



Lesson Four



AN UNBELIEVER IN A THIN PLACE (Acts 9:1-22)

Day One: Knocked Off His High Horse

The story of Saul's conversion brings startling insight into *thin places*—they can be experienced by unbelievers. I don't know about you, but this blew my mind. Remember Balaam? He was the wicked Hebrew priest who caused the Jews to be cursed when he tempted them to disobey God through sexual immorality. God sent an angel with a sword drawn to block his path before enacting his treacherous plan. But Balaam couldn't see the heavenly apparition. Instead, his donkey perceived the divine obstacle and refused to move forward. As a result, Balaam beat his beast of burden. That's when God gave the donkey the ability to speak, warning the prophet of the danger that lay ahead.

Saul is not the only unbeliever to encounter God in Scripture. He also revealed Himself to Nebuchadnezzar and to several Pharaohs. Incredibly, miraculous stories are coming out of Arab countries that Muslims in great number are having divine dreams leading to salvation. On *The Rosenberg Report*, host Joel Rosenberg discussed a powerful move of God among the Palestinian people with Taysir Abu Saada, a former Palestine Liberation Organization terrorist turned Christian. Taysir, author of *Once an Arafat Man*, was saved in the nineties. He told of a Hamas suicide bomber who had shaved and bathed ceremonially and was ready to don his suicide vest the next morning. That night, Jesus appeared to him in a dream saying, "What you are about to do is evil. I am Jesus; follow Me." When he awoke Jesus was standing in the room. Jumping from his bed in nothing but his underwear, he ran through the streets yelling, "Jinni, Jinni," which means *demon* in Arabic. Taysir and his friends caught wind of this man, who was being hunted by Hamas for not fulfilling his

murderous mission. Eventually, a Gazan Christian met this man and explained what had happened to him. He got saved and was immediately baptized in a bathtub. He became a robust preacher of the gospel,¹ just like Saul after he encountered Jesus on the road to Damascus.

READ THE VERSES BELOW AND ANSWER THE FOLLOWING QUESTIONS:

“Then Saul, still breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord, went to the high priest and asked letters from him to the synagogues of Damascus, so that if he found any who were of the Way, whether men or women, he might bring them bound to Jerusalem. As he journeyed he came near Damascus, and suddenly a light shone around him from heaven. Then he fell to the ground, and heard a voice saying to him, ‘Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting Me?’ And he said, ‘Who are You, Lord?’ Then the Lord said, ‘I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting. It is hard for you to kick against the goads’” (Acts 9:1-5).

PRACTICAL OBSERVATION:

1. Describe Saul’s state of mind and his evil intent.
2. Where did Saul go for support, and what was his request?
3. Describe the people Saul intended to persecute. What was his plan for their future?
4. Describe what Saul saw and heard on the road to Damascus.

2. HIGH PRIEST: *The high priest was the top religious and civic leader over Israel beginning with Aaron and his sons. He had to be of Aaron’s lineage, holy and without physical defect. He made the offering on the Day of Atonement for the nation of Israel. Jesus, our eternal High Priest, made an offering once and for all for our sins.*

4. BRIGHT LIGHT: *Saul later described this light as “brighter than the sun, blazing around me” (Acts 26:13, NIV). In response, he fell to the ground. John described Jesus in Revelation: “The hair on his head was white like wool, as white as snow, and his eyes were like blazing fire. His feet were like bronze glowing in a furnace” (1:14-15, NIV). Likewise, John fell to the ground.*

5. What did Jesus ask of Saul, and how do you think that made Saul feel?

6. What did Saul ask, and what did he learn?

PERSONAL APPLICATION:

7. It is estimated there are 360 million persecuted Christians living in the world today. Spend time praying for your brothers and sisters who do not possess the freedoms you enjoy.

8. Do you know people who are against Christianity in your world. Write down their names. Pray that they, too, would meet Jesus along their way.

