

## **Paul: Identity in Christ**

This study will focus on your Christian identity—what the Apostle Paul calls being “in Christ.” As a group, you will observe the life of Paul (known as Saul prior to his conversion) and discuss how God worked in his life: redeeming his past, empowering his present, and giving shape to his future. You will also consider your own life story (before and after your conversion) and explore what it means to live “in Christ.” In addition, this study aims to help the group begin to discover its own identity by considering what it means to live as the Body of Christ in your small group. While accessible to all groups, this study is recommended for groups who already know each other and are ready to explore serious issues of what it means to have your identity rooted in Christ.

### **Session 1: Saturday**

#### **The Past: “Just as Zealous”**

**10:30-12:30**

*Thirteen letters of the New Testament claim Paul’s authorship, making him the largest single contributor. Most Christians today think of Paul as the Apostle, writing letters of encouragement, of rebuke, of theology to the churches he founded – letters that continue to inspire us today. However, the Book of Acts, as well as Paul himself as he tells a bit of his story in Galatians, reminds us that Paul did not start out as a Christian visionary and pioneer. This session will explore Paul’s early identity as Saul the zealous Jew from Tarsus and allow you to discuss your own identities you had before becoming Christians.*

#### **Read: Acts 7:54-8:4**

1. What is the picture being drawn of Saul?
2. What picture could you describe of yourself that would help the group know you before your conversion? (*Note: if you don’t have a ‘conversion story’ because you have been a Christian for as long as you can remember, perhaps you can describe a time before you deeply committed your life to Christ or a time before you made faith in Christ your own*)

#### **Read: Acts 21:27-22:21; Galatians 1:11-24**

3. What things do you observe about Paul’s life before his conversion on the road to Damascus?
4. What do you think motivated Paul (as Saul) in his persecution of the church?
5. What were some consequences Paul faced as a Christian because of his early life?

*Many of us are familiar with the Damascus road story. Saul, on his way to persecute Christians, is literally knocked off his camel by God. Pretty good conversion story, huh? Paul wasn't just converted on the road to Damascus, however, he was also commissioned. As Alan Segal has written, "From the view point of mission Paul is **commissioned**, but from the viewpoint of religious experience Paul is a **convert**."*

1. Take time in the group to share with one another your "conversion stories." See sidebar for some ideas about sharing. (Note: This may take a long time – feel free to omit some questions or finish this study with part of the time allotted to Session 2)

2. In what ways would you consider your conversion story also as a "commissioning story"? In other words, what thoughts do you have about the purpose for which God saved you particularly?

3. As in Acts 22 when Paul was persecuted among his own people, being a Christian in your hometown is not easy—even Jesus had difficulty ministering in his hometown (Mark 6:1-6). Have you struggled sharing your faith with your family? What is it like for you to return home or try to witness to friends you had before you committed your life to Christ?

4. In what ways is Paul's story encouraging to you? In what ways, if any, is it discouraging?

*For those who became Christians at an early age or don't remember a time when they weren't a Christian, perhaps share:*

**-- A description of your early Church experience**

**-- How it is you know that you are a Christian**

**-- Who has been influential in your Christian life**

*For those who have a more defined conversion story, perhaps share:*

**-- A description of your life before Christ**

**-- The story of how you came to Christ: who was involved, when and where did your conversion happen?**

Now go back to the passages in **Acts** and **Galatians** (**Acts 21:27-22:21; Galatians 1:11-24**):

1. What now does God call Paul specifically to do?
2. Considering Paul's life before being 'called by God,' what gifts, talents, or skills do you see him using in his life that God redeemed for His purposes?
3. What strengths and obstacles (as best as you can imagine) did Paul have to overcome in order to live the life God called him to live?

#### **SUMMARY**

How does the identity you had in the past contribute to the story that God is telling through your life today?

**Close in a time of prayer, giving thanks for each other and to God who has called you individually and together for a purpose!**

**Session 2: Saturday**  
**The Present: “Alive to God in Christ Jesus”**  
**7:30-9:30pm**

*While Paul is clear about his actions as Saul, before he became a Christian, he is also unashamed of his new identity. Not all of us will experience such a sharp turn in our lives, but we can still see Paul as an example of one who fully embraces a new identity in Christ.*

**Read I Timothy 1:12-17**

1. How does Paul refer to his past life in this passage? How does he view it now as a Christian?
2. What picture is drawn of Paul through these verses?

