

GETTING PAST YOUR PAST DISCUSSION GUIDE

“Enter through the narrow gate.

*For wide is the gate and broad is the road that leads to destruction, and many enter through it.
But small is the gate and narrow the road that leads to life, and only a few find it.”*

Matthew 7:13–14 (NIV)

Have you ever arrived at an intersection and wondered which way to turn? When we're faced with choices that potentially impact the lives of others, it really boils down to a question of: "Will I do what everyone else does, which is far easier, or will I follow God's way?" Poor choices lead to roadblocks called regret, shame, and guilt that keep us from living God's way. We may be so scarred from the past, we can't imagine God could use us—so we sit on the sidelines. Or our pasts may be like a stain that won't wash out, and it keeps us at arm's length from God. In this lesson, we'll talk about how to get past our pasts and walk with God on his good and narrow road.

Open your group with a prayer.

This is only a guide. Pick and choose your points.

AN EVENTFUL PAST

Read about Saul's "eventful past" in Acts 7:58, 8:1–3, and 9:1. What do these passages say about Saul's painful past? What was he doing?

Often when faced with a decision, we want to choose the Lord's way, but we end up choosing the world's way, which is much easier. In these passages, Saul, in his ignorance, chose the easy way that kept him from the truth of Jesus Christ. Why do you think Saul chose to do these things during this time of his life?

Later it would have been very easy for Saul to feel great guilt and remorse over the things he'd done. What happens when we carry our guilt or shame of our past into our present?

Because of fierce persecution, the Jerusalem believers fled into other towns taking the gospel with them. In that way, God turned a negative into a positive. Discuss situations where God turned around a negative circumstance and worked all things together for good (see Romans 8:28).

When Paul, who had been Saul, appeared before King Agrippa, what did he confess to him? See Acts 26:10–11.

Saul had innocent blood on his hands. Fortunately he chose not to stay rooted in his past; instead he chose to accept the grace of Jesus Christ, and he became a trophy of God's grace. How does his example inspire us to move past our past?

Some people have painful or bad pasts like the Apostle Paul. Others may not have done a lot of bad things, but still feel guilt, remorse, or shame over poor choices. Discuss how a person who is bothered by the past can find God's grace. (Use Hebrews 4:16 as a guide.)

Fellowship – All of us long to belong, but a painful past can keep us from fellowship. What kinds of things prevent us from being transparent with one another and how can we learn to overcome these roadblocks? Consider Paul's example from Acts 26:10–11 in admitting his past to King Agrippa. If you struggle in this area, ask the group to pray for you to be able to see your past as forgiven and forgotten.

A GENUINE CONVERSION

Read and compare the three accounts of Saul's conversion in Acts 9:1–19; 22:6–16; 26:12–18.

How do you recognize a genuine conversion? How would you explain the value of conversion to an unbeliever?

Share conversion stories you have heard. What are different ways God reaches individuals?

According to Acts 9:26, what happened when Saul attempted to meet with the believers? What did they think he was doing?

What reactions would a convert receive from believers? From unbelievers?

If a person wanted to convince others he had a genuine conversion, what would he need to do? What would this look like in our daily lives?

Mission—Telling our stories of how God has changed our lives is a simple, honest, and effective way to share Christ with others. If you have never written your testimony so that it can be told in just a couple of minutes, plan to do that over the next week. Take time in the near future to hear one another's stories of changed lives.

AN AMAZING TRANSFORMATION

From Acts 9:20–21, what did Saul do as soon as he understood who Jesus really was? How did the others who witnessed this change respond?

Saul was able to say "follow me as I follow Christ." Who has influenced you in this way?

How could you influence others as Saul did?

Later, Paul (formerly Saul) made it his mission to plant churches and disciple believers wherever he went. What did he declare about himself in 1 Timothy 1:15–16 and for what reason did he believe he had been saved?

We all come to Christ from different paths. When you were first investigating a Christian life what study guides/books/encounters really spoke to you?

How can our pasts, like Paul's, become an illustration to others of Christ's transforming power?

Describe Paul's attitude in Romans 4:7–8. What do you think he is talking about here?

Paul is quoting David in Psalm 32:1–2. David had been guilty of murder. How did this qualify him to experience the joy of forgiveness?

How do you think Paul's former life affected his appreciation of forgiveness?

Worship—When Saul's eyes were opened to the true identity of Christ, there was only one possible response. Take time in your group right now to proclaim the truth that Jesus is, indeed, the Son of God. Thank God for forgiving your sins and for giving you a way to find both eternal life and a life of purpose here on Earth. If you have experienced an amazing transformation like Saul's, express your gratitude to God for choosing you and for changing you.

Take a moment to review any assignments/challenges made during the personal application and commitment section of your previous meeting. Seeing God at work in the lives of those who commit to him is essential for growth.

PERSONAL APPLICATION AND COMMITMENT:

Is your past a roadblock for you? If so, God wants you to know there is help at this crossroads of your life. Here are a few ancient paths and good ways for you to consider:

1. Read these verses—Psalm 86:5; Mark 3:28; Acts 10:43; Ephesians 1:7; Colossians 1:14; Hebrews 10:10; 1 John 2:2; 1 John 2:12; 1 John 4:10. Pray before you read and ask the Holy Spirit to open your eyes, just as he did for Saul on the Road to Damascus. Take a few moments to write down what you think he is saying to you in his Word.

2. Ask God to forgive your past (1 John 1:9)—If you have never done this before, come to Jesus now and begin a new life with him. Let Christ change your life as he did for Saul. If you have been a believer for awhile, know that God has forgiven your past. Ask him for strength to believe you are forgiven. Consider memorizing this verse to help you remember you are forgiven.

3. Talk to a follower of Jesus about your past (James 5:16)—Get your past “out in the open” and allow that Christ-following friend to affirm what you know to be true, “You're forgiven!” Hear those words. Remember those words. Feel those words. Live out those words. Your past is gone! (2 Corinthians 5:17).

4. Seek further help through our prayer support ministry.

Recognize that our effectiveness for Christ in this world depends on developing a close walk with him. Pray for one another to not let your pasts keep you from living God's way. Move past your past—God has.

“As far as the east is from the west, so far has he removed our transgressions from us.” Psalm 103:12 (NIV)