

FEARLESS CONVERSATION™

WHY IS GRACE SO AMAZING?

DISCUSSIONS FROM ACTS, ROMANS,
1-2 CORINTHIANS, GALATIANS,
EPHESIANS, AND 1 THESSALONIANS

CONTENTS

Lesson 1: Can God change someone—even if they don't want to be changed? (Acts 9:1-19)	9
Lesson 2: Why should I praise God when my life is hard? (Acts 16:16-34)	17
Lesson 3: Can I be good enough to please God? (Galatians 3:1-14)	25
Lesson 4: What does a life of freedom look like? (Galatians 5:1-15)	33
Lesson 5: How can I get along with others—even when I don't feel like it? (1 Thessalonians 5:12-22)	41
Lesson 6: Is my pastor better than your pastor? (1 Corinthians 1:10-17; 3:4-9)	49
Lesson 7: How far can I take God's grace? (1 Corinthians 6:12-20)	57
Lesson 8: Where do I fit in the body of Christ? (1 Corinthians 12:12-31)	65
Lesson 9: How can I get through the hard times in life? (2 Corinthians 4:5-18)	73
Lesson 10: Why should I be generous when others have more than I do? (2 Corinthians 8:1-15)	81
Lesson 11: Shouldn't people clean up before they come to God? (Romans 5:1-11)	89
Lesson 12: Is it okay for Christians to smoke? (Romans 14)	97
Lesson 13: Why would God want to make an example of me? (Ephesians 2:1-10)	105

LESSON 1: CAN GOD CHANGE SOMEONE—EVEN IF THEY DON'T WANT TO BE CHANGED?

LEADER PREP

- Read the entire lesson ahead of time. Also read the corresponding pages in the participant guide, as there may be additional info provided there that will be helpful to you.
- Make note of the information in the “Behind the Scenes” boxes with Bible commentary information. This will help you gain a better understanding of the text. The people in your class will have these, too.
- Pray. Then pray again.

GREETING

- Welcome everyone to class and be sure to introduce yourself.
- Be sure everyone has a copy of the participant guide.
- Let everyone know you'll be moving through Lesson 1 today, so they can find that section in their book.
- Explain that there are many “Behind the Scenes” commentary notes

throughout the lesson. These can be read by participants as they come to that section of the lesson, or people who want to plan ahead can read them during the week to be ready for the next lesson.

Then ask:

- **What are the little pet peeves that drive you crazy?**

For example, people who get into the “10 items or less” line at the store when they clearly have 50 items. Or people who sneeze but don’t cover their mouths...that sort of thing. Let’s hear about those annoying things you wish others would stop doing.

Allow a couple minutes for people to call out to the larger group their thoughts on this. Then say:

These little things people do annoy us, and we wish they would change their habits. But change is hard! Let’s get into smaller groups and talk a little more about changing our ways. Get into groups of no more than four and answer this question:

- **When someone else asks you to change, what’s your initial reaction? Be honest!**

Talk about that in your small group. Be sure you introduce yourselves too!

Allow about 4 minutes for people to get into small groups (they may need to move their chairs into smaller circles), introduce themselves, and discuss this question. After about 4 minutes have everyone return their attention to you.

Thanks for sharing in your groups and getting to know each other a little better. Today we’re going to be grappling with questions about change. And not just little changes of annoying habits, but true heart change. Now I have an activity for you and a partner.

Have each person find a partner and stand facing each other. Explain you are going to do an experiment in change. Let pairs choose who will be the observer and who will be making a few changes. Then give them 30 seconds to study each other carefully. The observer will then turn his or her back for 30 seconds while their partner makes five changes. These are simple changes, like removing a watch, putting on reading glasses, removing a shoe, and so on. Partners will then face each other, and the observer must try to identify what the partner changed. You can do this

again with partners switching roles. Have participants return to their seats, but don't tell them to correct or undo their changes.

Thanks to you all for being willing to make some changes. Change isn't easy. How many of you have already returned your watches to the correct wrist or replaced your earrings? Some changes are out of our control. For example, children leave for college, technology is always advancing, and we have to get used to those kinds of changes. But what about changes within yourself? Sometimes that type of change is the most difficult and the kind we are most reluctant to make. How willing are you to change? Today we're going to look at one of the Bible's most interesting stories about a changed life.

GROUNDING

Let's get grounded in God's Word so we can understand more about the way God can change us. Today's Bible account is from Acts 9:1-19. You might have heard of Paul, as he's a pretty big character in the New Testament. He did write about half of it. But you might not know that before he became a follower of Jesus, his name was Saul and he hated Christians. Hated them so much he sought them out for persecution and even death. Let's read what happened to him.

Read Acts 9:1-19 aloud, or invite someone from your group to read it aloud. Encourage everyone else to follow along in their own Bibles or in their participant guides.

