Stephen becoming the first Christian martyr (Acts 7:54–60). The historian Luke tells us that Stephen's executioners laid their garments at the feet of Saul (Acts 7:58), who was in full approval of the mob's murderous actions (Acts 8:1). Saul later ravaged the church, entering the homes of believers and committing them to prison. Saul's anti-Christian zeal motivated him not only to arrest and imprison male Christians (the "ringleaders") but to lock up female believers as well (Acts 8:3).

Paul's post-conversion correspondence to various churches reveal even more about his background. In his second letter to the church in Corinth, Paul describes himself as a Hebrew, an Israelite, and a descendant of Abraham (2 Corinthians 11:22). In his letter to the Philippian church, Paul says he was a Pharisee of the tribe of Benjamin (Philippians 3:5).

While on his way to Damascus to arrest and extradite Christians back to Jerusalem, Saul was confronted by the very One whom he was persecuting (Acts 9:3–9; 22:6–11; 26:12–18). What followed was one of the most dramatic conversions in church history. Saul of Tarsus became the apostle Paul, an ardent missionary to an unbelieving world and a fine example of faithful service in the face of fierce persecution (Acts 14:19; 16:22–24; 2 Corinthians 11:25–26). Saul's education, his background as a Pharisee, his Roman citizenship, and his unflinching zeal all contributed to his success as a missionary, once those credentials and traits had been subjugated to the lordship of Christ.

Matthew 19:26 Jesus looked at them and said, “With man this is impossible, but with God all things are possible.”

Mark 10:27 Jesus looked at them and said, “With man this is impossible, but not with God; all things are possible with God.”

Luke 18:27 Jesus replied, “What is impossible with man is possible with God.”

A Timeline of Paul’s (Saul) Life

The Apostle Paul’s Birth & Education

c. A.D. 6 Born a Roman citizen to Jewish parents in Tarsus (in modern eastern Turkey)

c. 20–30 Studies Torah in Jerusalem with Gamaliel; becomes a Pharisee

c. 30–33 Persecutes followers of Jesus of Nazareth in Jerusalem and Judea

Conversion

c. 33–36 Converted on the way to Damascus; spends three years in Arabia; returns to Damascus to preach Jesus as Messiah

c. 36 Flees Damascus because of persecution; visits Jerusalem and meets with the apostles

36–44 Preaches in Tarsus and surrounding region

44–46 Invited by Barnabas to teach in Antioch

46 With Barnabas visits Jerusalem to bring a famine relief offering

Mission Trips

47–48 First missionary journey with Barnabas, to Cyprus and Galatia

49 At the Council of Jerusalem, Paul argues successfully that Gentile Christians need not follow Jewish law; returns to Antioch; confronts Peter over question of Jewish law

49–52 Second missionary journey with Silas, through Asia Minor and Greece; settles in Corinth; writes letters to Thessalonians

52 Visits Jerusalem and Antioch briefly; begins third missionary journey

52–55 Stays in Ephesus; writes the letters to Galatians and Corinthians

55–57 Travels through Greece and possibly Illyricum (modern Yugoslavia); writes letter to Romans

Paul's Arrest & Death

57–59 Returns to Jerusalem and arrested; imprisoned at Caesarea

59–60 Appears before Festus and appeals to Caesar; voyage to Rome

60–62 Under house arrest at Rome; writes letters to Philippians, Ephesians, Colossians, and Philemon

62–64 Released; journeys to Spain?; writes letters to Timothy and Titus

64 Returns to Rome; martyred during perse

Love gives. Loves goes the extra mile. Love endures.

That love is not always reciprocated.

As Christ followers, we strive to give love from a pure heart that doesn't require a person to love us perfectly in return. We intentionally allow God to be our source of perfect love, and we relinquish the right to demand it from others. In obedience to God and His Word, we set our hearts on being patient and kind. We commit to modeling Jesus' sacrificial love. But sometimes the person we give our love to consistently betrays and wounds us. How do we give 1 Corinthians 13 love in that situation?

Exposing Dysfunctional Patterns

I've got a really strong mercy streak. For decades, I've looked for the best in everyone. I pursued relationships with very emotionally unhealthy people. I was sure God loved them and I could, too, but I had no idea how to employ boundaries. I gave love no matter how much pain was delivered to me in return. I was too timid to speak the truth in love.

I lived with a desperate fear of confrontation. My rational thinking dropped into a coma if I sensed any threat of an explosive reaction. Eventually resentment wrestled mercy to the ground. Wounded and exhausted, I would just walk away from the relationship.

That is how I handled my first marriage. Years later, I was very close to repeating the pattern in my second marriage.

A major crisis in our marriage led me to intense Bible study and prayer counseling. God exposed many of my own toxic relationship patterns. I was addicted to the approval of others. I was a great blamer and gossiper. If there had been a contest for arrogant victims, I would have won the crown.

I once was blind, but now I see.

Restoration is God's Work

Pride kept me from seeing these things about myself. It also kept me focused on how the "other person" needed to change so I could be ok. With amazing grace, God revealed the truth for the purpose of restoring me to wholeness.

He sent His Word and healed me and delivered me from self-destruction. (Psalm 107:20, my paraphrase)

God offers healing and freedom to everyone.

