

PAUL

A MAN OF GRACE AND GRIT

STUDY ONE

May I Introduce to You Saul of Tarsus

Acts 5:12–39; 7:54–8:3

Any time we engage in a serious study of a great life, we need to brace ourselves for surprises. Interestingly, the greater the life, sometimes the more shocking the surprises.

—Pastor Charles R. Swindoll

TRUTH often defies appearances.

Especially in a world like ours that's obsessed with image and out of touch with the past. It's easy to see someone's *great* accomplishments, position, or skill and view that person's whole life through rose-colored spectacles.

Surely, one who rises to political power was reared with flowery ease and enjoyed the fruit of high-class connections. The razor-sharp mind, so astonishing in a tenured scholar, must be the direct result of an educated, esteemed lineage. Then there are the musical virtuosos, the Olympian champions, the Nobel winners, the billionaire entrepreneurs—all great. But have they always known greatness? Most likely not.

Everyone's life is full of *surprises*.

We are awed to learn how the powerful politician grew up in a shack in the woods and how the keen-minded professor suffered from dyslexia in early life with little hope of getting a university education. The truth defies appearances.

Turning to the New Testament, we may again be *surprised* to learn the backstory of the apostle to the gentiles. That keen-minded, bold, Christ-loving evangelist and church-planter, the champion of grace, did not begin his life as such! His past certainly holds some shocking surprises. This study kick-starts our exploration of a great life that became characterized by grace and grit—the man we know now as the apostle Paul who was first Saul of Tarsus.



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PREPARE YOUR HEART

Prepare your heart to engage God’s Word today by making this prayer your own.

Father, as we approach You through Your written Word, give us eyes to see, to consider, and to reflect upon the early life of the man who would become that great saint, the apostle Paul. Remind us, as we peer into the dark, rebellious, and ruthless heart of Saul of Tarsus, that we, too, once possessed an unbelieving, even ruthless heart. As we have had our own Damascus Road experience, may our focus be upon Your infinite ability to transform even the hardest of hearts and employ us to Your service, and for Your glory. In Jesus’ powerful name. Amen.



TURN TO THE SCRIPTURES

Before his Damascus Road encounter with the risen Jesus, the apostle Paul—Saul of Tarsus—proved a hateful, antagonistic, and violent persecutor of the early church, the “followers of the Way” (Acts 9:2). How did Saul’s hostility toward Christians reach that point? Let’s get acquainted with Saul of Tarsus and consider his background, education, and upbringing.

First, read [Acts 21:39; 22:3](#). Then locate [Tarsus in Cilicia](#) on a Bible map like ones found at insight.org/maps. What details do you find about Saul’s birthplace and education?

Next, read an overview of his birthplace, education, and life in a Bible dictionary article on “Paul.” You can access a free, online article titled “[Paul the Apostle](#)” in *Baker’s Evangelical Dictionary of Biblical Theology* at bibleportal.com. Record your key thoughts.

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Lastly, turn to *Philippians 3:4–6*. Paul summarized his own pedigree. Read the verses and list the seven ways he described himself.

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____
4. _____
5. _____
6. _____
7. _____

Now that we have a grasp of Saul’s context, character, and credentials, let’s read Saul’s first documented encounter with the early church found in Acts 7.



Observation: Murderous Heart and Hands

After we seek God’s presence and guidance in our Bible study, we always begin with observation—which is carefully noticing as much as we can about the text. It’s simply reading the verses.¹

We’ll do that now with Acts 7—and Saul’s initial encounter with the early believers is not for the squeamish!

It is about Stephen, a Christian described as “a man full of God’s grace and power” (Acts 6:8). He had just addressed the Jewish Council (Sanhedrin) with a sermon for the ages, a stinging rebuke of their hardness of heart toward the truths of Scripture and God’s anointed, Jesus. We pick up the scene in Acts 7:54.

Carefully observe *Acts 7:54–8:3*. Note the threefold progression of anger which the Jewish leaders displayed according to 7:54, 57, 58–59.

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Tucked within that rageful mob was Saul. Paralleling the threefold progression of the mob, according to Acts 7:58, how was Saul first involved?

Next, what do you discover about his attitude toward Stephen's murder in 8:1?

Finally, what did his attitude in 8:1 lead to, based on 8:3?

Looking at 7:55–56, 59, now contrast Stephen's perspective with what you read of Saul's. Where was Stephen's gaze? What did Stephen exclaim in 7:60, and how did God fulfill this prayer considering what you know of Saul's life?

While we read about the advent of Saul's violent persecution of Christians in Acts 7–8, his anger had likely been seething for some time.

Saul was in the audience while Stephen gave his testimony. And not only Stephen but others before him. —Pastor Chuck Swindoll

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Acts 5 uncovers those others—the apostles—who, like Stephen, incited rage from the Jewish leaders. Spend a few minutes reading [Acts 5:12–42](#). From 5:12–16, detail what the apostles were doing that sparked jealousy among the Sadducees.

According to 5:17–25, what event authenticated the apostles' teaching?

After the apostles were rearrested, Peter spoke boldly in 5:29–32. What two accusations enraged the Sanhedrin?

Acts 5:33–40 forms a crucial section in this standoff between the Jewish leadership and the apostles. Who is the central figure? What was his counsel? From your research in the “Turn to the Scriptures” section above, what was his relationship to Saul?

