

Middle/High School Sunday School Lessons by

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Year 4: Session 7 – Transformation

Class 21: Acts 9:1-19 – Paul’s Conversion

CONCEPTS that will be covered in the lesson

- Help the class think about how we make mistakes when interacting with a new item or idea
- Apply this understanding of “mistakes with new things” to Paul’s reaction toward what the disciples were doing
- Note how Paul’s conversion is not a solitary experience, but a community experience

Materials needed:

1. Video clip (available on rfour.org) from *Leatherheads*
2. Electronics that show the video clip
3. For the activity
 - A cell phone to take pictures with
 - One blindfold per student
 - A 20 to 30 foot string / rope with the ends tied together (so it’s a big loop).
 - i. Note: We actually used a 40ft extension cord. Just plugged it into itself and it worked very well.
 - A room large enough for students to move a 20 to 30 foot string/rope around without too much restriction

THE LESSON

OPENING PRAYER

OPENING QUESTION

- One of the things we do every class is ask and answer the opening question at the beginning of class – because it helps us 1. Learn more about each other and 2. Helps “warm us up” for some of the ideas in the upcoming lesson. So we’re going to do that now.
- So here’s the opening question for today’s class. I [the teacher] will ask the question and then to give you some time to think of an answer, I will answer first.
- Once I answer the question, we’ll go around the circle and each of us will answer.
- When it’s your turn, start with your name and then answer the question to the best of your ability.
- *Here’s this week’s question:* If you could get a group of people to share the same understanding that you have about one thing, what would that understanding be?

INTRO

- Today we conclude our session on transformation – a session of stories where the characters are changed due to their decisions to pay attention to and interact with God.
- The first story we read was the Transfiguration where Jesus goes up a mountain to pray and during that prayer time, Jesus' clothes turn bright white and then Jesus, Peter, James, and John are able to see and hear things that normally they wouldn't see and hear.
- The second story we read was of Peter going to a rooftop to pray, and then being told to not call unclean what God called clean. Then when servants of the Roman Centurion, Cornelius, show up (aka Gentiles), Peter is prepared to accept them into his house, and to then go with them to visit Cornelius.
- In the Peter story, Peter probably wasn't comfortable with what God was telling him. What God was telling him went against his entire lifetime of religion and culture
- Today's story shares similarities with both of these previous two stories, especially the part where God's guidance is very different than what the main character was initially thinking / expecting.
- In today's story, this difference in direction between God and the main character, Saul, is partly due to Saul's misunderstanding of what Jesus' disciples are offering / teaching / doing because what they are doing is so new
- As humans, we often misunderstand new things
- And that's what I want us to be clear about before read today's story
- To provide one example of how we misunderstand new things, let's watch the following clip from the movie, *Leatherheads*
- The movie is set in a time when the sport of football was first getting started
- The big football player, by the way, is still in high school – the rest are “professional” players who play for very little money
- Let's see how well or *not* well the game is understood, even by those who are playing it

WATCH MOVIE CLIP

ASK

- Did the game of football seem to be understood by the players or coaches very well in this movie clip? (no)
- What were some of the things that makes you think they didn't understand the game very well? (how they stretched, the one guy smoking a cigarette, the big guy not playing as a blocker)
- Let's talk about the big football player: What position did the big guy's high school football coach have him play? (kicker)
- Was the big guy a good kicker? (no)
- Knowing what we know about football, what position would it make sense to have the big guy play? (a lineman; someone who blocks)
- And why do we know that? (Because we [or at least some of us] are very familiar with the game)
- But even when he was put in a blocking role, did the big guy seem to know the game very well? (no)
- When he was told to hit people, what did he do? (punched them)
- What do you think the quarterback meant when he said “hit whoever comes near you” (he meant “block” the other players)

