

SESSION 1: PAUL SEIZED BY CHRIST

LENGTH: 13 minutes

BEGIN: Roman soldiers marching through Jerusalem

END: High priest visiting Paul in Damascus and saying
“Keep me informed”

COMPANION SCRIPTURES:

Acts 6:1-8:4; 9:1-9

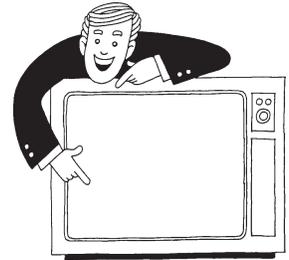
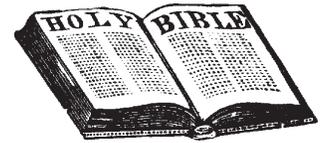
VIDEO SUMMARY:

- Persecution of Christians by the Jewish leaders in Jerusalem has begun. Peter, James, and John, the leaders of Jesus’ disciples, are concerned.
- The Pharisee Saul, who participated in the stoning of Stephen, the first Christian martyr, is determined to be a leader in exterminating these Christians.
- As he leads his band of persecutors to Damascus, however, he is blinded by a sandstorm and a blazing light—and left in a personal darkness in Damascus.

TEACHER BACKGROUND AND INFORMATION:

Peter and Paul fittingly opens with Roman soldiers marching through the streets of Jerusalem, for the Roman empire and its military might form an important background to the story of Christianity’s beginnings and the lives of Peter and Paul, the earliest Christian leaders. The census which brought Jesus’ parents to Bethlehem was decreed by the Roman Emperor Augustus, and Jesus was crucified at the command of Pontius Pilate, Roman governor of Judea, appointed by the Emperor Tiberius. Peter and Paul themselves would suffer death under a persecution instigated by the Roman Emperor Nero.

Roman military might would also be important in Christianity’s beginnings by providing a period of peace—the *Pax Romana*—throughout the Mediterranean. The Empire extended from England to Persia and from Germany to the Sahara, and the Roman legions kept order throughout this



vast region. With peaceful communications possible throughout the Empire, Christianity spread rapidly from its beginning base in Jerusalem.

The first segment of our film also gives us the important Jewish background of Christianity. All the first apostles, and Jesus himself, were Jews with a background in the Law and Prophets of the Old Testament. Peter and Paul are both Jews. Even though Paul will become known as the “Apostle to the Gentiles,” his method of presenting the Gospel was “to the Jew first and also to the Greek (Romans 1:16).”

The Church began at the Jewish feast of Pentecost. Thousands from the Diaspora (Jews scattered throughout the Roman world) were in Jerusalem and heard Peter deliver the first Christian sermon—a powerful exposition of who Jesus Christ is and why the Jews should believe on Him. On the day of Pentecost 3,000 became Christians and were baptized (Acts 2).

The apostles continued daily teaching in the temple and also performing miracles. The apostles were repeatedly thrown in jail (Even today one can see in Jerusalem, under the church of Peter-in-Gallicantu, the remains of the prison kept by the Jewish high priest). The apostles were told not to preach, but they courageously continued preaching, preferring to obey God rather than men (Acts 4:19-20; 5:29). Boldness, courage, and power characterized their ministry. They fearlessly proclaimed the power of the risen Lord and the unique provision He made for man’s salvation (Acts 3:12-16; 4:12).

Unity and love characterized the growing church (Acts 4:32-35). It is appropriate, then, that the first words the Christians are shown speaking in the video are Jesus’ new commandment of “Love one another” (John 13:34-35; 15:12-13). It was indeed a new commandment that contrasted sharply with popular religion of the day.

In the video, Peter and Paul make their first eye contact at the stoning of Stephen. This event indeed had important repercussions for the early church. Stephen, a deacon, was among the first officers selected by the church. He and six others were to help in distributing food to the Hellenistic Jews (the Jews who had lived in the Greek speaking Diaspora) to ensure that the Hellenistic Jewish poor were treated as well as the Hebrew poor who were native to the land (Acts 6:1-7). Latent in the episode itself is the entire

conflict between the Hellenistic and Jewish culture and its role in the church, a conflict in which both Peter and Paul will become later involved. Stephen was brought before the Jewish Council, or Sanhedrin, for blaspheming the Holy Place or the Temple. Under Roman rule, the Jewish leaders had no authority over capital offenses except in cases involving sacrilege against the holiness of the Jewish people. In such cases the Jewish people could implement their own law. The penalty for blasphemy was strong (Lev. 24:10-16), and Stephen was taken out of the city and stoned (Acts 7:58). Undoubtedly Stephen's sermon and courageous death had a powerful effect on Saul the Pharisee. It also was part of an increased persecution which especially caused the Hellenistic Jewish Christians to flee Jerusalem (Acts 8:1-3). The Jerusalem church became more thoroughly Hebrew in its composition.

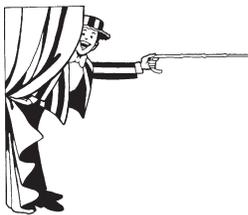
The video has Gamaliel speak to Saul words actually spoken to the Council or the Sanhedrin, although as Saul's teacher it is plausible that Gamaliel would have spoken similarly to Saul himself (Acts 22:3). Gamaliel was a Pharisee, a "Separated One" who devoted his life to the keeping of the law. Gamaliel was so loved and respected he was called the "Beauty of the Law." Later generations said that after Gamaliel's death there was no more reverence for the Law.