Present in the council chambers was young, hot-headed Saul. Tossing aside Gamaliel's wait-and-see advice, Saul bolted from the meeting with his mind set on murder.

The first pen portrait of Saul of Tarsus that hangs in the biblical gallery is both brutal and bloody. The blood of the first martyr was splattered across his own garments, and he's nodding in agreement. —Pastor Chuck Swindoll

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Interpretation: God's Miraculous Intervention

Acts 5:33–40 is a crucial text in our study as, indeed, God miraculously intervened in the course of history. Gamaliel, a Pharisee and prominent, influential member of the Sanhedrin, is reminiscent of the importance of Queen Esther in the Old Testament.

Read [Esther 4:14](#). As Esther was instrumental in sparing the Jewish people from a planned massacre, Gamaliel was instrumental in the apostles' protection. Review this short article about [Gamaliel](#) in the free, online *Holman Bible Dictionary* at studylight.org.

Then, reread [Acts 5:30–31](#). Within this text, Saul would have considered Peter's words blasphemous for two reasons. What claims did Peter make about Jesus that would have infuriated orthodox Jews?

Given his murderous mind-set, as Saul intently listened to his mentor's reasoned counsel in [5:33–39](#), what was going through his mind?

Look closely at [5:40](#). How did Gamaliel mirror Esther's intervention, and what is its significance for Peter and the future of the church?

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After their flogging and severe warning to cease proclaiming Jesus, the apostles faced a decision. They could have obeyed the Sanhedrin, or they perhaps could have moved to another area to continue their ministry. However, they persisted in proclaiming Jesus in Jerusalem. How did their persistence fulfill Jesus' mandate from [Acts 1:8](#)? How did God work in the church in Jerusalem prior to Saul's conversion?

God was preparing Saul for a radical spiritual transformation.

*Peter was alive then and in the years that followed because of Gamaliel.
Gamaliel saved his life. They would have stoned the whole bunch.
—Pastor Chuck Swindoll*



Correlation: A Brief Autobiography

Long after Saul's radical transformation through Christ, he never dismissed, disavowed, nor diminished his former blasphemous ways. Saul, now Paul, during his trial before King Agrippa, recounted candidly his ways as a zealous Pharisee who mercilessly persecuted the church.

According to [Acts 26:10–11](#), what four ways did Saul persecute the church? What do these verses tell us about the level of Saul's Jewish commitment and the power of our personal confession when sharing the gospel?

Later, in his first epistle to his protégé Timothy, [1 Timothy 1:12–13](#), Paul reiterated his persecutory testimony. How does 1:12 inform you of the depth of Paul's understanding of forgiveness? In 1:13, what reason did Paul offer for God's mercy toward him?

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Paul claimed to be the chief of sinners. He may very well have been. He wasn't trying to be modest. That's the Saul of Tarsus you need to know before you read Paul the apostle of the letters of the New Testament. —Pastor Chuck Swindoll



Application: Amazing Grace . . . How Sweet the Sound!

The truth defies appearances. Life is full of surprises. The end of our study brings us to the advent of grace. Saul of Tarsus sat on the precipice of grace. Three application principles emerge from a study of Saul of Tarsus.

1. *No matter how you appear to others, everyone has a dark side.* We are sinners by birth and sinful by choice. Each one of us is among the wretched.
2. *Regardless of what you have done, no one is beyond hope.* No one is beyond the Lord's long reach of grace.
3. *Even though your past is soiled, anyone can find a new beginning with God.* It's never too late to begin doing what is right and follow Jesus.

As you reflect on your relationship with Christ, can you look back and “inventory” your sinful past? Spend a few moments recognizing what you once were. Then, give thanks for what you now are—forgiven and free, redeemed and renewed!

As a believer, are you soiled in some area of your life which is a challenge to clean up? Confess it, thank the Lord for His for pardon, make a plan to purge it, and move forward in His Spirit's power.

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Is there someone in your circle—family member, friend, acquaintance—who is persecuting you? Remember, God changed even Saul’s hard heart! Record his or her name and pray that this person will “come to [his or her] senses and escape from the devil’s trap” (2 Timothy 2:26).

When the Lord saved Saul, He didn’t put him on probation!
—Pastor Chuck Swindoll



A FINAL PRAYER

Close your study by making this prayer your own.

Lord, we thank You for seeing us as we really are and for loving us in spite of it. It’s wonderful to know the One who knows us best loves us the most. Remind us, Lord, that Your grace is sufficient to cover any sin. If You are able to snatch one such as Saul from a horrid pit, You could save any one of us. So I count on You to do that, Lord, and to begin that work right now. For Jesus’ sake. Amen.

ENDNOTE

1. To learn more about Pastor Chuck Swindoll’s *Searching the Scriptures* Bible-study method, go to the web page, “[How Does Pastor Chuck Swindoll Study the Bible?](#)”

For the 2025 broadcasts, this *Searching the Scriptures* Bible study was developed by Marshall F. Davis in collaboration with Aaron Massey, senior vice president of *Searching the Scriptures* Ministries, and Bryce Klabunde, vice president of *Searching the Scriptures* Ministries, based upon the original outlines, charts, and transcripts of Charles R. Swindoll’s messages. Copyright © 2001, 2025 by Charles R. Swindoll, Inc. All rights are reserved worldwide. Duplication of copyrighted material for commercial use is strictly prohibited.

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