TELL / TRANSITION to SCRIPTURE

- Today's story takes place after Pentecost – meaning Jesus has been crucified and resurrected, has appeared to the disciples, and has ascended.
- After Jesus' ascension, the disciples then stayed together and prayed and eventually received the Holy Spirit – we remember that day every year on "Pentecost Sunday," which can be considered/thought of as the "birthday of the Church."
- Since that first Pentecost, then, the disciples had been living a lot like Jesus did. They had been inviting people to follow them and learn from them.
- They were also sharing God's love and healing with the people around them
- The Pharisees who thought they had gotten rid of Jesus, can't really figure out what to do with Jesus' disciples
- So they've mostly continued doing what they did to Jesus: They are threatening and enacting forms of violence to stop the disciples
- Saul is a young Pharisee who doesn't understand who or what these disciples of Jesus are doing – and so he is trying to stop anyone who is associated with this Jesus person/movement
- Today's story begins with Saul going on a mission
- Let's see what happens

READ Acts 9:1-19 (*recommend class reads it out loud; one person per verse*)

9Meanwhile Saul, still breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord, went to the high priest and asked him for letters to the synagogues at Damascus, so that if he found any who belonged to the Way, men or women, he might bring them bound to Jerusalem. 3Now as he was going along and approaching Damascus, suddenly a light from heaven flashed around him. 4He fell to the ground and heard a voice saying to him, "Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?" 5He asked, "Who are you, Lord?" The reply came, "I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting. 6But get up and enter the city, and you will be told what you are to do." 7The men who were traveling with him stood speechless because they heard the voice but saw no one. 8Saul got up from the ground, and though his eyes were open, he could see nothing; so they led him by the hand and brought him into Damascus. 9For three days he was without sight, and neither ate nor drank.

10Now there was a disciple in Damascus named Ananias. The Lord said to him in a vision, "Ananias." He answered, "Here I am, Lord." 11The Lord said to him, "Get up and go

to the street called Straight, and at the house of Judas look for a man of Tarsus named Saul. At this moment he is praying, 12and he has seen in a vision a man named Ananias come in and lay his hands on him so that he might regain his sight." 13But Ananias answered, "Lord, I have heard from many about this man, how much evil he has done to your saints in Jerusalem; 14and here he has authority from the chief priests to bind all who invoke your name." 15But the Lord said to him, "Go, for he is an instrument whom I have chosen to bring my name before Gentiles and kings and before the people of Israel; 16I myself will show him how much he must suffer for the sake of my name." 17So Ananias went and entered the house. He laid his hands on Saul and said, "Brother Saul, the Lord Jesus, who appeared to you on your way here, has sent me so that you may regain your sight and be filled with the Holy Spirit." 18And immediately something like scales fell from his eyes, and his sight was restored. Then he got up and was baptized, 19and after taking some food, he regained his strength. For several days he was with the disciples in Damascus

ASK

- Verse 1 and 2 – What's happening here? (Saul is getting permission from the Israelite High Priest to arrest anyone in the synagogues in Damascus who are talking about Jesus)

- Any thoughts on why Saul might want to arrest followers of Jesus? (It's easy to just think of someone as "bad" or "evil," but most likely Saul thinks that he's protecting God, his religion, and his people from this "Jesus sect")
- Verse 3 and 4 – What happened to Saul as he was traveling to Damascus? (His trip was interrupted; there was a bright light and a voice)
- Can you think of any other stories that we've recently read where there's light and a voice? (the Transfiguration with Jesus's clothes turning bright and God's voice coming from a cloud)
- Verse 5 and 6 – what does the voice tell Saul? (The voice tells Saul that he, Saul, is persecuting Jesus and is to go into the city where he will be told what to do next)
- Verse 7 – what is the response of the people around Saul? (they don't know what's going on; didn't see anything, but heard the voice)
- Verse 8 - How does the light and voice change Saul? (makes him blind)
- In Bible stories, blindness is almost always more than just a physical ailment and also a symbol of the person not being able to understand a situation. What situation do you think the story is trying to tell us that Saul doesn't understand? (he doesn't see/understand that the way of Jesus is *not* a threat to Judaism)
- Verse 9 – How long is Saul without sight? (three days)
- In verse 10 a new person is introduced to the story, Ananias. In verse 11 and 12, what does God tell Ananias to do? (lay his hands on Saul so that Saul can see again)
- Backing up one verse, in verse 11, what do we learn from God that Saul is doing? (praying)
- Back to Ananias in verse 13 & 14 – Does Ananias want to heal Saul? (no)
- Why not? (Because Saul is the enemy)
- Verse 15 and 16, what is God's response to Ananias? (basically, "I have plans for Saul.")
- Verse 17, Ananias listens to God and goes to Saul. In verse 18 and 19, what happens? (Saul's eyesight is restored, he is baptized, and he spends some days with the people he was originally going to arrest)