He is waiting to transform the lives of everyone leaking nuclear emotions and throwing verbal grenades. The controller, the abuser, and the too-easily angered are not immune to the power of God's Word. We are promised that nothing is impossible with God (Luke 1:37, Mark 10:27). There is hope for the bully, the addict, and the one whose mind is stuck in a negative gear. The blamer, the gossip, the arrogant, and the victim are all offered fresh doses of mercy from God each and every day.

God created those who hurt us. He has a good plan for their lives. He knows the "why" behind their destructive behaviors. He knows the lies they believe about themselves. He knows what stands in the way of their wholeness. He is a Shepherd who pursues every sheep that wanders away from all He offers.

Partnering with God

We are temples of God's Holy Spirit, empowered by Him to believe in what we cannot yet see. We are vessels of His mercy, His wisdom, and His Word. His mighty power is at work within us to accomplish infinitely more than we can ask or imagine (Ephesians 3:20).

We do not wrestle against flesh and blood (Ephesians 6:12).

There is a dark force of evil behind every lethal personality disorder and self-defensive coping mechanism. Every casualty in a relationship war has fallen prey to the one who steals, kills, and destroys.

The great news is... God has far more power than Satan. The God of angel armies makes us ready for battle with His truth, salvation, faith, righteousness, peace, and the sword—the Word of God. His banner of victory flies over us. When we arm ourselves and pray, we salute His authority and partner with His plan for the family of God.

What would delight our God more than for us to turn our minds away from the problems and focus on Him? He is our solution.

Praising God is a powerful first line of defense. We can worship and adore Him, our wonderful counselor and supreme relationship expert.

Holy God. You are full of mercy and compassion, slow to anger and full of love. No one can measure Your greatness. You open your hand to satisfy the needs of everyone.

You protected Daniel in the lion's den. You provided an ark before the flood. You create streams in deserts. No situation is too dire for You. Everything is possible because You are the Creator and Redeemer.

You love imperfect people extravagantly. Your perfect love drives out fear.

You are mighty to save!

We can choose to live prayerfully and humbly before God. He can help us love those who do not love us well with a pure heart.

Father, I may be blind to my own role in toxic relationships. Help me see the truth about myself. Apply the healing power of Your Word to my heart and mind. Deliver me from any stronghold that causes me to harm people with my words and actions. Save me from self-destructive patterns.

I struggle in my relationship with _____. I need You to give me wisdom on how to love _____ well. You are my shield and defender. Show me how, when and where to erect boundaries in our relationship. I believe You are my healer and I trust You to guard my heart and mind.

I need Your specific directions on how to interact with _____.

I want to love _____ with a pure heart and a good conscience and a sincere faith. (1 Timothy 1:5)

Help me to love _____ courageously. Fill me with Your truth and compel me to fearlessly tell the truth with love. Let Your perfect love cast out all of my fears related to our relationship.

I forgive _____ for hurting me. I ask You to forgive me for _____ and _____. I acknowledge my emotions: _____, _____, and _____. And I invite You to steady my heart so my emotions do not rule my decisions

I surrender what I think our relationship should be. Please transform it so that it honors You.

In Jesus, I pray. Amen

The toxic person in your life may feel like an enemy. That is certainly how Satan wants you to feel about your husband, your family member, your church leader, etc. But remember the real culprit is Satan.

God has given us clear instructions to bless those who curse us and pray for the people who mistreat us (Luke 6:27–28). Jesus modeled this pure love for us on the cross, and when He washed Judas' feet knowing he was going to betray Him.

Praying for your enemy is like training for the Christian Olympics. The stakes are high. The requirements are intense. But the reward is far greater than any gold medal. Your prayer can be used by God in a person's life, their family, and the generations after them.

Use this prayer prompt to launch an ongoing conversation with God on behalf of the toxic person in your life.

God, I acknowledge You as _____'s provider. Thank You for providing all _____ needs to live in peace and harmony with me and others.

Your Word is alive and a gift of healing to _____. I invite You to fill _____'s life with It. Let It be a salve to _____'s wounds. Use it to set _____ free from the snare of the enemy.

You are the Good Shepherd. Please rescue _____ from paths of destruction.

You are the Wonderful Counselor. Break down the walls in _____'s heart and mind with Your battering ram of revelation. Give _____ spiritual wisdom and insight to know You. Flood _____'s heart with Your light.

Where _____ has endured shame, pour double portions of honor into _____'s life.

Your Holy Spirit intercedes for _____ 24/7. Use me to do the same and raise up an army of intercessors on _____'s behalf. Let heaven and earth work in tandem to deliver _____ from evil.

Make _____ ready to hear me and others speak Your truth in love. Help _____ to experience Your love and Your presence.

You are the One who can enable _____ to hunger for Your Word and obey Your commands. Let that be so for _____.

With faith in Jesus, I pray. Amen

Application/Activity

This week's application/activity is to identify six people in your life, whether immediate or far reaching, that are "bad" people or "toxic" people. Use their name in these preceding prayers. Pray for them. Pray that God will soften their hearts. Pray that they will come to know and love Jesus. Pray that your relationship with them (if it is a person close to you) will be healed. Examples of these types of people could be a co-worker, a relative. It could be somebody that is far reaching such as the President, North Korea's president, the Democrats, the Republicans, all politicians. The list probably does not lack in names. Think about six that you believe to be critical in your life as a whole. We are told to pray for our enemies. You never know when one of those "enemies" might turn out to be a Paul one day!