

ACTS: POWERED FOR PURPOSE

Week 9 • Deeper Study Guide

Acts 26:9-20 | "Living Beyond the Label"

THE DEEPER THEOLOGICAL QUESTION

By Acts 26, Paul has been a prisoner for years. He has been arrested multiple times, transferred between officials, and is now standing before King Agrippa. The charges against him have never produced concrete evidence. But something more powerful than evidence is holding him — a label. Troublemaker. Sect leader. Threat. Prisoner. And labels, once applied, become lenses that determine what people are capable of seeing.

The profound irony Luke is exposing is this: the man everyone has labeled is the man whose entire life is the greatest argument against labels. Before Paul the apostle, there was Saul the persecutor. The labels applied to Saul in Acts 8-9 were not entirely false. He had approved Stephen's death. He had imprisoned believers. He had been eager to kill. There was evidence. And that is exactly what makes grace so theologically radical.

Grace does not operate by denying the evidence. Grace looks at the full evidence — including the future that God sees — and refuses to let the past have the final word. The deeper question Acts 26 presses is not simply 'Can people change?' It is: 'Do we actually believe what we preach about resurrection and new creation — and does that belief change the lens through which we see people?'

GOING DEEPER: WHAT GRACE IS — AND WHAT IT IS NOT

One of the most important distinctions in this passage is that grace is not the same as denial. Jesus on the Damascus Road does not pretend Saul is someone he is not. He knows exactly what Saul has done, who he has hurt, and what he intends to do next. Grace operates with full information.

Grace does NOT mean: ignoring destructive behavior, calling wrong things right, eliminating healthy boundaries, or restoring trust that has not been rebuilt.

Grace DOES mean: refusing to believe that what someone has done is the totality of what they can ever be. You can forgive and still have boundaries. You can extend grace while allowing trust to rebuild slowly.

The key distinction: Grace does not require you to deny what someone has done. It keeps you from deciding that what they have done is all they can ever do.

Grace sees reality. But grace also sees possibility. Labels see a chapter. Grace sees the story God can still write.

SCRIPTURE THREAD

Read these in sequence this week:

- Acts 7:58-8:3 — Saul approves Stephen's death and ravages the church — the label is established
- Acts 9:1-19 — The Damascus Road — grace enters and the label begins to break
- Acts 9:26-28 — The Jerusalem church refuses to believe Saul has changed — labels outlast transformation

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

- Paul's labels in Acts 21-26 were not entirely false — he had been dangerous, he was a divisive figure. The question is not whether a label contains truth, but whether it tells the whole truth. Who in your life have you reduced to a label that may be incomplete?
- Ananias knew Saul's reputation — and Jesus told him to go anyway. Jesus sees the future where we see the history. Is there

- Acts 26:9-20 — Paul tells his full story to King Agrippa — same man, different lens
- Romans 5:8 — While we were still sinners — grace makes the first move
- 2 Corinthians 5:16-17 — We no longer regard anyone from a worldly point of view — new creation changes the lens
- Ephesians 2:1-10 — Dead in sin, made alive in Christ — the theological ground of living beyond the label
- 1 Corinthians 6:9-11 — And that is what some of you were — past tense

Key verse:

2 Corinthians 5:16 — Paul says we no longer regard anyone from a human point of view. He learned this on the Damascus Road. Grace changed how he saw himself. And it changed how he saw everyone else.

someone God may be asking you to extend grace toward that feels risky because of what you know about their past?

- Confirmation bias means we see what we already believe. Once we label someone, we interpret everything they do through that lens. Where has a label you applied to someone been quietly shaping what you are able to see in them?
- What label have you accepted about yourself — failure, too damaged, too late, not enough? Where did that label come from? And have you allowed grace to speak louder than it?
- We cannot preach resurrection while refusing to believe people can become new. Where is there a contradiction between what you believe theologically about transformation and how you actually treat someone in your life who has hurt you?

GOING DEEPER: THE PSYCHOLOGY AND THEOLOGY OF LABELS

Labels do not simply describe people. They become lenses that determine what we are capable of seeing. Psychologists call this confirmation bias — once we have formed a conclusion about someone, we tend to interpret almost everything they do as evidence confirming what we already believe.