7. THE WAY: *The early disciples were not known as Christians, but people “of the Way” (Acts 9:2). Saul didn’t realize that when he persecuted the Jews in Jerusalem, they would flee and as a result spread the gospel. The apostle made a mad rush to the north to stop the news of Jesus’ resurrection from circulating.*

“While Christians in America have worshipped without the fear or threat of physical abuse for their beliefs, thousands of their brothers in Christ throughout the world have been tortured and martyred for confessing the name Christ.”

—Billy Graham

Day Two: Blinded by the Light

If blindness is the inability to see, then spiritual blindness is the inability to see the things of the Spirit. A perfect illustration of this is found in John 9 when Jesus healed a blind man by spitting on the ground and anointing his eyes with the clay. He told the man to wash his eyes in the pool of Siloam and he would be healed. And just like that, he was healed.

When his neighbors saw that the blind man was healed, they dragged him to the spiritual leaders of the day—the Pharisees. They did not believe that Jesus performed a miracle since He had done so on the Sabbath, which they had forbid. Others said Jesus was a sinner and God would not allow a sinner to heal. After interrogating the man and his parents, the callous-hearted leaders cast the family out of the temple. The Pharisees could not explain away the miracle and would not acknowledge Jesus as the Messiah.

Jesus sought out the man to reveal that He was the Son of God. The blind man believed in the Lord and worshiped. Then Jesus said something profound, “For judgment I have come into this world, that those who do not see may see, and that those who see may be made blind” (John 9:39). Whenever someone is unable to recognize the activity of God, through the work or words of Jesus, they are considered spiritually blind.

If spiritual blindness is a condition that affects the religious, how do Christians avoid it? Reverend Kyle Norman wrote, “Spiritual blindness is an internal condition. It occurs when we focus our attention upon our own pride, desire, or limited understanding.”² It’s the “I know better than God” attitude, like when Peter rebuked Jesus for talking about His upcoming death. The Lord said, “Get behind Me, Satan! You are an offense to Me, for you are not mindful of the things of God, but the things of men” (Matthew 16:23). Are you afflicted with spiritual blindness? Pray this week that God will open the eyes of your heart to see and believe in the works and words of Jesus Christ.

READ THE VERSES BELOW AND ANSWER THE FOLLOWING QUESTIONS:

“So he, trembling and astonished, said, ‘Lord, what do You want me to do?’ Then the Lord said to him, ‘Arise and go into the city, and you will be told what you must do.’ And the men who journeyed with him stood speechless, hearing a voice but seeing no one. Then Saul arose from the ground, and when his eyes were opened he saw no one. But they led him by the hand and brought him into Damascus. And he was three days without sight, and neither ate nor drank” (Acts 9:6-9).

PRACTICAL OBSERVATION:

1. Describe the difference in Saul's emotional state from yesterday's text to today's verses.

2. Rephrase Saul's question in your own words.

3. What did Jesus ask Saul to do? How thorough were His instructions?

4. Describe what the men traveling with Saul experienced.

5. Explain how Saul traveled the rest of the way to Damascus.

6. What was Saul's state for the first three days in Damascus?

2. SPEECHLESS: *We witnessed Saul's conversion from shouting accusations to speechless. He was now realizing that Jesus was no conspiracy theorist but the Lord. Lord can be interpreted as a master or a person possessing supreme authority*

5. SIGHTLESS: *It has been said that "there is none so blind as those who will not see." Saul would not see Jesus spiritually. Now, after seeing the Lord in His glory, he could not see physically. Saul spent three days and nights neither seeing, eating, nor drinking.*

PERSONAL APPLICATION:

7. Describe the day of your salvation when you recognized Jesus as the Light of the World. Did you tremble or fall to the ground? Were you speechless?

◦ **7. PROSTRATE:** *In the Old Testament, prostrate meant to worship by lying face down on the ground. It is also described as crouching or falling down. It portrays an attitude of humility and reverence. “Then King Nebuchadnezzar fell on his face, prostrate before Daniel, and commanded that they should present an offering and incense to him” (Daniel 2:46).*

8. Isaiah said that spiritual blindness comes from a hard heart (see Isaiah 6:9-10). Rewrite the following verse into a prayer of repentance asking God to help you see the things of the Spirit.

