



# LifeGroups

GROWING TOGETHER IN THE GOSPEL

## Growth Sheet

### “Who Are You, Lord?”

Acts 9:1-19

#### Overview of “Encounters with God: Stories of Grace Overcoming Guilt”

Throughout this series, we have studied episodes in the lives of individuals in which God met and spoke with them. Three recurring themes have emerged from our study. When God confronts people he (1) shows himself for who he is, (2) allows people to see themselves for who they are, and (3) extends his grace to them.

Since Jesus is the ultimate revelation of God (John 1:1; 2 Corinthians 4:6; Hebrews 1:1-3), each of these encounters with God points to Jesus Christ and what he has done for us. Only in Christ can we see God for who he is (both holy and loving) and ourselves for who we are (sinful but loved). Only in Christ, moreover, does God extend his grace to us. Therefore, studying these encounters with God serves to humble us, heighten our joy, and fix our affections on Christ.

#### The Damascus Road: A Conversion Story?

Many people are familiar with Paul’s encounter with Jesus on the road to Damascus. After all, it’s the classic “conversion story,” and our culture has even embraced the expression, “Road to Damascus” to refer to a sudden turning point in someone’s life.

But the closer we look at this remarkable encounter, the more we wonder whether it can really be called a “conversion story”—at least, in the common use of that word. For one thing, we’re not talking about a crook who became a saint. Paul was well within the bounds of the law, already seriously religious, and sincerely so. Further, we have a hard time saying he even “switched religions.” After the Damascus Road, he still accepted the Jewish Scripture as the Word of God, and he still worshiped the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.

So what happened?

Paul’s Damascus Road experience was not a move from irreligion to religion, nor was it a change of religions. Rather, it was a life-changing encounter with the resurrected Jesus of Nazareth. It was a true conversion since Paul discovered that in Christ alone he could find everything—and much more—that he had been sincerely searching for in religion. This tells us something very important: that *an encounter with Jesus results in a changed view not only of our sinfulness, but also of our religion*. In other words, we find in Jesus what cannot be found even in our well-intentioned zeal: true righteousness, true peace, true joy. As Paul would later write, “I count everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord” (Philippians 3:8).

We will see Paul’s encounter with Christ in three parts: (1) a divine revelation, (2) a personal realization, and (3) a total revolution.



### **1. A divine revelation**

Some people have tried to explain Paul's experience as a seizure, sunstroke, or some religious ecstasy. Each of these theories falls short of the simplest and most compelling reason: Paul really saw the resurrected Christ (see Acts 15:8).

Christ's sudden presence and conversation with Paul revealed at least two essential truths to him: first, that Jesus (who he thought was dead) is alive; second, that Jesus (who he thought was an impostor) is actually God himself.

### **2. A personal realization.**

This divine revelation led to a personal realization. Paul had to accept that all his religious efforts were entirely misdirected. He also realized the true object of all his hopes—Jesus of Nazareth—really *was* the Christ. This meant that Paul was shattered and fulfilled at the same time: shattered because he realized the worthlessness of his religious credentials, fulfilled because he found in Christ what he had been looking for, albeit in all the wrong places.

### **3. A total revolution**

This divine revelation and personal realization led to a total revolution in Paul's life. While obviously not perfect, Paul was transformed in his affections, thoughts, and will. He had a new love, thought about all of life in a completely new way, and had new desires. The same is true of everyone whose life Jesus changes.

## **Discussion and Application**

1. Name some prominent conversion (or "deconversion") stories—either from current culture or from history. What elements do these stories tend to have in common? What are some possible pitfalls in focusing on certain individuals' "conversion stories"?
2. Read Philippians 3:4-6. Paul summarizes his pre-conversion mindset as "confidence in the flesh." In other words, a sense of satisfaction in what he himself could accomplish. Is it possible that there are some ways in which our attitudes and values are like Paul's before his conversion? If so, what are some ways we might display those attitudes and values? (To help you think about this, consider how we might display those attitudes and values in relationships toward people who think unlike us, politics, conversations with family members about other people).
3. Before his conversion, Paul was looking for righteousness (Philippians 3:9). That's a good thing to look for. The problem is that he was looking for it in all the wrong places. Name good some things (for example, contentment, peace, etc.) we look for, and the wrong places we tend to look for them in.
4. In Colossians 2:6, Paul writes, "As you have therefore received Christ Jesus the Lord, so walk in him." In other words, our progress in our relationship with Christ is essentially no different from our first turning to Christ. Name some things that happened when you first turned to Christ that should continue for the rest of your life.