Saul Becomes Paul April 23, 2023

**Bible Verses:** Acts 9:1-19

**Spark Story Bible:** pages 514 to 519

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Overall Lesson Takeaways

* **Believing that people can change.**

Although we obviously know the direction that Paul’s life took after his conversion, let’s put ourselves in the shoes of early Christians: this was a man who was hunting down Christians and putting them to death, only to suddenly claim that he had a change of heart and wanted to preach the Gospel. Would we have been able to trust him? What if he was just doing this as a way to learn more about when/where Christians met? Could his past actions be forgiven? Is it possible for someone to truly change? These are all valid and important questions, but the transformation of Saul into Paul calls to mind past transformations that God has sparked in both the Old and New Testament. The biblical answer is “Yes” – even though that can sometimes be a struggle for us skeptics out there.

* **Thinking about important moments in our lives.**

It’s not hyperbole to say that Paul’s vision of Jesus completely changed his life. Paul quickly changed from persecution to proclamation – and he is believed to have travelled around 10,000 miles spreading the Gospel throughout the course of his ministry! Now, most of us – particularly kids – won’t have had a similar sort of “Damascus Road” experience in our lives… but it can still be an excellent opportunity to get kids to think about some of the important events or people in their lives who have made a big difference in their lives. From moving or starting a new school, to thinking about parents, grandparents, or teachers – everyone has had important moments or figures who helped make them who they are!

* **Seeing Saul’s blindness as a metaphor.**

Paul being blinded by the light of Jesus’ appearance certainly has religious connotations (outside of Moses, human beings aren’t described in the Bible as being capable of seeing God – that’s why angels typically serve as intermediaries) but for kids old enough to think about metaphor, the idea of Paul’s blindness should be an accessible one. When Paul had been persecuting Christians, he had been blind to the damage that he was causing – and blind as well to the truth that Jesus was sharing. In his interactions with Ananias, an otherwise unknown disciple in Damascus, Paul comes to recognize Jesus’ identity as the Son of God – and recognize that he had been called to bring Jesus’ good news to the Gentiles.

Checking In

**Before the reading:**

* **Check in with the kids – welcoming any newcomers warmly.**
	+ Younger kids: Did you do anything for Earth Day yesterday?
	+ Older kids: Highs and Lows from the past week
* **We’re learning about when Paul used to be known as Saul. If you were picking a different name for yourself, what would it be?**

Bible Lesson / Discussion

**Reading the Bible:**

* Our passage today shows a very dramatic transformation in Paul’s life – and it was one that many people probably didn’t see coming!
* **Read the text together, either in the Bible, or the Spark Story Bible.**
	+ Feel free to stop and ask questions during the reading, if helpful.
	+ Afterwards, take time to explore what that passage might mean, and know there's no one *correct* way to read these passages!

**Questions About the Passage** (see next page for PreK/K questions)

* Would you have trusted Paul after he said that he was a changed person? What could convince you that he was actually following Jesus now?
* Paul was blind for a little bit after his vision of Jesus, but he was also blind to how he was hurting others *before* that vision. What else might Jesus have said to help Paul see the hurt he was causing?

**Connections to Our Lives**

* This vision of Jesus changed Paul’s life. What have been important moments in your life? Who are important people who have helped you?
* Do you think change is something that usually happens quickly or slowly? How do you feel when something isn’t changed as quickly as you’d like?

**Biblical/Church Connections**

* During the season of Eastertide, we learn about people who helped the church grow – particularly during those earliest years. Why do you think the church grew so quickly back then? Why would people have been so excited to learn about Jesus?

**Alternate Preschool and K/1st Questions**

Younger ages, particularly those in our preschool class, may have a hard time discussing the biblical text for very long (if at all). My hope is that these questions (and especially the activity) can help with engagement!

**Opening Questions / Activity**

* **Take some time to welcome / get to know the kids!**
	+ Do you know why you have your name, or what your name means? Ask your parents sometime if you don’t know!
	+ Have you ever had a big change in your life before, like moving or starting at a new school? Was it easy or hard to change?

**Warm Up Game – Spot the Difference**

* Today we were learning about some big changes that Paul made, I thought it would be fun to play a game where we had to try to notice some changes: Spot the Difference
	+ Share Original Picture 1
	+ Share Different Picture 1
		- There’s no pen, no smile, and Paul has no feet!
	+ Share Original Picture 2
	+ Share Different Picture 2
		- No windows, no belt, and Paul is missing his hand!
* Play as long as kids are having fun, then transition to the Bible questions.

**Bible Discussion/Questions**

* Our Bible story today is about someone named Saul who was being mean to Christians and the early church – only to become a Christian himself!
* **Read the text together, either in the Bible, or the Spark Story Bible.**
	+ Feel free to stop and ask questions during the reading, if helpful.
	+ Afterwards, take time to explore what that passage might mean, and know there's no one *correct* way to read these passages!
* Back when he was known as Saul, Paul used to be really mean to Christians – you could think of him as a bully. How did Jesus help Paul understand that bullying was not OK?
* Paul realized he was wrong and starting telling everyone about Jesus and how we should love God and each other. How could you tell or show someone else that you love them – and that God loves them too?

