

THE WAY, SESSION 7

Why Do You Persecute Me?

*The Acts of the Apostles 9:1-31, The Damascus Road, the Body of Christ, and the Name We Have
Been Waiting For*

Part 1: Leader Preparation Guide

Session Overview

Discovery Aim. Participants watch the Church's fiercest enemy become her greatest missionary, and discover two things in the wreckage on the Damascus road: that the risen Jesus so identifies with His Church that persecuting her is persecuting Him, "why do you persecute *me*?", and that even the man called directly by heaven is sent to the Church, to a nobody named Ananias, for his sight, his baptism, and his commission. Tonight is also the night a six-session question gets its answer: the movement finally has a name, and it is the name on the cover of this study.

Catholic Touchstone. The Church is the Body of Christ. Saul, so far as the record tells us, never met Jesus of Nazareth; he struck at Christians. Yet the voice from heaven says "me." The whole Catholic doctrine of the Mystical Body, and Paul's own later theology of it (1 Corinthians 12:12-27; Colossians 1:24), germinates in that single pronoun (CCC 787-795). St. Augustine gave the doctrine its classic name, the *totus Christus*, the whole Christ, Head and members: the Head in heaven cried out for His members on earth. And the secondary touchstone follows immediately: Christ, who could have completed Saul's conversion Himself on the spot, instead routes his healing, his baptism, and his instructions through the hands of an ordinary disciple. Even Paul receives grace the way everyone does: through the Church.

What You Need to Know

Open with the threat level. Saul is not a heckler; he is "breathing threats and murder," armed with extradition letters from the high priest, expanding the persecution internationally to Damascus, about 135 miles north. Luke has shown us his resume in installments: coat-minder at Stephen's stoning (7:58), approving of the death (8:1), ravaging the church house by house (8:3). The Church's situation, humanly speaking, is about to get much worse.

The encounter itself (9:3-9) is a theophany in the full Old Testament sense: light from heaven, a voice, the terrified question "Who are you, Lord?" And notice the doubled name, "Saul, Saul," the form God's calls have always taken: "Abraham, Abraham" at Moriah, "Moses, Moses" at the bush, "Samuel, Samuel" in the night. Luke's Jewish readers would hear the pattern instantly: this is a prophetic call narrative, and the God issuing the call identifies Himself as Jesus of Nazareth.

The center of gravity is the pronoun. Saul has never laid a hand on Jesus; Jesus has been ascended for perhaps two or three years. Yet: "why do you persecute *me*?... I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting." Not "my followers," not "my movement." *Me*. The theology Saul will spend his life writing, the Church as Christ's own Body, is handed to him in his first second of Christian existence, as an accusation. Give this pronoun a full question; it is the touchstone.

Then watch what Jesus does not do. He does not catechize Saul on the road or baptize him with a word (a direct commission will come too, as Paul recounts in Acts 26:16-18, but not the sacraments). He says: "rise and enter the city, and you will be told what you are to do" (9:6). Three days blind and fasting, Saul's personal triduum, and then the Lord sends Ananias, a disciple otherwise unknown to history, whose hands restore Saul's sight, whose ministry fills him with the Holy Spirit, and whose baptism washes his sins away (9:17-18; Ananias's own words at 22:16: "Rise and be baptized, and wash away your sins"). Prepare the steelman here: Paul's conversion is the favorite Protestant paradigm of unmediated salvation, and the text itself is the answer.

Do not miss verse 2, and do not let the group miss it, though you must not flag it in advance: Saul asks for letters against "any belonging to **the Way**." Six sessions of waiting end here. The movement's first recorded name is not Christians, not the church of the Nazarene, but the Way, *hē hodos*. Let a participant catch it;

someone will, because it is the title of the booklet in their hands. The Thread Watch section tells you how to land the moment and where the thread goes next.

The aftermath matters as much as the flash: Saul preaching in Damascus to general astonishment, the plot against his life, the escape in a basket, and Jerusalem's entirely reasonable terror of him, until Barnabas, the true coin of Session 4, personally vouches for him before the apostles (9:26-27). Every convert needs an Ananias to receive him and a Barnabas to vouch for him; ask your group who played those roles for them, and for whom they will play them.

