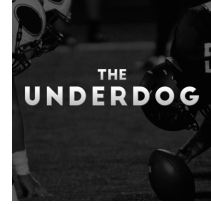


## DISCUSSION GUIDE :: WEEK 3

**THE UNDERDOG**  
**WHEN I'VE DONE IT TO MYSELF**  
**ACTS 9:1-31**  
**11/14/2016**



### MAIN POINT

Everyone who believes the gospel is forever changed, and God uses others to help us in our new way of life.

### INTRODUCTION

As your group time begins, use this section to introduce the topic of discussion.

**Over time, what is something on which your views have radically changed? (A few ideas include: political affiliations, how to raise kids, the role of the church, etc.)**

**Who or what was influential in this transformation?**

**Has this shift in your thinking directly impacted any of your relationships or changed the way people view you, for better or worse? Explain.**

The dictionary defines metamorphosis as a change of the form or nature of a thing or person into a completely different one, by natural or supernatural means. Every Christian has experienced metamorphosis. We all have a story to tell because we have been powerfully changed from death to life by the gospel of Christ. There are few more radical transformations in Scripture than that of Saul on the road to Damascus. In an instant Saul was transformed from a persecutor of the church to one of its greatest champions.

### UNDERSTANDING

Unpack the biblical text to discover what the Scripture says or means about a particular topic.

Armed with the authority of the high priest, Saul intended to stamp out the Christian movement. It is not known how many Christians were there at the time, but Saul's desire to go to Damascus reveals the extent of his hatred. His earlier activity against believers had been directed primarily against those in and around Jerusalem, but a zealous persecutor, Saul would not stop until he had stopped the spread of the gospel.

**ASK A VOLUNTEER TO READ ACTS 9:1-9.**

**What do Jesus' statements to Paul reveal about his close identification with His followers?**

**How did Saul's companions respond to what happened to him?**

**Why do you think Saul was struck blind? What might God have been trying to teach him through blindness?**

**How do you think Saul felt when confronted by Jesus? Given his previous activities, what might he have been thinking about during those three days of blindness and fasting (v. 9)?**

Jesus asked Saul why he was persecuting Him personally. Christ so identifies with His followers that to attack them is to attack Him. Jesus revealed Himself to Saul and gave him further instructions, and Saul's response was immediate. His fasting and blindness were not a punishment, but an appropriate response to the intensity of his encounter with Jesus. This encounter with Jesus resulted in a dramatic transformation in the life of this proud, Christian-hating Pharisee.

**ASK A VOLUNTEER TO READ ACTS 9:10-19.**

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**How do you think Ananias must have felt when the Lord asked him to go take care of Saul?**

**What does Ananias' response to Jesus' directions reveal about his own life and obedience?**

**What plans did the Lord have for Saul? How might this have differed from Ananias' expectations?**

Ananias' response of "Here I am, Lord" revealed a heart that was eager to please the Lord and obey Him. This incident shows us clearly that God's assessment of people is often radically different than our own. Where most Christians would have looked at Saul with warranted fear and trepidation, God saw a "chosen instrument" that He would use to carry the gospel to the known world.

**Why did the Lord send Ananias to Saul to restore his sight? Why didn't the Lord restore Saul's sight without Ananias's involvement? What does this tell us about how God desires for spiritual growth to happen?**

**How did Ananias address Saul? What does this reflect about the change in Saul's life? How did Saul respond after his physical healing?**

Ananias followed directions and went to Saul. God could have healed Saul without the personal interaction with another believer, but God has never intended anyone do the Christian life alone. Ananias addressed Saul as brother, which reflects the familial relationship that exists between the family of faith.

**ASK A VOLUNTEER TO READ ACTS 9:20-31.**

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**What would the crowd have expected Saul to say when he came to the synagogue? When he proceeded to preach about Christ, how did they react (v. 23)? Why do you think some of the people were upset by Saul's preaching?**

**Why was Barnabas willing to stand up for Saul? What was Barnabas risking by doing so?**

**Who has taken a risk on you? Who gave you your first opportunity to serve Jesus? What was the result?**

## How would things have been different if Barnabas hadn't been there to stand up for Saul?

Saul's earliest ministry was characterized by bold witness, Jewish persecution, and a timid response from the rest of the church. Barnabas provides another example of discipleship. As a result of Barnabas's defense, the apostles accepted Saul into their fellowship and they opened doors of opportunity for him to minister and spread the gospel in Jerusalem. Boldness characterized Saul's evangelism. Acts 9:31 ends the account of Saul's conversion. With that watershed event, the early persecution of Christians also ended. The church experienced peace, the Spirit's encouragement, and numerical growth.