People of Faith

In addition to reading our weekly Bible story, I'd love for our older grade school students to learn more about people whose lives were changed by their faith in Jesus. We'll lift up a new person each Sunday, trying to connect their story to our Bible passage as much as possible!

**Mary McLeod Bethune**

As we learn about Paul’s life-changing experience of Jesus, we also remember today a remarkable woman who changed thousands of lives through her tireless commitment to education and activism: Mary McLeod Bethune.

Bethune was born in 1875 to a large family – the 15th of 17 children! – and both of her parents were former slaves who still worked for white families in their South Carolina town. However, when she was 5 Bethune had an experience that would change her life. After dropping off laundry at a white family’s home, Bethune was curious about the books on the shelves – only to be told by a white child that black people couldn’t read. Bethune would quickly prove her wrong!

She was the only child from her family to attend school – a one-room class that was run by a group of Presbyterians – but at night she would teach the rest of her family how to read and write. She eventually hoped to be able to serve as a missionary, but it quickly became apparent that she was a gifted teacher – and she soon became recruited by a Presbyterian minister to run a school in Florida.

After moving to Daytona, Bethune and her husband created a brand new school for African-American girls that quickly began to thrive – and she began to invest in the community in other ways as well: creating a hospital, starting college funds, and leading six different non-profit groups fighting for women’s rights and civil rights. Her school continued to grow, eventually becoming Bethune-Cookman University – and throughout all of this time, Bethune was one of only a handful of women at that time who were serving as university president.

Bethune continued to break down doors and stereotypes throughout her remarkable career – even serving as an advisor to Franklin D. Roosevelt. In reflecting on her accomplishments, Bethune wrote: “I had faith in a loving God, faith in myself, and a desire to serve” – and her service changed countless lives.

Crafts / Activities

**Saul Becomes Paul Mask**

**(Ages 3+, 5 mins)**

Supplies Needed:

* Printed Handout
* Crayons/Markers/Colored Pencils
* Scissors
* Tape/Glue + Popsicle Stick

Instructions:

* This two-sided mask is fairly easy to cut out and assemble, but should be a good craft for any age.

**Saul Becomes Paul Spelling Puzzle**

**(Ages 5+, 3-5 mins)**

Supplies Needed:

* Printed Handout
* Pen/Pencil/Marker

Instructions:

* This puzzle is a little confusing at first, but requires kids to connect objects that are just one letter different (example: Nose-Hose, just like Saul-Paul). This could also be done as a class puzzle/activity.

**Saul Becomes Paul Maze**

**(Ages 7+, 5 mins)**

Supplies Needed:

* Printed Handout
* Pen/Pencil/Marker

Instructions:

* This maze is definitely tricky, but that will make it really fun for older kids and/or maze enthusiasts!

Biblical Background – Saul Becomes Paul[[1]](#footnote-2)

Paul’s ministry is one of our best windows into the surprising way that the early church expanded – largely growing not because of Jewish converts, but through “Gentiles” living outside of Judea in the wider Roman Empire – and it’s worth reviewing some of the important aspects of that transformation:

**Early evangelists in Antioch, Alexandria, Rome, Corinth + others by 40 CE.**

Paul is certainly the best known missionary, but there were many Christian communities outside Jerusalem before Paul even began his missionary work! These communities likely developed from within Jewish synagogues in those cities at first, but there was clearly a shift outside Judea from early on.

**Paul’s Missionary Journeys, ranging from 46 to 60 CE**

As noted above, Paul was not the first to create communities outside Judea, but he was certainly prolific! Paul took three major missionary journeys spreading the Gospel and planting fledgling churches, even as controversy was brewing about the degree that Gentiles should adhere to Jewish Law.

**Mission to the Gentiles is approved by the Jerusalem Council in 49 CE**

The Jerusalem Council described in Acts 15, led by Peter and James, was perhaps one of the most important moments for how Christianity would grow and evolve – at issue was whether Gentile (aka non-Jewish) converts should observe traditions like circumcision, dietary restrictions, etc. The Jerusalem Council eventually decided to not force Gentiles to adhere closely to Jewish Law.

**First Jewish-Roman War and Destruction of Jerusalem in 70 CE**

Although there are some debates around when the early Christian community fled Jerusalem, there is no doubt that the Jewish revolt against Rome that broke out in 66 CE, and eventually led to the destruction and siege of Jerusalem in 70 CE, contributed to the diasporic movement away from what had once been the center of Christianity. As Jerusalem waned, places like Antioch, Rome, and others would assume leadership in the earlier church – and that prominence would continue in subsequent decades.

1. Your ability to share this info with kids will vary depending on their age – this section is mainly written for teachers and parents to learn a bit more about the background to each week's passage! [↑](#footnote-ref-2)