

“Conversion”
Acts 9:1-22
August 14, 2022

INTRODUCTION:

We're in the second sermon today in a five-sermon series on outreach. Blake led us off last week with an excellent sermon from Colossians, and each of our pastors will be preaching one sermon on this topic, concluding on September 4. I want to preach today about conversion. Christianity is a converting religion. At its heart, Christianity teaches that people need converting because by nature we go the wrong way, a way that destroys all that is most precious. In theological terms, we have a sin nature that will destroy us apart from divine intervention. Such intervention can be described in various ways, but one of the most common is conversion. Everyone, even covenant children raised in good Christian families, needs conversion.

Stories of conversions encourage us. When our children were in school, we began giving a ride to a young man who was a classmate of our son, Matthew. He was very bright and gifted, but used those gifts in a cynical, negative way. He would sometimes come over to our house, and at times would attend youth group with Matthew. But his cynicism and negativity continued unabated, and he seemed to be at the top of the list of those least likely to come to faith in Christ. But he had an older brother who prayed for him, and some Christian friends in this church who continued to love him, befriend him and pray for him. He played trumpet, so Steve Whitner did his usual thing and recruited him to use that talent in the music ministry of this church and also reached out to him in spiritual ways outside of music. Then a couple of years after his high school graduation, God converted him. He came to this church until he moved out of town. God later blessed him with a wife, and the two of them began serving the Lord as missionaries.

Today's passage describes what is arguably the most famous conversion in the history of the Church. Luke finds it so important that he manages to write the book of Acts in such a way that the story of this conversion appears three times, of which this is the first. The chief persecutor of the church becomes the chief apostle who will spread the good news of Jesus to the Gentile world.

I. The Heart of Conversion

Conversion is all about change, something that humans are by nature reluctant to do. Perhaps the reason for this reluctance is simply our resistance to admitting that we were wrong. In any case, conversion is always from something and to something else. What was Saul, later named Paul, converted

from? Luke tells us in verse 1 that Saul was a murderer, **“breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord.”** Saul “breathed” threats and murder. The average person breathes about fifteen times each minute. This is Luke’s way of saying that Saul was consumed with anger and hatred for Christians.

We need to ponder this a bit. We know that Paul described himself in Philippians 3 as one who was **“as to the law, a Pharisee”** (Phil. 3:5). The Pharisees were noted for their zeal for obedience to the law. So how could Saul, zealous for the law, commit himself to a lifestyle that was in such obvious violation of the sixth commandment, “Thou shalt not murder”? Undoubtedly, Saul would have seen himself not as a murderer, but as one who was zealous for God. In his biography of Paul, N. T. Wright says that Saul imagined himself as a version of the Old Testament character, Phinehas. In the wilderness years of Israel, Phinehas was commended for his zeal when the children of Israel began taking wives from among the people of the land, which then led them to worship the false god, Baal. In judgment, a plague broke out among the people. It was ended when Phinehas went into the chamber of an Israelite man who was with his Midianite wife, took a spear and ran it through them both. Saul viewed the worship of Jesus as an assault on the glory of Israel’s God. So he was zealous, but with a misguided zeal.

Paul tells us in Philippians 3 that it was his self-righteousness that fueled his misguided zeal. So conversion is from the attempt to establish one’s own righteousness to trusting in Jesus’ righteousness. Our text also helps us learn to spot the damaging effects of such self-righteousness. It is revealed by the presence of fear and anger. Saul was fearful and angry at the threat to Judaism represented by Jesus and his followers. What gives rise to fear and anger in your heart? When you pull back the curtain, you will see that it is the same self-righteousness that fueled Saul’s murderous actions. One of the common sources of fear and anger in America today is what we might call “political righteousness.” It happens on both the left and the right side of the political spectrum. If you respond in anger to those who disagree with you politically, it is very likely that politics has become your religion and you are seeking to establish your righteousness through having correct political views. For example, a church member told me during the 2020 election that a friend of hers, also a professing Christian, said that she couldn’t be friends with anyone who voted differently than her. Perhaps such a person is in need of conversion.

The zeal of Saul is evident in this trip to Damascus. Saul had hoped to snuff out what he considered this heresy of the worship of Jesus. But we learn in the previous chapter that when a persecution broke out in Jerusalem following the martyrdom of Stephen, the Christians were scattered. Saul got word that some went as far as Damascus, Syria, about a week’s journey from

Jerusalem. So he secured an extradition order from the high priest to find any of these Christians and bring them back to Jerusalem.

Saul had almost reached his destination of Damascus when the light from heaven flashed around him. Saul was an Old Testament scholar, and such a light would have been familiar to him. It was the shekinah glory of God, a light that accompanied the presence of God. Did Saul think that God appeared to him here to commend him for his zeal? It would seem so, based on his response to God's words. When Jesus said, "**Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?**", Saul was puzzled. That wasn't what he was expecting to hear from God. So he asks, "**Who are you, Lord?**" And then came the reply that changed everything for Saul. "**I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting**" (v. 5). The heart of conversion is a changed view of Jesus. Saul had regarded Jesus as a problem to be removed, and now he sees that Jesus is none other than God incarnate.