### APPLICATION

Help your group identify how the truths from the Scripture passage apply directly to their lives.

**Paul tells the story of his conversion several times in the rest of the book of Acts. What is your story? How could you share it this week with someone who has not believed the gospel?**

**Is there anyone that you feel is irredeemable? How does Saul's story show us that God can change the hardest of hearts?**

**Ananias and Barnabas play an important role in discipling Paul. Who in your life could you take the time to disciple?**

### PRAY

Thank God for using the most unlikely people for His kingdom. Praise God for His grace in your life that transformed you into a new person living for Jesus.

### COMMENTARY

#### ACTS 9:1-31

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9:1-2 As the word of God spread and the number of disciples increased, the church met strong opposition. Saul, who had held the clothing of those who had stoned Stephen, was intent on destroying the church. This persecution was the most severe threat believers had faced to this point in the church's brief history. Saul was breathing out threats against the disciples. The verb translated breathing out also means "inhaling" or "being bent on" some activity. Threats and murder had become the very breath Saul breathed. Saul's hostile mission was to place believers under arrest, whether men or women, and bring them as prisoners to Jerusalem. There they would stand trial before the Sanhedrin. Saul clearly demonstrated himself an enemy of Christ and His people.

9:3-5 As Saul and those traveling with him neared the completion of their journey to Damascus, an unusual thing happened. Saul encountered the resurrected and exalted Christ. A blinding light flashed around him, and he heard a voice. The question Saul heard was succinct and accusatory. Saul was on a mission of hate to persecute Jesus' followers. The resurrected Christ, however, so identified with His people that He said the persecution was against Him personally. When Saul inquired about the identity of the One speaking to him, he used the title Lord. Saul quickly learned the Lord's identity and soon learned the deeper significance of the lordship of Christ in his life.

9:6-7 After securing Saul's full attention and revealing His identity as the risen Christ, Jesus commanded Saul to go into Damascus and await further instructions. Saul was not told at this point what his mission or purpose was. That was reserved for when he encountered Ananias later in the city of Damascus. This stepwise introduction to his future kept him from being overwhelmed all at once with the changes Jesus had initiated in his life, and it also allowed the Christians in Damascus to meet and accept the one whom they feared. This is the first of three accounts of Saul's conversion that appear in the Book of Acts (Acts 22:6-11; 26:12-18).

9:8-9 Saul's encounter with Jesus also impacted him physically. He was unable to see when he got up from the ground. His traveling companions had to lead him by the hand into Damascus. For three days Saul was blind, and did

not eat or drink anything. Certainly his meeting with Jesus had been a traumatic experience. His life would be changed radically by this encounter with the resurrected Christ.

9:10-12 Ananias received no special identification here other than that he was a disciple in Damascus. The Lord spoke to him in a vision and informed Ananias that he was to go to Saul and place his hands on him so that Saul's sight would be restored. As is clear from verse 17, the designation Lord refers to Jesus. The Lord Jesus informed Ananias that He was at work in the lives of both persons involved in the situation. The Lord had given Saul a vision of Ananias coming to him.

9:13-14 Ananias was reluctant to obey the Lord's command for he was aware of the havoc Saul had caused among the Christian community in Jerusalem. Although Luke did not record a detailed account of Saul's activity in Jerusalem, it is obvious from reading Acts 8:1-3 that his persecution had dealt a serious blow to the Jerusalem church. Reports of the intense persecution in Jerusalem already had reached the Christian community in Damascus. The Christians in Damascus also were aware that Saul had come to their city to arrest believers. Naturally Ananias was reluctant to place himself in what he viewed as jeopardy. He knew Saul's reputation and thus protested the Lord's call. Ananias's honest response helps to emphasize the radical transformation that had occurred in Saul's life.

