

Understanding our faith  
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# Paul: The transformation of a violent man

## Reading

Acts 7:54–8:1, 9:1-19; Romans 5:1-11, 13:8-10; Galatians 1:11-24

## Teaching

What does it mean to serve God?

The first Christians followed Jesus’ ways of openness and abundant mercy. As Jesus had, they faced conflict with the religious leaders. This conflict reached its height when one of the early church’s most dynamic leaders, Stephen, was executed by stoning.

The book of Acts tells us that when “they dragged [Stephen] out of the city and began to stone him, the witnesses laid their coats at the feet of a young man named Saul” (Acts 7:58).

Then something amazing happened. Saul headed for the city of Damascus, looking for Christians, intending to bring them back to Jerusalem to be tried for blasphemy, perhaps hoping they would all meet the same fate as Stephen. On the road, Saul was blinded by a flashing light and then came face to face with Jesus. “He asked, ‘Who are you, Lord?’ The reply came. ‘I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting’ ” (Acts 9:3-9).

**Paul remained intensely committed to serve God, but realized that the service God desires is to unconditionally love others, not to seek to do them harm when they offend his belief system.**

This Saul himself soon regularly breathed “threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord” (Acts 9:1). Saul’s hostility toward the Christians was *because* of his commitment to protecting God’s honor. Later, he wrote how he “was violently

persecuting the church of God” because of the zeal he had for his religion (Gal.1:13-14).

However, because Paul did sincerely want to do God’s will, he was able to receive God’s direct revelation to him. He came to follow his new understanding of God’s will with full commitment. The Jesus he had hated, he came to believe, was in fact the fullest revelation of his God. Jesus was not a blasphemer, but instead was the model for genuine faithfulness to the God of Israel.

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Saul was undone, rendered speechless and blind for several days. He recovered, but was never the same again. On the Damascus road and after, Saul had his life turned completely around, symbolized by his new identity, Paul the apostle. His old world came apart.

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This revolution in Paul’s worldview led to his transformation away from a zealous and violent persecutor of people he considered to be heretics. He became a man of peace. He remained intensely committed to serve God, but realized that the service God desires is to unconditionally love others, not to seek to do them harm when they offend his belief system.

Paul came to preach the following message: The gospel of God is the good news that, more than anything else, God loves us and wants us to be whole. In *response* to God’s love, we are challenged to love others. This is the most important law or commandment. Paul wrote: “The one who loves another has fulfilled the law. The commandments, ‘you shall not commit adultery; you shall not murder; you shall not steal; you shall not covet’ and any other commandment, are summed up in this word. ‘Love your neighbor as yourself’ ” (Rom. 13:8-9).