

# GoDeeper



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Paul | Part Three | Pastor Steve Wells | 05.02.2021  
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As we continue learning more about the life of Paul/Saul it is common to wonder how Saul became known as Paul. Was he always Saul **and** Paul? Did his name change? If so, how did his name change? Together with your Small Group or family read the article written by Greg Lanier (<https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/>) to see what scripture tells us. <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/article/no-saul-the-persecutor-did-not-become-paul-the-apostle/>

“I keep coming across a “sticky” misconception that God (specifically, Jesus) changed the name of an important figure we now typically refer to as “Saint Paul.”

In a recent sermon, I heard: “Just like Saul the persecutor can become Paul the apostle, God is gracious to us.” On an exam, one of my brightest students wrote: “It is Saul, who is re-named as Paul, who is the primary messenger of the gospel.” A church member asked me, “Wait, you mean Jesus didn’t change Saul’s name to Paul on the Damascus Road?”

The problem is that such a view, however common, isn’t accurate. I hate to ruin the fun.

## Popular But Unbiblical

I’m unclear on the origins of this idea—though some industrious person has no doubt studied it—but it seems this Saul-renamed-Paul notion is a clever re-reading of an Old Testament storyline onto that of the great apostle.

As is well known, God prominently changed the names of two Old Testament patriarchs: Abram to Abraham ([Gen. 17:5](#)) and Jacob to Israel ([Gen. 32:28](#)). The idea seems to be that something similar happened to Paul when he encountered Jesus on the Damascus Road ([Acts 9](#)).

There is no scriptural evidence, however, to support a name change for Saul/Paul. Here are six lines of biblical evidence that prove the popular notion wrong:

### 1. Jesus addresses him as “Saul, Saul” during the christophany ([Acts 9:4](#)).

Nothing in the narrative suggests Jesus subsequently changed Saul’s name. In [Galatians 1:15–17](#), Paul speaks of being set apart before birth to preach to the Gentiles, but there is no mention of any name change.

### 2. Ananias addresses him as “Saul” after his conversion ([Acts 9:17](#)).

There is no mention of a name change, and he is still calling him “Saul” after the christophany.

### 3. The Holy Spirit calls him “Saul” before his first missionary trip.

[Acts 13:2](#) says, “While they were worshiping the Lord and fasting, the Holy Spirit said, ‘Set apart for me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them.’” It would be odd for the third person of the Trinity to keep calling this man by his “persecutor” name if the second person of the Trinity had changed it to his “apostle” name four chapters earlier.

### 4. After the conversion experience, he is called “Saul” 11 more times.

Again, this would be odd if Jesus had changed his name to Paul.

## **5. The decisive shift from “Saul” to “Paul” in Acts happens only once Paul sets off on his missionary journeys away from Jerusalem.**

This subtle shift occurs in [Acts 13:13](#): “Now Paul and his companions set sail.” The person who “changes” his name is not Jesus, but Luke.

## **6. Saul and Paul were two names for the same person all along.**

[Acts 13:9](#) is the clincher: “But Saul, who was also called Paul, [was] filled with the Holy Spirit.” Here the converted person is being called both Saul and Paul—not “Saul the tyrant who was renamed Paul the Christian.” Saul and Paul are dual names of one man, both before and after his conversion.

### **Paul Is Saul**

As it turns out, “Saul”—derived from the famous first king of Israel, from the tribe of Benjamin, to which Saul/Paul himself belonged ([Phil. 3:5](#))—is simply the Hebrew name for this person. “Paul”—a normal koine name—is his Greek name, derived from the Latin surname Paulus.

For someone born in Tarsus ([Acts 21:39](#)) but educated under Gamaliel in Jerusalem ([Acts 22:3](#)) in a strict form of Pharisaism ([Gal. 1:14](#); [Phil. 3:5–6](#)), this is not unusual. Much as many immigrants to English-speaking worlds take an Anglicized name on top of their ethnic name, many Greek-speaking Jews in Paul’s day would have a Jewish/Hebrew name and a Hellenistic/Greek name.

Here’s the smoking gun: When Paul recalls his conversion, he specifically notes that Jesus was “saying to me in the Hebrew language, ‘Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?’” ([Acts 26:14](#)). Paul draws attention to how Jesus addressed him in his Hebrew name, and makes no mention that it is now abandoned.

When Saul/Paul launches his Gentile-focused ministry among primarily Greek-speakers (beginning with [Acts 13:9](#)), it’s natural for Luke, the author of Acts, to begin referring exclusively to him by his Greek name. Nor is it surprising that he’s later referred to as “Paul” in Jerusalem, since there were Greek speakers there too. Indeed, Luke could be making a thematic point by shifting from Saul to Paul around chapter 13, given the broader theme of Acts (e.g., 1:8). After all, the church’s nucleus is shifting from predominantly Jewish-centered Jerusalem to the Greek-centered “ends of the earth,” such as Rome.

The apostle’s two names is not unique. Several other figures in the New Testament have two given names: Joseph, later called Barnabas ([Acts 4:36](#)); Simeon, also called Niger ([Acts 13:1](#)); and Thomas, also called Didymus ([John 21:2](#)); among others.

### **Why It Matters**

So why does clarity on this issue matter? Why would I rain on the parade of someone for whom a divine name change from Saul (bad guy) to Paul (good guy) is a cherished illustration of God’s grace? Theological ideas not rooted in God’s Word—even if attractive and useful—are ultimately unwarranted. I can imagine how easy it is to draw powerful applications from the notion that Saul the persecutor met the risen Jesus and was so transformed that Jesus gave him a new name. That will preach, especially given how closely connected naming and identity are in Scripture. Nevertheless, without biblical evidence for such an idea, we should not use it. Even if it spoils the fun.

This principle applies well beyond this situation, of course. Another common error is the conflation of the magi with the shepherds at the manger. The magi were not there at the same time; they found Jesus months later. We can derive the right doctrine from the wrong text, and we can derive the wrong doctrine from the right text.

As God’s people we should endeavor to read God’s Word closely and be as faithful to it as possible, in every area. Application that appears to draw on Scripture but isn’t actually scriptural—even if it’s “useful” or “cool”—can easily undermine someone’s faith once they realize they’ve been misled all along.”