9:15-16 Ananias eventually followed the Lord's command but he did so only after the Lord assured him that He had chosen Saul. The risen Christ referred to Saul as my chosen instrument. To further encourage Ananias, the Lord briefly outlined Saul's future as a believer: he would carry the gospel to a broad cross section of the population in the Roman world of the first century. Both Gentiles and Jews would be among those to whom Saul would proclaim the message. The Lord also told Ananias that Saul himself would be called to suffer for Jesus' name. Saul, who had persecuted Christ's followers, would experience as a believer the same kind of suffering he had inflicted on others. We are not to understand this message as one of divine retaliation for what Saul had done prior to his conversion. Rather, the Lord's words to Ananias were a prophecy about a privilege Saul would experience as he followed the Lord.

9:17-20 The ordering of events in Saul's conversion may have been altered from the standard pattern so that baptism rather than the filling of the Holy Spirit was the final event. The process may have been extended over several days rather than occurring all at once. But the result was the same: Saul became a follower of Jesus Christ. Saul stayed in Damascus for some days, likely becoming oriented to basic Christianity even as he began proclaiming Jesus in the synagogues. He gave priority to the synagogues throughout his ministry, starting there before being forced to take the message elsewhere.

9:21-22 Understandably, the initial response to Saul was skeptical amazement, but as he grew more capable he was able to confound unbelieving Jews, proving that Jesus is the Messiah. Apparently, he was able to explain the messianic connections between the Old Testament and Jesus so clearly that the Jews in Damascus could not refute him.

9:23-25 After many days pictures Saul dutifully preaching Jesus as Messiah for long enough to become the uppermost enemy of unbelieving Jews in Damascus. He had come to help their struggle against the growing Christian movement, but now he had become the chief cause of its growth. Thus they conspired to kill him. Unable to leave via the city gates, Saul escaped in a most undignified but effective manner: he was placed in a large basket and shoved through an opening in the wall (literally "through the wall").

9:26 Unable to refute Saul in debate, the Jews plotted to kill him. His disciples helped him escape from Damascus (vv. 23-25). Saul traveled south to Jerusalem and attempted to associate with the disciples there—the Christian community. He sought to be attached to them, to be known as one of them. Understandably, they were all afraid of him. After all, shortly before this time he had persecuted the Jerusalem church, hunting down, and imprisoning believers (see 8:3). The disciples did not believe his commitment to Christ was genuine; they thought it was a trick to enable him to capture them. They seriously doubted he was a genuine disciple.

9:27 Barnabas, "Son of Encouragement," took a tremendous risk. He was a respected believer whom the disciples trusted. He had generously contributed to Jerusalem Christians' needs (see 4:36-37). Barnabas took Saul to the apostles—the Twelve. Convinced Saul was a genuine believer, Barnabas was willing to act as a mediator with the apostles. The Greek text will allow the explanation in the latter part of the verse to be Barnabas's or Saul's words. The explanation recounted Jesus' appearing to Saul on the road to Damascus, their conversation, and Saul's bold preaching about Jesus in Damascus.

9:28 The apostles accepted Saul into their fellowship. That he was coming and going with the apostles indicates his full identification with them. The implication may be they opened doors of opportunity for him in Jerusalem. He was speaking boldly about Jesus in Jerusalem's synagogues, mainly in those of the Greek-speaking Jews.

9:29 Saul conversed and debated with the Hellenistic (Greek-speaking) Jews. Saul took up Stephen's work and likely advocated Stephen's view that the gospel is for every person. Saul's background as a Jew who was born and had lived in a Gentile area, Cilicia, equipped him to speak to and debate with these Jews. If Saul had debated with

Stephen, that experience—coupled with his viewing the manner in which Stephen died—doubtless had a profound effect on him. The Hellenistic Jews reacted to Saul as they had responded to Stephen: they attempted to kill Saul. His claims for Christ enraged the synagogue members; they considered him to be a traitor to Judaism and sought to eliminate him.

9:30 Members of the Christian community discovered the plot to kill Saul. These believers escorted him to Caesarea on the Mediterranean coast, where he boarded a ship bound for Tarsus, his native city in Cilicia. Saul's name does not resurface in Luke's narrative until Acts 11:25, in events of about 10 years later. Saul demonstrated his intense commitment by going to Jerusalem and meeting with the disciples. In addition, he preached about Jesus and risked his life by debating some Greek Jews about Jesus.

9:31 This verse marks a significant point in the development of the early church. The church, having been forced by persecution to scatter outward from Jerusalem, was at peace in Judea, Galilee, and Samaria. This set the church up for a second stage of growth, which would see the gospel boldly taken outside Israel.