



FROM SAUL TO PAUL
Acts 9:1-22

This summer we are studying those biblical accounts where an individual encounters Jesus – or Jesus encounters an individual – and how they seize the day. Today’s lesson is perhaps the most well-known conversion experience in the entire New Testament. This account usually is preached on the second Sunday after Easter to remind us that “Easter is not confined to a single day. It demonstrates that the risen Lord continues to be the energizing force in the church.”¹

Three times Mary and I have visited the magnificent St. Paul’s cathedral in London, England. It is simply a stunning, gorgeous building that beautifies the London skyline. While the Apostle Paul himself would have cringed at the thought of such a building bearing his name – it was Christianity’s way of declaring the immense impact and influence he has had on the Christian faith. What this famous church structure says to me is that St. Paul’s writings – his life – his insights – and his missionary journeys have done more to shape history than any other servant except Jesus Christ himself. It was his witness that propelled the church into a world-wide movement – that continues to grow even to this very moment in this church service today. A man saw the Grand Canyon in all its splendor and beauty for the very first time and said, “Something fantastic happened here.” That is what we would say about the life and work of St. Paul.

In the 18th century – there lived in England two brilliant lawyers – Lord Littleton and Gilbert West. As they studied the New Testament – these lawyers came to the conclusion that Christianity rested on two twin towers: the resurrection of Jesus Christ and the conversion of Saul of Tarsus. They devoted all their energies to prove that Christianity was totally false.

They set out to prove the resurrection of Jesus Christ and the conversion of Saul of Tarsus were myths. Attorney West picked up the mantle of refuting the resurrection of our Lord – and Lord Littleton refuting the conversion of Saul.

After a couple of years using their skills as trial lawyers they met to discuss their progress and findings. Attorney West said, “You know – my research is not going the direction I had hoped it would go.”

Lord Littleton looked up and said, **“That is exactly what is happening to me.”**

However, they both persevered in their tasks and finally produced their books. Using all their academic training and legal skills – one proved beyond a shadow of a doubt that the resurrection story of Christ was true – and the other that the conversion account of Saul was authentic. Both men surrendered and gave their lives to Jesus Christ. They were converted by the conversion story.

My mentor Eugene Peterson writes: “Three times Luke tells this story so that we won’t miss it or forget it. Luke tells the story of Paul’s conversion not to show us what a typical conversion should look like – but to convince us that anyone – absolutely anyone – is capable of conversion.”²

Yes, when we read the passage this way, it’s no longer a story about a conversion that happened to someone else a long time ago. It’s now a story about what God can do with the person I think is beyond God’s grace. It’s the word of God that raises my expectation about the person from whom I expect nothing but the worst.

As **verse 15** shares: “This man from whom I expect the worst is the man about whom God said: ‘I have picked him as my personal representative.’”³

Our knowledge of Paul is based upon the writings of St. Luke in the Book of Acts of the Apostles – and, of course, Paul’s own writings which comprise almost ½ of the New Testament. Saint Luke writes about “Saul” until **Acts 13:9**, when he becomes “Paul.” When a new name was given – this often symbolized a new birth – or a new way of life.

Saul was raised in Tarsus – which was the capitol of the Roman province of Cilicia, now in southern Turkey. It was the home of a great university equal or superior to the great universities in Athens and Alexandria. The diversity of the Roman world and Empire could be found in Tarsus. The powerful influence of Hellenistic and Roman culture flow together. These experiences prepared him for his missionary work.

Our story opens today with Saul of Tarsus on his way to Jerusalem with official papers to rid the land of this new heretical group called Christians – or the ‘people of the way.’ It is easy to see that Paul’s way – and God’s salvation plan unfolding in Jesus Christ – are in deep conflict. Yes, Paul’s way of the law and the new way of God’s grace are unable to mix. They are like oil and water.

In my first 5 years here we have studied our way through the gospels of Saint Mark, Saint Luke, and Saint John. We discovered on more than one occasion how our Lord restored the gift of sight to those born blind. In our story today – it is ironic that our Lord took away the gift of sight – so that Saul could see anew with sight – and also gain a new insight into the eternal purposes of God.

Paul is to learn during his time of blindness and self-examination that God’s plan for the salvation of the human race does not hinge on our strategies – our cleverness – our efforts – but on the purposes of God.

Somewhere in Paul's learning and training as a Pharisee – the great truth of **Habakkuk 2:4** had been lost “**but the righteous shall live by faith.**”⁴ So much effort had been placed on outward appearances rather than inward truth and beauty. God's law – rather than God himself – had become Paul's life. The Pharisees had forgotten that the law was to lead us to God – not to make a god of the law.

Scholars – Bible teachers – and pastors from a variety of theological positions have argued over the years whether Paul's conversion was a sudden dramatic one – or was the result of a process of learning that took place over a long period of time. How sad. You should never debate the process of someone else's conversion experience – only the deep impact or evidence it has for them upon their life. God is at work in different people's lives – in different ways – because we are simply at different places spiritually.

