

10.34

## Acts 9—“Conversion” of Paul

One of the most persistent misunderstandings regarding the story of early Christians in the book of Acts is that the missionary who becomes known as the apostle Paul began his life with a different name: he was called “Saul” when he was the enemy of Christians but changed his name to “Paul” after he began proclaiming the faith he had once tried to destroy.

This was not actually the case. Like many Jewish people of his day, the man in question used one name in his interactions with Jews and another in his interactions with gentiles. A rough analogy would be a Mexican-American businessman being known as “Juan” among Mexican friends and as “John” in more Anglo settings.

Examples of the misunderstanding abound. For example, in Ralph Ellison’s 1952 novel *Invisible Man* (not a science fiction novel but an exploration of how African Americans in urban America are “unseen” by white Americans), the first-person narrator reflects on life:

“You start Saul, and end up Paul,” my grandfather had often said. “When you’re a youngun, you Saul, but let life whup your head a bit and you starts to trying to be Paul—though you still Sauls around on the side.”<sup>1</sup>

Thus Ellison (or at least the narrator of his novel) seems to think “Saul” and “Paul” represent stages of development in a person’s life.

New Testament students know better. There was no “name change” and the Jewish missionary/apostle would have continued to be known as both Saul and Paul throughout his life.

Ellison does recognize that those who become “Paul” still remain “Saul” in certain respects—on that point, he is correct.

1. Ralph Ellison, *Invisible Man* (New York: Vintage Books, 1995), 381.