The heart of conversion, not only for Saul, but for everyone who has ever become a Christian, is a changed view of Jesus. Instead of seeing him as someone who gets in the way of a satisfying life, he is seen as the author of all of life. Instead of seeing him as the problem, he's seen as the solution. In August of 1949, a group of fifteen elite firefighters parachuted out of a plane to battle a raging Montana fire. Not long after they landed, they realized that the fire had progressed much further and faster than they realized, to the point that their attention turned from stopping the fire to escaping it. As they were attempting to escape, it became evident to Wagner Dodge, the foreman of the crew, that they wouldn't make it. Dodge then did something that baffled his crew. He stopped, took out his matches, and began lighting fires around them. His crew thought he was crazy, and they all continued running for cover. What he was doing, of course, was seeking to clear an area where the fire would lack any fuel, an area where he could hide while the fire passed over him. Twelve of his crew would die that day, but Dodge survived. He had been "converted" from seeing the fire not only as a threat but also as the means of his salvation.

What did Saul see about Jesus that day that so transformed his life? Most significantly, he saw that Jesus is God. He is the God of Genesis 1-2, who created the heavens and earth by the word of his power. He is the God who delivered his people from Egypt, who anointed Israel's kings and called their prophets. He is the author of the Ten Commandments and all of the law. He is to be worshipped, obeyed and loved. He also saw that this God whose name is Jesus is full of mercy. Note Jesus' first words to Saul: "Why are you persecuting me?" It is often victims of abuse that ask questions such as "Why are you hurting me?" But we don't expect such questions to come from the sovereign, almighty God of the universe. We see in this that God is changing the way he deals with his enemies. He is no longer defeating his enemies by killing them, but is doing so now by converting them into his friends. He is

willing to suffer to do this. He was willing to suffer and die a cruel crucifixion. He is willing to continue to suffer with his people in their suffering. Like a loving parent who hurts when his or her children hurt, Jesus hurts when his children hurt.

There are some things about Saul's conversion that are unique. When people are converted today, it is rarely, if ever accompanied by a blinding light from God and a voice speaking to them. It is not even usually such a dramatic, sudden event. There are many genuinely converted people whose conversion was far more gradual, to the point that they are unable to give a date for that conversion. But there is one thing that is true of all genuine conversions, no matter the circumstances surrounding that conversion. There is always a changed view of Jesus, a change that sees him as the Son of God, full of grace and truth.

II. The Fruit of Conversion

One of the obvious results of Saul's conversion was blindness, at least for three days. Instead of entering Damascus full of self-confidence and self-righteousness, he entered as a dependent man, led by the hand. He would regain his sight in three days, due to the Lord's restoring of it from the touch of Ananias. This matter of Saul's eyesight, first its loss and then its restoration, demonstrates something important about conversion. A feature of life prior to one's conversion is the confidence that one sees clearly, while in fact there is blindness. But after one's conversion, due to the Lord's work of opening our eyes, we see clearly. Clear sight comes not from our own abilities but from a miracle of God, a miracle given at conversion.

A second fruit of conversion is that the converted person is no longer defined by his past, but rather by his future. When the Lord appeared to Ananias in a vision to tell him to go to Saul to lay hands on him that he might regain his sight, Ananias had an obvious objection. **“Lord, I have heard from many about this man, how much evil he has done to your saints at Jerusalem. And here he has authority from the chief priests to bind all who call on your name”** (v. 13-14). Saul's past was the past of a killer. But the Lord gives him a new future. **“Go, for he is a chosen instrument of mine to carry my name before the Gentiles and kings and the children of Israel. For I will show him how much he must suffer for the sake of my name”** (v. 15-16). No matter what your past might be, no matter how dark and shameful it is, when you get things straight with Jesus, all things become new, and your future is a good one. In Saul, God brought about the conversion of the chief persecutor of the church and makes him the chief apostle of the church. He is no longer a destroyer, but is now a builder for God's glory.

A third fruit of conversion is a changed relationship with God's people. Saul went to Damascus to arrest and kill Christians, and he leaves Damascus with a new family consisting of the very ones he had sought to arrest. One of those is Ananias. After God directed Ananias to go to Saul, we read these beautiful words. **“So Ananias departed and entered the house. And laying his hands on him he said, ‘Brother Saul, the Lord Jesus who appeared to you on the road by which you came has sent me so that you may regain your sight and be filled with the Holy Spirit’”** (v. 17). He calls him “Brother Saul.” The Christian world at this time was not large, and it is likely that Ananias knew some of the Christians who had been killed by Saul. And yet because of God's work in his life, he welcomes him.

Back in the early 70's, a young teenage girl moved to Charlotte, North Carolina from just outside Pittsburgh. Though no one else in her family was attending church, she began doing so when someone invited her to attend their youth group. She was not the ideal youth group member. She flirted with the boys and couldn't seem to keep her mouth shut when she was supposed to. Some of the parents of the youth group members wouldn't let their teenagers sit with her in church, because she was a bad influence on them. One family, though, welcomed her fully and often gave her rides to youth group events. Several years later, this teenager was converted to Christ as a college student. After another few years, Wendy Strassner met Brad Allison and became his wife. There are many Wendy Strassners in our midst. We pray that God will help us to welcome them and that we would pray for their conversions.

CONCLUSION:

Our closing hymn today is a testimony of another conversion, that of the hymnwriter and preacher, Charles Wesley. Charles and his brother, John, were missionaries to Georgia. You can see a statue of John Wesley still in Savannah where they labored as Anglican missionaries. But they both acknowledged that during their time in Georgia, “being ignorant of the righteousness of Christ, I sought to establish my own righteousness.” Upon returning to London, they encountered Luther's commentary on Galatians. Concerning Galatians 2:20, where Paul wrote, “The Son of God loved me and gave himself for me,” Luther wrote, “Dwell long on this little word, ‘me.’” When Charles Wesley received that word and received the love of Jesus personally, he was converted. As he describes it in the hymn we're about to sing, “I woke, the dungeon flamed with light; my chains fell off; My heart was free; I rose, went forth, and followed Thee.”