Old Testament Roots and Fulfillment

Exodus 3:1-6. The burning bush: divine light, the doubled name "Moses, Moses," the self-identification of God, and a commission the man feels unequal to. The Damascus road is a call narrative in the Sinai family, and Saul, the expert Pharisee, would have known exactly what genre he was suddenly living in.

Genesis 22:11; 1 Samuel 3:10. "Abraham, Abraham"; "Samuel, Samuel." The doubled vocative is the grammar of God's most solemn personal calls. "Saul, Saul" places this Pharisee, mid-atrocity, in the lineage of the patriarchs and prophets, which is itself a mercy: the voice that stops him is the voice that has always called Israel's servants.

Jeremiah 1:5 and Isaiah 49:1, 6. The prophet consecrated from the womb, appointed a light to the nations, that salvation may reach to the end of the earth. Paul will later describe his own call in exactly these terms (Galatians 1:15), and the Lord's word to Ananias, "a chosen instrument of mine to carry my name before the Gentiles and kings and the sons of Israel" (9:15), is Isaiah 49 given a passport.

Jonah 1:17. Three days in darkness before a mission to the feared enemy. Christian readers have long seen in Saul's three days without sight, neither eating nor drinking, a burial with Christ before rising in the water, and Jesus Himself named the three day pattern "the sign of Jonah" (Matthew 12:40). Let the group find the number and its meaning.

VOICES OF THE CHURCH

VOICES OF THE CHURCH

St. Augustine of Hippo, Expositions of the Psalms and Sermons on the Conversion of St. Paul (5th century)

St. Augustine never tired of the pronoun. The Head, he preached, was in heaven, untouchable, yet He cried "why do you persecute me?" because the Head cries out for His members: when the body is trodden on, the tongue says "you are stepping on me," though no one touched the tongue. Christ and His Church are the whole Christ, totus Christus, one person mystically, and whoever strikes the least believer strikes Him.

VOICES OF THE CHURCH

St. John Chrysostom, Homilies in Praise of St. Paul (De laudibus sancti Pauli), Antioch, 4th century

Chrysostom, who loved Paul above all the saints, marvels that grace took the Church's most violent enemy at the peak of his fury and made of him her most tireless servant, and that Paul cooperated so totally that he outworked them all. The wolf, he says, was turned into more than a shepherd: into a man who wore his chains as ornaments and carried the Name to nation after nation. No sinner, Chrysostom concludes, may despair after Damascus, and no saint may boast.

VOICES OF THE CHURCH

St. Bede the Venerable, Commentary on the Acts of the Apostles (8th century)

St. Bede lingers on the Lord's strange economy: Christ, appearing in glory, could have taught Saul everything on the road, yet He sent him into the city to receive the word, the Spirit, and baptism through Ananias. The Lord so honors the ministry He has placed in His Church, Bede says, that even one called by a voice from heaven is perfected through the hands of a fellow servant, that the proud might learn that no one is Christian alone.

Catechism Connection

CCC 787-789. Christ and His Church form one body; the comparison of the Church with the body casts light on the intimate bond between Christ and His Church: He is the Head, we are the members, one mystic person.

CCC 795. The Catechism crowns the doctrine with Augustine's own word: Christ and the Church together are the *totus Christus*, the whole Christ, and quotes St. Joan of Arc's luminous simplification: "About Jesus Christ and the Church, I simply know they are just one thing."

CCC 1263. By baptism all sins are forgiven, original sin and all personal sins; nothing remains that would impede entry into the Kingdom. Ananias's words to Saul, rise, be baptized, wash away your sins, are the sacrament speaking plainly.

Thread Watch

THREAD WATCH

Thread 1, The Name: RESOLUTION TONIGHT. Acts 9:2: Saul seeks letters against "any belonging to the Way." Six sessions of a nameless movement end in the mouth of its persecutor. Do not announce it; question 2 walks the group into the verse and lets someone at the table catch the words on their own booklet cover. When they do, give the moment room, then open the meaning: Jesus said "I am the way" (John 14:6); Isaiah cried "prepare the way of the Lord" (40:3), the verse the Baptist wore; and a way is not a theory you hold but a road you walk, a whole manner of life. Then tell them the thread is not finished: this name will appear five more times in Acts (19:9; 19:23; 22:4; 24:14; 24:22), always at charged moments, and the study's final session holds one last secret about how Luke ends the whole book. Say no more than that.