God's Word: Acts 9:1-19

¹ Meanwhile, Saul was still breathing out murderous threats against the Lord's disciples. He went to the high priest ² and asked him for letters to the synagogues in Damascus, so that if he found any there who belonged to the Way, whether men or women, he might take them as prisoners to Jerusalem. ³ As he neared Damascus on his journey, suddenly a light from heaven flashed around him. ⁴ He fell to the ground and heard a voice say to him, "Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?"

⁵ "Who are you, Lord?" Saul asked.

"I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting," he replied. ⁶ "Now get up and go into the city, and you will be told what you must do."

⁷The men traveling with Saul stood there speechless; they heard the sound but did not see anyone. ⁸Saul got up from the ground, but when he opened his eyes he could see nothing. So they led him by the hand into Damascus. ⁹For three days he was blind, and did not eat or drink anything.

¹⁰In Damascus there was a disciple named Ananias. The Lord called to him in a vision, “Ananias!”

“Yes, Lord,” he answered.

¹¹The Lord told him, “Go to the house of Judas on Straight Street and ask for a man from Tarsus named Saul, for he is praying. ¹²In a vision he has seen a man named Ananias come and place his hands on him to restore his sight.”

¹³“Lord,” Ananias answered, “I have heard many reports about this man and all the harm he has done to your holy people in Jerusalem. ¹⁴And he has come here with authority from the chief priests to arrest all who call on your name.”

¹⁵But the Lord said to Ananias, “Go! This man is my chosen instrument to proclaim my name to the Gentiles and their kings and to the people of Israel.

¹⁶I will show him how much he must suffer for my name.”

¹⁷Then Ananias went to the house and entered it. Placing his hands on Saul, he said, “Brother Saul, the Lord—Jesus, who appeared to you on the road as you were coming here—has sent me so that you may see again and be filled with the Holy Spirit.” ¹⁸Immediately, something like scales fell from Saul’s eyes, and he could see again. He got up and was baptized,¹⁹ and after taking some food, he regained his strength.

Saul spent several days with the disciples in Damascus.

Before we discuss this, I’d like you to take a moment to reflect.

•What are the first questions that come to mind? What catches your attention?

I’d like you to capture those initial thoughts and questions in your participant guide.

Wait at least 1 minute—or even a little longer—so people can jot

down their questions and thoughts before moving forward. This should be something people do on their own—not in discussion groups. When it appears everyone is ready to move on, continue.

GRAPPLING

We'll get to your personal questions and thoughts in a bit. But let's grapple with a few other questions first. Before we start into this time of discussion, let's remember that together we are creating a safe environment for sharing and conversation. This means we will all be respectful of each other, listening to others before we jump in with our own thoughts and welcoming different opinions, as they may bring us to greater understanding. Also, we believe that God is here and is a part of this conversation. We can trust that God can guide the direction we take as we explore the Bible together. Let's invite God to direct our conversation right now!

Pray for the group to be open to hearing each other and to hearing God. Ask God to open hearts to be receptive to

each other, and ask God to direct the conversation where he wants it to go.

LEADER LEARNING

Often people will look to the leader to help them know what kinds of answers they should be sharing. If you want group members to be honest, vulnerable, and respectful, don't be afraid to model these types of responses. It might take a week or two, but others will begin to see the safety of the group and respond accordingly.

BEHIND THE SCENES

Saul wasn't your typical guy. In Philippians 3:4-6 he gives us a glimpse of some of his achievements and reasons for confidence in himself. His Jewish pedigree was impeccable. He was born of the tribe of Benjamin, meaning he could trace his lineage back hundreds of years to Benjamin, the brother of Joseph. He was a Pharisee, one of the Jewish elite, and kept to the letter of the Mosaic law. Paul says he kept the law so well that he was considered "faultless." His passion for protecting the Jewish teachings and law was so great he was willing to persecute others who taught something he viewed as heresy.

Let's start by discussing in our small groups. We'll start with just the first question in your participant guide. You'll talk about this for about 5 minutes in your small group, and then we'll hear some reports back to the larger group.

• **Why do you think Jesus used such dramatic means for changing Saul?**

Allow about 5 minutes for discussion, and then have each group share something they feel is significant. Thank everyone for sharing.

Let's talk about this next question as a large group.

• **Verses 15 and 16 of this chapter say, "But the Lord said to Ananias, 'Go! This man is my chosen instrument to proclaim my name to the Gentiles and their kings and to the people of Israel. I will show him how much he must suffer for my name.'" What do you think is meant by this statement?**

Allow time for different people to share their thoughts with the whole group. Remember to model and encourage listening and respect for others as they share. When several people have had a chance to respond, continue.