TELL

- This story is a little bit different than the other two stories because in this story, Saul does not appear to change willingly
- If fact, it can be really easy to read this story as God intervening and actively stopping Saul's actions
- And you are welcome to think about this story that way
- But, here's something else to consider: That Saul actually thinks he's doing God's work at the very start of the story. AND, that Saul is trying his best to pay attention to God.
 - Furthermore, one possible reason for why Saul is so ... *intense* ... about prosecuting the Jesus followers is because he really wants to protect how people understand God.
 - If we think about Saul in these terms, then what that would mean is that Saul may very well be seeking God's will, but is not understanding the situation very clearly
 - But, because Saul *does* want to do God's will, that makes it more likely that he would have an "ah-ha" moment from and/or with God.
 - And that's what we see in today's story: The light bulb goes on for Saul -- there is insight and understanding about the current situation, just like we saw happen in the Transfiguration story and Peter's vision story
 - But the insight that Saul gets is even more disturbing than Peter's insight; Saul's insight completely changes what he thought he knew and understood and it renders him useless for awhile; it *stuns* him
 - So he prays about this insight for three days
- But Saul does not convert on his own. It's too big of a change for him.

- Which is why God sends someone to Saul.
- And who God sends is someone who is praying, who is paying attention to God.
- Ananias, when he hears that he is to join Saul and help him understand what's going on, also has to change. He doesn't want to help Saul.
- But, Ananias agrees to help God, goes to Saul, and because Ananias does this, then Saul is able to see and understand the situation much more clearly
- The story says, "something like scales" fell from Saul's eyes
- And, because Saul can see and understand the situation differently, he then makes different decisions than what he had been making
- Such a drastic change is not easy
- We saw a similar thing happen in the previous story with Peter – Peter receives a difficult vision and then other people appear who tell him about what Cornelius is hearing in prayer.
- To have more than one person, then, paying attention to God is a powerful and important thing – because it provides more opportunity for at least someone to see what God is offering / suggesting.
- To help us think about how insight changes what we do, we're going to do the following activity

EXPLAIN ACTIVITY

- I need everyone to stand up
- And, then, I need everyone to grab onto a section of this 30 foot loop of rope so that the rope is mostly in a circular form
- Our task will be to work together to make shapes with this rope
- We can talk to each other, we can move, but we cannot let go of the rope
- So basically, our bodies become dots that the rope connects to and makes a shape by doing so
- There are three phases: First, all of us will be blindfolded, then half of us will be blindfolded, and then none of us will be blindfolded
- In each phase, we'll make 3 shapes and take pictures of the shapes
- We'll start with the blindfolded phase, then move to half of us being blindfolded and then, finally, everyone will be able to see.

DO SHAPE ACTIVITY

Instructions to teacher(s)

- Three shapes to make: a "triangle," a "house" (a square with a triangle on top of it) and an "8"
- Give the students about 1 minute total to make each shape – give a 30 second warning and then count down out loud from 10 seconds.
- Then tell them to hold still while you take a picture
- When only having half the class be blindfolded, randomly choose some students to take off their blindfolds – it doesn't need to be every other student and it doesn't need to be 50% of the students.

ASK / TELL

- Which phase was the easiest? (when we could all see)
- And which phase was the hardest / least successful? (all blindfolded)
- We see this same thing being true in these three stories about transformation: Just having one person, like Jesus, being able to see because of God's light is far better than having NO ONE who can see.

- But the last two stories that we read tell us that there's something even better than just having one person have God's insight: *Multiple* people having God's insight is even better
- Because, when many of us are seeing what God's trying to help us see and know, then it makes it easier to work together and show others what God is doing and offering to us
- Would you like to look at the pictures from our activity to see just HOW MUCH BETTER it is when we can all see? Let's take a look...

CLOSING PRAYER