Thread 2, The Map. Damascus is outside the holy land: the Gospel's collision with Saul happens on the road *between* circles, and his commission aims at "Gentiles and kings and the sons of Israel" (9:15). The third circle, the end of the earth, has just been assigned its courier.

Thread 3, Peter First. Quiet tonight, but note 9:26-28: even Saul, called by Christ Himself, is brought to the apostles in Jerusalem to be received. Luke keeps tying the spread of the Gospel to apostolic communion, and here he does it with his hardest case: even the man called by Christ on the road is not left to stand on his own testimony, but is brought to the Twelve and received. The thread resumes loudly next session.

Thread 4, The Breaking of the Bread. A whisper: Saul's fast ends, "he took food and was strengthened" (9:19), among the disciples, after baptism. Say nothing; just notice the rhythm settling in.

Session Goals

1. Participants can explain the pronoun of 9:4-5 and articulate the doctrine of the Mystical Body it contains, in Augustine's *totus Christus* terms.
2. Participants discover the call-narrative pattern (doubled name, light, commission) and the Jonah pattern in Saul's three days.

3. Participants can answer the strongest Protestant use of Paul's conversion as a paradigm of unmediated, churchless salvation, from the text of Acts 9 itself.
4. Participants catch and can explain the movement's first name, the Way, and what it says about Christianity as a manner of life.
5. Participants each identify their Saul (continuing last week's prayer), their Ananias, and one person for whom they can be a Barnabas.

Time Note

Planned for 90 minutes: Win 15, Build 55, Send 15, prayer and memory verse 5. If running long, cut in this order: (1) the second Win question, (2) the Dig Deeper on the three accounts, (3) compress question 8 (the basket and Barnabas) into a summary. Do not cut question 2 (the Name resolution), question 4 (the pronoun), or the steelman; they are the session.

Part 2: Discussion Guide

Opening Prayer

Lord Jesus, you stopped a man in the middle of his worst plan and called him by name, twice, the way you called Abraham and Moses and Samuel. Call us tonight. Show us where we have been kicking against the goads, heal what we cannot see, and send us an Ananias when we are blind and a Barnabas when no one trusts us yet. You are the Way; make us people who belong to you. Amen.

Win (15 minutes)

1. What is the biggest turnaround you have ever personally witnessed in someone, and what did the people around them do while it was happening: help, hinder, or refuse to believe it?
2. Have you ever been absolutely certain you were right and later discovered you were fighting against the very thing you should have been serving? What finally opened your eyes?

Build (55 minutes)

1. Read Acts 9:1-2. Assemble the threat: what is Saul doing, with whose authority, aimed at whom, and how far is he willing to travel? What does this tell us about the Church's situation, humanly speaking?

ANSWER, SHARE AFTER THE DISCUSSION

Still breathing threats and murder, Saul obtains extradition letters from the high priest to the synagogues of Damascus, 135 miles away, to drag believers, "men or women," back to Jerusalem in bonds. The persecution is going international, led by its most gifted and most sincere zealot. Humanly speaking, the Church's darkest figure is about to expand his reach, and no strategy meeting in Jerusalem has an answer for him. Heaven does.

2. Stay in verse 2 one more moment and read it word for word. Luke tells us what Saul's arrest warrants actually called the people he was hunting. What is it, and why should everyone at this table check the cover of their booklet?

ANSWER, SHARE AFTER THE DISCUSSION

"Any belonging to the Way." Six sessions ago we noticed something odd: this movement had no name, and we agreed to watch for what the world would end up calling it. Here it is, and its first appearance in Scripture is in a persecutor's paperwork: the Way, *hē hodos*. Not a philosophy, a school, or a party: a road. Jesus had said "I am the way, and the truth, and the life" (John 14:6); Isaiah had cried "prepare the way of the Lord" (40:3); and the name confesses what Christianity is, a whole manner of life that is walked, not merely a set of opinions that is held. You cannot belong to a lecture. You can belong to a Way. And keep watching: Luke will use this name five more times before his book ends, always at moments of pressure, and it has one more secret to give up in our final session together.