“Go to this people and say, ‘You will be ever hearing but never understanding; you will be ever seeing but never perceiving. For this people’s heart has become calloused; they hardly hear with their ears, and they have closed their eyes. Otherwise they might see with their eyes, hear with their ears, understand with their hearts and turn, and I would heal them’” (Acts 28:26-27, NIV).

“The light that he reveals in Christ, in the gospel, the light that he reveals of himself in Scripture, the reason people don’t come is not that they lack light, but that they love darkness. They are not kept from light against their will. It’s precisely their strong-willed preferences for the darkness that keeps them away from the light.”

—John Piper

Day Three: Revealed in a Vision

Today, we learn about two individuals—Ananias of Damascus and Saul of Tarsus—who received a vision from Jesus simultaneously, proving God is an incredible multitasker. Multitasking is the ability to do two or more tasks at the same time. My trifecta is listening to the radio while talking to my sister on the phone and then pulling into a fast-food drive-through to order a burrito. I'm not sure my sister enjoys the experience, but I feel like I'm winning until the people behind me honk their horns.

God's multitasking is known as His omnipresence—meaning He is all present. That describes His ability to be everywhere all at the same time. In other words, God's divine presence encompasses the whole universe. There is no location He does not inhabit. "The eyes of the LORD are in every place, keeping watch on the evil and the good" (Proverbs 15:3).

It's astounding to note that God could be with Ananias and Saul at the same time in different places. What does God's omnipresence mean for you and me? First, you are never alone. "He Himself has said, 'I will never leave you nor forsake you'" (Hebrews 13:5). The Holy Spirit lives inside you. Second, because God is omnipresent, you know that wherever you go in this world, He is with you. You can leave your comfort zone knowing He's right there by your side.

I have traveled through the jungles of Burma, the deserts of Iraq, and the inner city of Amman, Jordan. Was I safe? Not always. But God was with me every step of the way. I recently visited Kfar Aza, the first kibbutz Hamas brutally attacked on October 7, 2023. The sound of rockets, artillery, and bullets blasted in the distance as we were just two miles from Gaza City. As I stepped over the rubble and ruins of a bombed building, I repeated the name of Jesus aloud, "Jesus, Jesus, Jesus." His presence comforted me. It's been said that "God inhabits the praise of His people" (see Psalm 22:3, KJV).

READ THE VERSES BELOW AND ANSWER THE FOLLOWING QUESTIONS:

"Now there was a certain disciple at Damascus named Ananias; and to him the Lord said in a vision, 'Ananias.' And he said, 'Here I am, Lord.' So the Lord said to him, 'Arise and go to the street called Straight, and inquire at the house of Judas for one called Saul of Tarsus, for behold, he is praying. And in a vision he has seen a man named Ananias coming in and putting his hand on him, so that he might receive his sight'" (Acts 9:10-12).

PRACTICAL OBSERVATION:

1. Who else lived in Damascus, and how does Scripture describe him?

2. How did Ananias respond to God’s vision?

3. What did God ask Ananias to do?

4. What was happening to Saul while Ananias was experiencing a vision?

5. Describe what God revealed to Saul in his vision.

2. HERE I AM: *This phrase is the most beautiful way to reply when you hear God call your name. It means you are ready, willing, and available for whatever the Lord may ask. The most memorable instance of this reply was when the Lord called the young Samuel: “Samuel answered, ‘Here I am’” (1 Samuel 3:4, NIV).*

5. VISIONS *provide supernatural insight or awareness through divine revelation. The difference between a dream and a vision is that dreams occur while sleeping. Visions happen when a person is awake.*

PERSONAL APPLICATION:

6. Today we read about how Ananias responded to God’s voice. Fill in the following chart to discover who else replied in the same way.

Scripture	Who said, “Here I am”?
Genesis 22:1	
Exodus 3:4	
Isaiah 65:1	

7. We learned that the Holy Spirit was imparted by the laying on of hands. Have you ever given or received this blessing? Journal a prayer asking God to fill you afresh with His Spirit. Would you ask a spiritual leader to lay hands on you? Why or why not?