The Jewish leaders at this time were divided into several different sects—the Pharisees, the Saducees, the Essenes, the Herodians, and the Zealots. The Zealots were fiercely anti-Roman and wanted total independence from Rome. The Herodians were willing to cooperate with the Romans, especially if they could gain personal advantages from their cooperation. The Essenes were ascetics who led a kind of monastic life. It was their community at Qumran which hid the Dead Sea Scrolls. The Saducees were the aristocratic priestly party which firmly followed the written law while rejecting traditional interpretations which had grown up around the law. The Pharisees, which means Separatists, were the Scribes and students of the law. They were the real religious leaders of the land whom the people followed and respected. Saul was a "Pharisee, a son of a Pharisee." (Acts 23:6).

Both Peter and Paul had a diversity of names. How did this come about? Paul was called Saul until he was with the proconsul Sergius Paulus

(possibly a kinsman?) on the island of Cyprus, when he began to be called Paul. Both names, Saul and Paul, were given him at birth, but Saul was a Jewish name and the other was Roman, befitting one who inherited Roman citizenship from his father. When the apostle began to move out and minister among the Gentiles, it was only natural that he began to use his Gentile name, Paul.

In the case of Peter, however, his real name was Simon Bar-Jonah, Simon the son of Jonah. The title given him by Jesus was Cephas, the Aramaic for stone or rock. That this was a title and not a proper name is obvious from the fact that Cephas was translated into Greek as Peter—you translate titles, but not proper names. Jesus gave Simon this title when he first met him (John 1:36-42). This was in keeping with the Jewish custom of choosing words filled with promise, placing the bearer under obligation to fulfill that promise—or become what he has been called (e.g. see Genesis 17:5,15; 32:28; Isaiah 62:2; 65:15).



INTRODUCTION:

Peter and Paul are both important leaders of the first century church. What picture do you have in your mind of each man? [Give the class time to respond, to determine what is already known about the apostles. Make a list on the board of what is known about the two men. For Peter, people might remember he was a fisherman, a leader of Jesus' disciples, given the keys of the kingdom, denied Christ 3 times. Some might say Peter was the first Pope. For Paul, people might remember his Damascus road experience, that he wrote many New Testament epistles, a Pharisee, brought Christianity to the Greek and Gentile world].

In our 13 week study, we want to learn more about these two men who were so important to Christianity's establishment and early spread.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS FOR AFTER VIEWING VIDEO:

1. Acts 2:42-47 gives a description of the early church in Jerusalem. What are some of its characteristics? To what degree are these characteristics of the church today, or should be?



2. The video begins with the church in Jerusalem at the time of Stephen's death. How is Peter portrayed in the first section of the film? Would the portrayal of Peter have been different if the video had started at the day of Pentecost? Why or why not? *[Peter's courage and leadership in the days before Stephen was taken are very clear. From his first sermon at Pentecost, to his repeated imprisonments, and his continued preaching and healing in the temple, Peter was the key figure in the first days of the church. People even thought Peter's shadow could heal (Acts 5:15)! The deaths of Ananias and Saphira also indicate his righteous power for the establishment of the church. You don't get the sense from these earliest passages in Acts that the church has gone into hiding. What caused a change, however, was the persecution which coincided with the stoning of Stephen (Acts 8:1).]*

3. Peter, James, and John are shown discussing the church's development at the beginning of the video. These three disciples were the closest to Jesus. Can you remember any particular experiences these three had shared together? *[e.g. Mt. of Transfiguration; Gethsemane]*

4. *[Because of the length of Stephen's sermon, this might be a good question for reflection during the week and then to be discussed next week.]* Stephen's testimony (or sermon!) before the Sanhedrin (Acts 7) elicited different responses from observers. In the video, James protested that Stephen went too far. What might he have meant by this? *[Stephen charged the Jewish people with having a history of neglecting the law and attacking the true prophets of God.]*

Paul, however, tells Gamaliel that Stephen's sermon made him determined to protect the Jewish law and persecute the Christians. What in Stephen's sermon would have provoked this response? *[Paul was determined to be faithful to the law, not unfaithful as many in Israel's past had been. In order to be faithful to the law, he thought he must persecute the Christians and remove them from the nation.]*

5. Read Gamaliel's address to the Sanhedrin in Acts 5:34-40. If Paul was a Pharisee and student of Gamaliel, why wouldn't he heed his advice as the Sanhedrin did? In Gamaliel's advice to Paul in the video, whom did he see as the real enemies of the Jewish law and nation? Why do you think, then, that Saul considered the Christians a greater threat to the Jewish people than the Romans?

6. Saul's conversion on the road to Damascus is one of the most significant events in all of history. Saul's Damascus road experience is described three times in the book of Acts. Luke's account is in Acts 9; Paul's account to the Jews is in Acts 22; and Paul's account before Agrippa at Caesarea is in Acts 26. In each case it is recorded that Jesus asked Saul, "Why are you persecuting me?" How could Saul have been persecuting Jesus when He was not on earth? See Matthew 25:44-45.

7. Paul's profound sense of his personal call to apostleship, so emphasized in his epistles (I Corinthians 1:1; II Corinthians 1:1; Ephesians 1:1; Colossians 1:1; Galatians 1:1), is based on the fact that Jesus did actually speak to him and call him for a purpose. In the context of I Corinthians 9:1 and 15:8, what points is Paul trying to make based on the fact that he had seen Jesus?

8. In commenting on Saul's conversion as he was on his way to persecute Jesus' followers, the early church father Chrysostom commented, "Christ, like a skillful physician, healed him when his fever was at the worst." He went on to say that Paul's conversion was a powerful testimony to the truth of Christ's resurrection. Explain how that could be.



CONCLUDING THOUGHT:

The video has shown the infant church in extreme weakness—persecuted and fearful. Yet, in Saul's conversion, we have also the key to the church's expansion and survival. What is that key? *[Christ is working to build His church, and no amount of persecution will overcome His work.]*