3. Read Acts 9:3-6. Notice how the voice addresses Saul, and remember your Old Testament: where else does God call someone by a doubled name? What kind of scene is Saul suddenly inside of?

ANSWER, SHARE AFTER THE DISCUSSION

"Saul, Saul": the doubled vocative of God's most solemn calls: "Abraham, Abraham" at Moriah (Genesis 22:11), "Moses, Moses" at the burning bush (Exodus 3:4), "Samuel, Samuel" in the night (1 Samuel 3:10), each with

light or fire or the temple near. Saul the trained Pharisee knows this grammar cold; he is inside a prophetic call narrative, the genre reserved for God commissioning His servants, and the terror of it is who issues the call: "I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting." The crucified man Saul's theology had ruled out is speaking from the glory of God.

4. Now the pronoun that changes everything. Saul has never met Jesus of Nazareth, who ascended before Saul ever raised a hand against the Church. Yet the voice says, "why do you persecute *me*?" Not my followers. Me. What is Jesus revealing about His relationship to the people Saul has been dragging to prison, and where will Saul, as Paul, take this single pronoun?

ANSWER, SHARE AFTER THE DISCUSSION

That the Church is not Christ's fan club but Christ's Body: so united to Him that her wounds are His wounds and touching her is touching Him. St. Augustine gave the doctrine its name, the *totus Christus*, the whole Christ, Head and members: the Head in heaven cried out because His members on earth were being trodden on, as the tongue cries "you are stepping on me" when the foot is crushed. Saul will spend his life unpacking his first second of Christian revelation: one body with many members, "you are the body of Christ and individually members of it" (1 Corinthians 12:12-27); "in my flesh I complete what is lacking in Christ's afflictions for the sake of his body, the church" (Colossians 1:24). The Catechism seals it with St. Joan of Arc: about Jesus Christ and the Church, "I simply know they are just one thing" (CCC 795). Every consequence of Catholic ecclesiology, that the Church is more than an institution, that harming her members is sacrilege, that Christ is truly met in her, is folded inside the pronoun that knocked Saul to the ground.

5. Read Acts 9:8-9, slowly. Count the days, and note what Saul does and does not do. Where in Scripture have we seen three days of darkness before a new mission, and what is happening to Saul in that house on Straight Street?

ANSWER, SHARE AFTER THE DISCUSSION

Three days without sight, neither eating nor drinking. Jonah spent three days and three nights in the fish before his mission to the enemy city he despised (Jonah 1:17), the pattern Jesus called "the sign of Jonah" and applied to His own three days in the earth (Matthew 12:40). Acts tells us only the fast and the blindness, but the shape is one Christians have read the same way for centuries: a personal triduum, the old man, Saul the persecutor, in the tomb, fasting and praying in the dark, waiting to rise. Luke will time the rising precisely: sight, the Spirit, and baptism arrive together, through a pair of very ordinary hands.

6. Read Acts 9:10-19. Who is Ananias, what does the Lord ask of him, how does he initially respond, and what happens through his hands? List everything Saul receives, and from whom.

ANSWER, SHARE AFTER THE DISCUSSION

A disciple at Damascus, otherwise unknown to history, no office named, no resume given (Acts calls him only a disciple; whether he held any office we are never told). The Lord asks him to go lay hands on the most feared man in the Christian world, and Ananias answers with the most relatable prayer in Acts: Lord, I have heard about this man. He goes anyway, and his first word to the terrorist is "Brother Saul." Through Ananias's hands Saul receives his sight, is filled with the Holy Spirit, and is baptized, and Ananias's own words, reported by Paul later, name what the water did: "Rise and be baptized, and wash away your sins, calling on his name" (22:16). The greatest theologian in Christian history was healed, welcomed, and, on the strength of Ananias's own

words at 22:16, washed by a disciple with no office recorded, whose only stated qualification was obedience.