7. LAYING HANDS: *In the New Testament, the phrase laying hands often referred to Jesus blessing or healing someone. Once Jesus ascended to heaven, the apostles became His hands continuing to lay hands on others similarly. Eventually, it conveyed a person receiving the Holy Spirit. “Then Peter and John placed their hands on them, and they received the Holy Spirit” (Acts 8:17, NIV).*

“The story of Christian reformation, revival, and renaissance underscores that the darkest hour is often just before the dawn, so we should always be people of hope and prayer, not gloom and defeatism. God the Holy Spirit can turn the situation around in five minutes.”

—Os Guinness

Day Four: Called to Great Suffering

You feel a sense of urgency when God told Ananias to go find Saul. There is no lollygagging or lingering. I believe it is because at that exact same moment, Saul was crying out in prayer. God had asked him if it was “hard for [him] to kick against the goads” (Acts 9:5). Goads were made from a piece of lumber that was smooth on one side and sharp and spikey on the other. Shepherds used them to poke and prod sheep along a path. I think God’s goad was piercing the apostle’s very heart—hurting him to the core. Yes, God had caused the pain. But now that Saul was sorrowful and repentant, the Lord would send a tender nurse in the person of Ananias to provide healing. You can almost hear God saying, “Go quickly to My dear son and tell him that although he persecuted Me, I will forgive and comfort him.”

God was also going to show Saul “how many things he must suffer for My name’s sake” (v. 16). You might say that suffering provided Saul’s bona fides—his credentials. In 2 Corinthians 11, Saul-turned-Paul gave a long list of suffering he endured: “From the Jews five times I received forty stripes minus one. Three times I was beaten with rods; once I was stoned; three times I was shipwrecked; a night and a day I have been in the deep; in journeys often, in perils of waters, in perils of robbers, in perils of my own countrymen, in perils of the Gentiles, in perils in the city, in perils in the wilderness, in perils in the sea, in perils among

false brethren; in weariness and toil, in sleeplessness often, in hunger and thirst, in fastings often, in cold and nakedness—besides the other things, what comes upon me daily: my deep concern for all the churches” (vv. 24-28). Like Paul, our calling as Christians comes with great promises and pain.

READ THE VERSES BELOW AND ANSWER THE FOLLOWING QUESTIONS:

“Then Ananias answered, ‘Lord, I have heard from many about this man, how much harm he has done to Your saints in Jerusalem. And here he has authority from the chief priests to bind all who call on Your name.’ But the Lord said to him, ‘Go, for he is a chosen vessel of Mine to bear My name before Gentiles, kings, and the children of Israel. For I will show him how many things he must suffer for My name’s sake.’ And Ananias went his way and entered the house; and laying his hands on him he said, ‘Brother Saul, the Lord Jesus, who appeared to you on the road as you came, has sent me that you may receive your sight and be filled with the Holy Spirit.’ Immediately there fell from his eyes something like scales, and he received his sight at once; and he arose and was baptized” (Acts 9:13-18).

PRACTICAL OBSERVATION:

1. In your own words, explain what Ananias had heard about Saul.
2. How did God describe Saul?
3. Explain what Saul’s calling would include.

2. CHOSEN VESSEL: A vessel, a container that holds something, can be made from clay, which is then baked to harden. Paul referred to the indwelling of the Holy Spirit in us as having “this treasure in earthen vessels” (2 Corinthians 4:7). Chosen implies being special, precious, or prized.

3. SUFFERING SAINT: As Christians we are called to suffering. Peter said, “To this you were called, because Christ also suffered for us, leaving us an example, that you should follow His steps” (1 Peter 2:21). We suffer in part because we live in a fallen world. Suffering also sanctifies us—purifying us like pure gold.

4. What three things did Ananias do immediately?

5. What did Ananias explain to Saul?

6. Describe the two miracles that happened to Saul.

7. How did Saul confirm his conversion to Christ?

PERSONAL APPLICATION:

8. God made you on purpose for a purpose. He's crafted you into a vessel of honor. Journal about the kind of vessel God has made you. What are some of your gifts, abilities, and attributes? What do you think God is calling you to do?

9. Write down the names of people suffering around you. Pray about how God might be asking you to call, visit, or write to them. What encouragement could you offer?