BEHIND THE SCENES

Just before the events in today's passage from Acts 9, Stephen, known as the first Christian martyr, had been stoned by members of the Sanhedrin, which was the highest judicial council in the Jewish community. The stoning, which led to the persecution of other Christians and caused disciples to scatter to other cities, had

been witnessed and approved by Saul (Acts 8:1). The disciples fleeing to other parts of Israel wasn't such a bad thing, as it allowed them to tell others about Jesus who otherwise might not have heard about him. But this dispersion from Jerusalem wasn't enough for Saul, as he "was still breathing out murderous threats against the Lord's disciples" (Acts 9:1). Saul was so determined, he was willing to make a six-day journey of approximately 140 miles on foot to Damascus to root out followers of Jesus.

I'd like us to have a chance to share in our groups about our own observations and questions. Take time now to share anything that seemed especially relevant to you as we read from Acts chapter 9—and also share the questions that popped into your mind. Your group can discuss those questions if you're willing to tackle them!

Allow at least 10 minutes for groups to talk. Give a 1-minute "time to wrap it up!" warning so groups have time to finish their thoughts.

I'm curious what you talked about! Does any group want to share an idea or a question your group found interesting?

Allow a few minutes for different groups to share. Depending on how much time you have left you can simply let groups report their insights and

questions, or if you have time you can invite the larger group to respond to an insight or question that was shared.

LEADER LEARNING

Encourage everyone to participate in the conversation, whether it's in the large group or just in their small group. Everyone's opinion and insight is important!

BEHIND THE SCENES

You've heard the terms "disciple" and "apostle," but what do they mean? Are they the same? Interestingly, they aren't. An apostle is literally "a messenger or envoy." In the Bible, these are the 12 men who followed Jesus. They saw him, talked with him, and were sent by Jesus to "make disciples of all nations" (Matthew 28:19). Paul (Saul) is also included as an apostle, as Jesus spoke to him specifically and called him to be a messenger to the Gentiles.

But when reading the Bible, we tend to think of the 12 men who followed Jesus as "the 12 disciples." Disciple is a term for the follower of a specific teacher. Generally, a disciple isn't a casual follower, as one might listen occasionally to a preacher they hear on the radio. Rather, a disciple adheres to the teachings of the master and imitates him. Ananias was a disciple of Jesus who trusted so much in him that he was willing to risk his life when Jesus asked him to help Saul. How does his devotion and obedience challenge you?

Often we pray for a quick and striking change in either ourselves

or others, but God's way isn't always as dramatic as Saul's experience. On the outside it appears that Saul was intent on his desire to stamp out those who followed Jesus, yet he was quick to change when confronted by Jesus himself. It's possible his heart was already being prepared for this encounter in his recent experiences, specifically Stephen's message and death.

•Which do you think shows the power of Jesus more— an experience like Saul's, or a transformation that might take years? Explain your reasoning.

Invite people to share their thoughts with the entire group. Be sure to thank people for being fearless in their conversation.

BEHIND THE SCENES

Have you ever heard the saying, "Nothing is wasted in God's economy?" Meaning, nothing in your life is wasted. God will use every experience in some way, either to change you or to change others. This was true in Saul's life. Although he was a Jew, he had been raised in Tarsus, so he was familiar with Greek culture. As a Pharisee, he also knew the Jewish tradition, theology, and Law quite well. Additionally, he was a Roman citizen, which brought a host of benefits he would need while traveling ▼

and telling others about Jesus. God used his passion, training, and upbringing in ways Paul never expected. Imagine what God can do with you!

GROWING

It's great to have these conversations and really dig into what the Bible says. This helps us move into greater understanding of God and grow in our relationship with God. One way we see that growth is through applying what we've discovered to our lives.

Saul thought he was defending God by arresting followers of Jesus, throwing them in jail, and approving of their death, as in the case of Stephen. And he wasn't looking to change. He was satisfied with what he was doing and fully believed he was serving God by his actions. Yet when Jesus appeared, he made it clear that instead of helping, Saul was actually hurting Jesus. In fact, Jesus said, "Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?" By hurting Christians, Saul was hurting Jesus. But by his grace, Jesus changed Saul.

BEHIND THE SCENES

It's interesting to note that prior to his transformation by Jesus, Saul was bent on persecuting those who followed Jesus. Yet after his transformation as he traveled to tell others about Jesus, he was arrested, jailed, and ultimately killed for his own faith in Christ.

Jesus knew Saul by name, and he knew what Saul was doing. Saul's conversion should give all of us hope for ourselves and for those we love, as Jesus made it clear that nothing is too hard for him. Maybe there's something within you Jesus wants to change. Maybe there's someone you know who needs Jesus but seems so very far away from him.

• Whatever it is, take a few minutes right now to have a fearless conversation with Jesus about what's on your heart after reading this section of the Bible.

Invite everyone to silently reflect and pray and write their reflections in the space provided in their participant guides.

Allow time for people to adequately reflect and journal; then close with a prayer, thanking God that he is able to change our hearts, minds, and desires and use all our experiences and passions for a greater purpose.