Build the steelman. Paul's conversion is a favorite Protestant paradigm of direct, unmediated salvation: Christ Himself saves a man on a road, no priest, no sacrament, no institution in sight, and Paul himself insists on it: "the gospel which was preached by me is not man's gospel, for I did not receive it from man, nor was I taught it, but it came through a revelation of Jesus Christ," and he "did not confer with flesh and blood" (Galatians 1:11-12, 16). If the apostle to the nations needed no Church to be saved, why does anyone? Salvation is a direct encounter between the soul and Christ; everything else is scaffolding. Then put it in its strongest and most careful form, the one a well catechized Lutheran or Reformed Christian would actually make, which is not that the Church is dispensable. It is this: Saul is justified on the road, by grace, through faith, in the moment he calls Jesus Lord; Ananias follows three days later. What Ananias brings therefore signs, seals and publicly confirms a salvation already given, and Acts 9 by itself does not show that the water and the hands caused it. Nothing in the chapter says Saul was unsaved between the light and the laying on of hands. State it at full strength; it is a serious argument with a real Pauline text behind it.

7. Press question one. Stay strictly inside Acts 9. Jesus is standing in glory, speaking audibly, with Saul's total attention. List what Jesus could have done on the road, and what He actually chose to do instead. Then reconcile Galatians 1 with the scene it describes.

ANSWER, SHARE AFTER THE DISCUSSION

He could have catechized Saul on the spot, conferred the Spirit with a word, declared his sins forgiven, and commissioned him directly; He is God, mid-theophany. What He actually says is: "rise and enter the city, and you will be told what you are to do." The healing, the Spirit, the washing of sins, and the instructions are all deliberately routed through the Church, through Ananias's hands and Ananias's baptism, and Saul's mission is publicly owned in communion with the apostles: Barnabas brings him to them on his first visit to Jerusalem (9:27), and years later Paul says he went up again and laid his gospel before them "lest somehow I should be running or had run in vain" (Galatians 2:2), and received from James and Cephas and John "the right hand of fellowship" (Galatians 2:9). Paul is emphatic that they added nothing to his gospel (Galatians 2:6); what he sought and received was communion, not a license. Galatians 1 answers a different question: the *source and authority* of Paul's gospel, which came from Christ, not from human invention. The *means* of his cleansing and incorporation were sacramental and ecclesial, and the same Paul says so: be baptized and wash away your sins. And to the careful form of the objection: Luke does not narrate a Saul who is complete on the road and merely ratified in the city. He narrates a Saul who is told he will be told what to do, who is left blind and fasting, and whose sight, Spirit and washing all arrive together through a man sent to him. Whatever happened on the road, heaven treated it as unfinished until Damascus. The one convert in history who least needed the Church's mediation, by the Protestant reading, is the convert whose mediation Luke documents most carefully. If Damascus proves anything, it proves that heaven itself refuses to bypass the Body it just finished defending with the pronoun me.

8. Read Acts 9:20-30. Trace Saul's first steps as a believer: what does he do immediately, what does it cost, and who takes the risk that makes his acceptance in Jerusalem possible? Read verse 27 with Session 4 in mind.

ANSWER, SHARE AFTER THE DISCUSSION

He proclaims Jesus in the synagogues "immediately," confounding Damascus; the hunters become the hunted, and he escapes the city in a basket through the wall, the great persecutor smuggled out like contraband. In Jerusalem the disciples are afraid of him, entirely reasonably, and the deadlock is broken by one man: Barnabas, the son of encouragement whose honest generosity opened Session 4, personally takes him, brings

him to the apostles, and vouches for the reality of the road and the boldness at Damascus. Every convert needs both figures this chapter gives us: an Ananias willing to say "brother" first, and a Barnabas willing to stake his own credibility on someone's new beginning. The Church grows on people who take those risks.

9. Read Acts 9:15-16 and 9:31. What does the Lord tell Ananias that Saul's future holds, and how does Luke close this section of the story? Measure verse 31 against verse 1.