9. **BAPTISM** is an outward sign of inward change. Through baptism, believers identify with the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. The old person dies in the waters of death and rises with Him in “newness of life” (Romans 6:4).

“For the believer in Jesus, every trial of suffering is an opportunity to grow in the faith, to grow in our relationship with the Lord, and to see Him work in our lives in a uniquely personal way that demonstrates His compassion, His comfort, His tender mercies, His loving kindnesses, His grace, and His endless love. Only God knows what each of us needs to experience and learn in order to be ‘conformed to the image of his Son.’”

—T. A. McMahon

Day Five: Increased in More Strength

Even though I didn’t live in California during the Jesus Movement, I witnessed its influence in Michigan as that great wave of revival sent ripples across the United States. Several of my high school classmates became Jesus freaks! One day, they were drinking on the shores of Lake Michigan, and the next, they were getting baptized in its waters, just like their counterparts at Pirate’s Cove in Corona Del Mar, California. Oh, I mocked them severely and avoided their company at all costs. No one wanted to hang with those “holier than thou” killjoys.

But something happened in my life that changed everything. My atheist father, who lived in California, got saved by Chuck Smith and was baptized at that iconic cove—one of the symbols of the Jesus Movement. When I visited my dad during my summer break, I joined him at Calvary Chapel Costa Mesa and walked forward during an altar call. Eventually, I was baptized by Pastor Chuck at Pirate’s Cove, too. Afterward, I couldn’t get enough time at church with all those Jesus freaks. Those I chided I now cherished. So great was my transformation!

That’s just what happened with Saul after his conversion. He couldn’t get enough of the disciples in Damascus. He went from avoiding them to adoring them. He joined them in the synagogue. Matthew Henry said, “Those that take God for their God take his people for their people.”³ Saul now saw the disciples as a source of great knowledge and grace, conversing with them and openly declaring himself a disciple.

READ THE VERSES BELOW AND ANSWER THE FOLLOWING QUESTIONS:

“So when he had received food, he was strengthened. Then Saul spent some days with the disciples at Damascus. Immediately he preached the Christ in the synagogues, that He is the Son of God. Then all who heard were amazed, and said, ‘Is this not he who destroyed those who called on this name in Jerusalem, and has come here for that purpose, so that he might bring them bound to the chief priests?’ But Saul increased all the more in strength, and confounded the Jews who dwelt in Damascus, proving that this Jesus is the Christ” (Acts 9:19-22).

PRACTICAL OBSERVATION:

1. How was Saul’s strength renewed?

2. Who did Saul spend time with, and what do you think happened during this time?

3. What did Saul do next? Describe the difference in his message from the beginning of his journey until this point in Acts 9.

3. CHRIST literally means anointed one. It was not one of the names for Jesus but rather a title. It describes Him as the long-awaited Messiah. “[Jesus] said to them, ‘But who do you say that I am?’ Simon Peter answered and said, ‘You are the Christ, the Son of the living God.’” (Matthew 16:15-16).

4. How did the crowd respond? Explain what puzzled them.

5. Describe the result of Saul's preaching.

6. What did Saul's conversion prove?

PERSONAL APPLICATION:

7. Saul spent time with the disciples at the synagogue. That's like going to church with fellow believers. Journal about some of the benefits you've enjoyed at church.

8. Saul was a different man after conversion. Using the space below, list some of your attributes and actions before and after salvation.

Before Christ

After Christ

5. STRENGTH: *First, Saul's physical body was strengthened by healing through some food and Ananias's touch. Next, he grew in strength through fellowship with the disciples. Finally, he gained strength in his faith by exercising the gifts God had given him and preaching the gospel.*

7. FELLOWSHIP: *After Saul was saved, he spent time with the disciples. The writer of Hebrews explained why it's so important to gather with other believers. "Let us consider one another in order to stir up love and good works, not forsaking the assembling of ourselves together, as is the manner of some, but exhorting one another, and so much the more as you see the Day approaching" (Hebrews 10:24-25).*

"Church is not an organization you join; it is a family where you belong, a home where you are loved, and a hospital where you find healing."

—Nicky Gumbel