One of my dearest friends at seminary had a doctorate in music. He was a gifted bassoonist. He was the head of the music department at a well-known high school in New Jersey. He was not a Christian at this time. A position of choir director came open at the church his wife attended. He was up front with them that he was not a Christian. He shared that musically he could take them a long way – and he did.

It was at a Maundy Thursday service that he felt like ‘chains’ that were imprisoning him began to break – and he felt free for the first time in his life. He found himself resigning his teaching position and applying for seminary at age 45.

He was forced to sell his home and move into a small apartment with his wife and 2 daughters.

No one else at the church that night received or experienced the same phenomenon. God is always at work in all of our lives drawing us close to him.

I remember once C. S. Lewis shared that one day in his office at the University he found himself saying “God – you are God.” He said, “**I became the most reluctant convert in the history of the Christian faith.**” However, this reluctant convert became one of the most credible Christian statesmen of the 20th century. So whether your turning to Christ as Savior was gradual, sudden, quiet, or dramatic there was the same joy in heaven because of your decision to follow God's plan of salvation.

If Paul's conversion experience was sudden and dramatic – the church's acceptance of him was not. It took the encouraging work and words of Ananias, Barnabas, and others – to help him settle into this new community and establish himself. They did not call him St. Paul the first time they met. That came later.

Now, in all fairness to Saul – it is threatening to see in a new way. I clipped out of a newspaper a most revealing story of a distinguished eye surgeon who agreed to perform free of charge – a delicate operation to restore sight to a blind homeless man

on the streets of New York City. The blind man refused. He said, "If the world is anything like the world around me, I do not know if I could stand seeing the acts of violence and inhumanity around me."

I think this sort of phenomenon was taking place in the life of the Apostle Paul – when he was known as Saul. As the late Dr. William Sloan Coffin would often say, "Sometimes we prefer the illness more than we do the cure." It is threatening to see in a new way.

I believe Paul was blinded for two reasons. One is that he had to experience his own spiritual darkness – and the spiritual darkness he had brought others into. Secondly, during the time he was blind he had to learn to trust Christ and walk by faith.

For most of his religious journey Saul of Tarsus did everything he knew to earn his salvation – and his right understanding with God. Now Jesus Christ comes and changes the way. It must be a gift of grace – not a work of man. Paul had to be blinded in order to see the greater and purer light of God's love revealed in Jesus Christ. It is tough to move in a new direction – and see in a new way.

Our mentor and founder, John Wesley's first rule for a Methodist preacher was that "they know God as a pardoning God. If you do not know God as a loving God – then you do not fully know our God.

I once shared with my Truth Seekers Class I would have loved to be present when Saul of Tarsus applied for membership at the Evangelical United Methodist Church of Jerusalem. Can you imagine the discussion at that Administrative Board meeting? Imagine the conversations in the parking lot after the meeting. It would be like the late Madeline Murray O'Hare coming into our church and volunteering to be our prayer chain coordinator.

It would be like the UNA bomber volunteering to take charge of our computer and mailing operation. I would have given him the task of sending out the letter to raise the \$30,000 needed to paint the sanctuary – or get volunteers at Vacation Bible School. I bet every envelope would have been returned - and on time at that.

In 1922 Max Flack of the Chicago Cubs and Cliff Heathcote of the St. Louis Cardinals were traded for each other.

That's not unusual, except that they were traded after the first game of a double-header between those two teams. During the second game both men played in different uniforms. That is exactly what is happening in our scripture lesson today. Saul is on his way to persecute more Christians when he surrenders. He changes teams – puts on a different uniform and moves in a different way.

Yes, Saul of Tarsus became the famous Apostle Paul who had shaped the Christian church more than anyone else except for Jesus Christ. Just think!

Evangelical United Methodist Church of Jerusalem almost did not let him in. On the Damascus road – Jesus got all of Paul – and Paul let all of Christ into his life. History demonstrates what a great trade it was. This is one trade we all need to make.

Just think – if Jesus loves and pursues his arch enemies this much – imagine how much he loves and pursues us who actually belong to him.

Now, you see why Paul’s conversion experience is described in the most dramatic of ways. The gifted spiritual writer Flannery O’Connor once said of Saul’s conversion, “I reckon the Lord knew that the only to make a Christian out of that one was to knock him off his horse.” Now, I have never fallen off a horse, but I do not think it would be a gentle experience. One of the marvels of the human condition is that it often takes hardship to get our attention.

Yes, on the Damascus Road – the risen Lord encounters Saul of Tarsus and leads Paul in a new and exciting way. All the evidence demonstrates what a magnificent U-turn it was. U-turns are still allowed and even encouraged.

Amen and amen.

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June 22, 2008

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ENDNOTES

¹ Fred B. Craddock [et. al], **“Preaching Through the Christian Year, YEAR C**, Trinity Press International, first edition, Valley Forge, PA, 19482, 1994, page 238.

² Eugene Peterson, **Conversations: The Message Bible with its Translator**, NavPress, Colorado Springs, CO, 2007, page 1696.

³ Peterson, *ibid*, page 1697.

⁴ RSV, Habakkuk 2:4.