ANSWER, SHARE AFTER THE DISCUSSION

"A chosen instrument of mine to carry my name before the Gentiles and kings and the sons of Israel; for I will show him how much he must suffer for the sake of my name." The call and the cost are issued together; the Name he persecuted becomes the Name he will carry and suffer for, to the third circle of the map. And then Luke's summary verse: the church throughout all Judea and Galilee and Samaria had peace and was built up, walking in the fear of the Lord and the comfort of the Holy Spirit, and multiplied. The chapter that opened with the Church's worst enemy breathing murder closes with the Church at peace, because God did not merely stop the enemy. He hired him.

DIG DEEPER: WHY DOES LUKE TELL THIS STORY THREE TIMES?

Acts recounts the Damascus road three times: here in chapter 9, and twice from Paul's own mouth, before the Jerusalem mob (22) and before King Agrippa (26). Luke, the most economical of writers, spends his ink where the weight is: the conversion of Paul is, after the Resurrection and Pentecost, the hinge of his whole two-volume work, the event that carries the Gospel to the end of the earth. The repetitions also model something: Paul's testimony flexes for each audience, Hebrew details for the mob, prophetic vocation for the king, one story told three ways. Every believer should be able to do the same with theirs.

DIG DEEPER: THE STREET CALLED STRAIGHT

Luke gives an address: the house of Judas on Straight Street (9:11), a street Damascus still preserves under its traditional identification with the Roman Via Recta. The Lord of the theophany speaks in street addresses; grace is never generic. Somewhere on an ordinary street this week is the person God intends to reach through an ordinary disciple, and He knows the house number.

Send (15 minutes)

1. Ananias's first word to his persecutor was "Brother." Who has God placed in your path that you have written off, and what would be your version of walking to Straight Street?
2. Barnabas risked his reputation to vouch for a convert nobody trusted. Who around you, new to faith, returning to the Church, or carrying a past, needs someone to publicly stand with them, and will you?

Live It This Week

Keep praying for your Saul from last week, by name, daily; you now know what those prayers can purchase. Then add the two roles this chapter modeled. Be an Ananias once: one concrete act of welcome toward someone you have feared, resented, or avoided, beginning, if you can manage it, with the word brother or sister. And be a Barnabas once: one act of vouching, publicly including, introducing, or standing beside someone who is new, returning, or distrusted. Do both quietly. Damascus teaches that the hinge moments of

Church history run through people whose names almost nobody remembers, and whose obedience God never forgets.

Closing Prayer

Lord Jesus, you are the Way, and by your mercy we belong to you. Thank you for every Ananias who called us brother and every Barnabas who believed in us early. Make our hardest cases your chosen instruments, teach us that every wound to your Church is a wound to you, and lead us on the road until we see you face to face. Amen.

Scripture Memory Verse

"But the Lord said to him, 'Go, for he is a chosen instrument of mine to carry my name before the Gentiles and kings and the sons of Israel.'" (Acts 9:15)

Part 3: Leader Reference Card

Every passage used in Session 7, in order of appearance. Flag these before the session.

PRIMARY TEXT

1. Acts 9:1-2 (the letters; the Way)
2. Acts 9:3-9 (the theophany; three days)
3. Acts 9:10-19 (Ananias)
4. Acts 9:20-30 (Damascus, the basket, Barnabas)
5. Acts 9:31 (the summary of peace)

OLD TESTAMENT DISCOVERY PASSAGES

6. Exodus 3:1-6 (the bush; Moses, Moses)
7. Genesis 22:11; 1 Samuel 3:10 (the doubled call)
8. Jonah 1:17 (three days and nights in the fish)
9. Jeremiah 1:5; Isaiah 49:1, 6 (called from the womb; light to the nations)
10. Isaiah 40:3 (prepare the way of the Lord)

NEW TESTAMENT CROSS REFERENCES

11. Acts 7:58; 8:1-3 (Saul's resume)
12. John 14:6 (I am the way)
13. Matthew 12:40 (the sign of Jonah)
14. Acts 22:3-16; 26:9-18 (Paul's retellings; 22:16, wash away your sins)
15. Galatians 1:11-16; 2:1-2 (steelman and its answer)
16. 1 Corinthians 12:12-27; Colossians 1:24 (the Body)
17. Acts 19:9; 19:23; 22:4; 24:14; 24:22 (the Way, future sightings)

CHURCH DOCUMENTS

18. CCC 787-789; CCC 795; CCC 1263