- If the label is difficult: a disagreement becomes proof
- If the label is selfish: a boundary becomes selfishness
- If the label is arrogant: confidence becomes arrogance
- The label stops describing what we see. It starts determining what we can see.

Theologically, this is the same problem that kept the Jerusalem church from trusting Paul in Acts 9:26. They had the label. Barnabas had to physically intervene and vouch for him. The community's bias was so strong that eyewitness testimony from a trusted leader was required to break through it.

The Christian alternative: 2 Corinthians 5:16 — Paul says we no longer regard anyone from a worldly point of view. The new creation reality changes the lens through which we see people. Because we know what grace did with us, we cannot look at anyone else and say: this is all they can ever be.

RESOURCES FOR DEEPER STUDY

BOOKS

- The Prodigal God — Timothy Keller | The most theologically precise treatment of grace available — directly addresses what it means to see people the way the father sees the prodigal.
- Unoffendable — Brant Hansen | Challenges the assumption that our ongoing judgments of people are warranted — applies directly to the label-as-lens problem.

- Paul: A Biography — N.T. Wright | Reads Acts 26 in full context; shows how Paul's testimony before Agrippa is the culmination of his entire Damascus Road theology.
- What's So Amazing About Grace? — Philip Yancey | The classic treatment of grace as the most scandalous and countercultural force in the Christian life.
- Redemption — Mike Wilkerson | AG-friendly treatment of how the gospel redeems identity and breaks the power of past labels — deeply personal and biblically grounded.

PODCASTS & SERMONS

- "Acts 26" — The Bible Project podcast | Excellent treatment of Paul's defense before Agrippa as the theological climax of the entire Acts narrative.
- "The God Who Sees" — Christine Caine (YouTube) | Directly addresses how grace changes the way we see people — powerful and practically applied.
- "New Creation" — The Bible Project YouTube series | Essential background for understanding 2 Corinthians 5:16-17 and why new creation changes the lens we use for people.
- "Grace Greater Than Our Sin" — Assemblies of God sermon resources (ag.org) | AG-aligned treatment of grace as transforming power — not simply forgiveness but new identity.
- "Seeing People Through Grace" — Steven Furtick / Elevation Church (YouTube) | Addresses confirmation bias and the grace lens directly, with strong pastoral application.

ARTICLES & ONLINE RESOURCES

- "What Is Confirmation Bias?" — Psychology Today (psychologytoday.com) | Accessible overview of the psychological mechanism that makes labels so sticky and resistant to change.
- "Identity in Christ" — Assemblies of God position paper (ag.org) | AG-grounded theological framework for understanding how the gospel redefines identity beyond past labels.
- "The Difference Between Forgiveness and Trust" — Focus on the Family (focusonthefamily.com) | Practical treatment of the grace-does-not-mean-no-boundaries distinction central to this message.
- "Paul Before Agrippa: Acts 26" — Bible Study Tools (biblestudytools.com) | Exegetical overview of the passage, including its significance as Paul's most complete autobiographical statement.

THIS WEEK'S CHALLENGE

Acts 26 calls us to let grace become the lens — both for ourselves and for the people around us:

- Read Acts 9:26-28 and Acts 26:9-20 back to back. Notice how the same man is seen so differently by different people. Ask: who do I most resemble in these passages — the suspicious Jerusalem church, Barnabas who vouched for Paul, or Agrippa who heard him out?
- Identify one person in your life you have labeled. Write the label down. Then write three things about them that the label doesn't capture. Ask God to give you the grace lens for them this week.
- Identify one label you have accepted about yourself. Write where it came from. Then look up 1 Corinthians 6:11 and 2 Corinthians 5:17. Let those verses speak directly to the label.
- Memorize 2 Corinthians 5:16: "So we have stopped evaluating others from a human point of view." Pray it as a daily declaration this week before you interact with the people who are hardest for you to see with grace.

"Labels see a chapter. Grace sees the story God can still write."