**Read Romans 1:1; I Cor. 1:1; Gal 1:1; Php 1:1; Titus 1:1; Philemon 1:1**

1. When Paul writes to the churches, he introduces himself with phrases that are telling of how he views his life and ministry in Christ. Make a list of these descriptions:
2. Look closely at the list: What words does he use? How does he frame his identity – in terms of things he’s done, in terms of personality traits, in terms of who his companions are... What are some reasons you think he uses these as his introduction?
3. Perhaps you are not used to speaking of yourself in terms of your relationship with God or your calling from God. But if you did, for instance in a letter written to your small group, what terms would you use of yourself in your introduction? Why?

*Throughout his letters, Paul uses a variety of terms and metaphors to describe our identity in Christ. Some of these terms describe our relationship with God, some our new mission or ministry, and some our relationship with other Christians.*

1. Look up the following passages, and list the metaphors Paul uses to describe our life in Christ. Then take time to discuss the implication of being known as such:

<b>Scripture:</b>	<b>Metaphor(s):</b>	<b>Implication:</b>
<b>Romans 6:18-23</b>		
<b>Galatians 4:6-7</b>		
<b>2 Corinthians 5:17-20</b>		
<b>2 Corinthians 4:4-10</b>		
<b>Ephesians 2:19-22</b>		

2. Now, considering your current experience of being “in Christ,” which one (or two) of the above metaphors do you most identify with? Which one(s) don’t you so much? Why?

*For Paul, living in Christ is not only a personal experience but a communal one. We are not only “new creations” individually but also have become “God’s people...being built together to become a dwelling in which God lives by his Spirit.”*

**Read: 1 Corinthians 12:12-27**

1. What ways is the church like a human body?
2. How does this visual representation help you understand the connections and functions of the many people and communities that make up the body of Christ?
3. In what ways do you participate in the body of Christ? How does this relate to the identity you talked about earlier today? If your identity and the ways you participate are not connected, why do you think this is?
4. *Despite Paul’s harmonious metaphor, it has proven difficult to maintain unity with such diversity in the church (and perhaps even in your small group!) Why do you think this is? How might understanding our individual identities help to overcome this struggle?*
5. In what ways could your small group be the “Body of Christ”?

**SUMMARY**

*Being “in Christ,” then, has both the sense of an individual relationship with Christ and a communal relationship together with other believers. What gifts or “parts” do you bring to the group that contribute to the story God is unfolding? What is your group doing (or what could it do) to connect with the larger story of the Body of Christ?*

Going back to the morning study, how is God using your individual past stories in the story he is creating in your group currently?

**As a small group discuss what commitments you can make to each other to strengthen your group identity as the “Body of Christ.” Pray together around the metaphors discussed earlier—that your identities in Christ would deepen and be meaningful on both an individual and communal level.**

**Session 3: Sunday**  
**The Future: Struggles and Promises**  
**10:15-12:00pm**

Even Paul, with his enviably powerful conversion experience, didn't pretend that leading a life in Christ is without struggle, without trial.

With Christ's life, death and resurrection, the redemption of humanity has begun, yet it will not be complete until His return, until the advent of the New Creation.

We live, in other words, in the in-between time. In writing to his churches, Paul confronts these frustrations, even in his own life.

**Read: Romans 7:14-25    2 Corinthians 5:1-5**  
**2 Corinthians 4:7-12**

1. Paul uses many images to describe this tension. Talk about each image as a group. Which image do you find to be most powerful? Why?
2. Do you feel this tension? If so, in what part of your life do you feel this tension the most?
3. If you don't feel it, why do think some people do and some people don't?
4. How does this tension play out in your personal story? In your community's story?

**Read: Romans 8:14-15    Romans 8:18-26    Romans 6:15-21**

1. Though there will be struggles, God promises to make it possible for us to survive. What promises does God give us in these verses?
2. Which of these promises do you find most comforting? Why?
3. How can these promises strengthen you to live more and more in Christ, in your "Paul" identity?

4. Are you more encouraged by promises concerning day-to-day life? Or by promises pointed towards eternity?

5. In what ways are the two dependent on each other?

6. Do you have a favorite “promise” verse? If so, share with your small group. How did this verse come to be important to be important to you? In what ways do you find it comforting and encouraging?

If God is for us, who  
can be against us?  
~Rom 8:31

7. Taking time to memorize Scripture can be an excellent source of day to day encouragement. Decide as a group on one promise verse to commit to memory after this weekend.

**Take time to break into smaller groups of two to three people to pray for help in struggles as well as confidence and comfort in promises.**

**Rejoin as a group and pray together to live in the comfort and security of your identity in Christ.**