

September 19, 2010

Rethinking Church: Paul's Surprising Conversion

Acts 9:1-31

Meanwhile Saul, still breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord, went to the high priest 2. and asked him for letters to the synagogues at Damascus, so that if he found any who belonged to the Way, men or women, he might bring them bound to Jerusalem. 3. Now as he was going along and approaching Damascus, suddenly a light from heaven flashed around him. 4. He fell to the ground and heard a voice saying to him, *Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?* 5. He asked, *Who are you, Lord?* The reply came, *I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting.* 6. *But get up and enter the city, and you will be told what you are to do.* 7. The men who were traveling with him stood speechless because they heard the voice but saw no one. 8. Saul got up from the ground, and though his eyes were open, he could see nothing; so they led him by the hand and brought him into Damascus. 9. For three days he was without sight, and neither ate nor drank. 10. Now there was a disciple in Damascus named Ananias. The Lord said to him in a vision, *Ananias*. He answered, *Here I am, Lord.* 11. The Lord said to him, *Get up and go to the street called Straight, and at the house of Judas look for a man of Tarsus named Saul. At this moment he is praying,* 12. *and he has seen in a vision a man named Ananias come in and lay his hands on him so that he might regain his sight.* 13. But Ananias answered, *Lord, I have heard from many about this man, how much evil he has done to your saints in Jerusalem;* 14. *and here he has authority from the chief priests to bind all who invoke your name.* 15. But the Lord said to him, *Go, for he is an instrument whom I have chosen to bring my name before Gentiles and kings and before the people of Israel;* 16. *I myself will show him how much he must suffer for the sake of my name.* 17. So Ananias went and entered the house. He laid his hands on Saul and said, *Brother Saul, the Lord Jesus, who appeared to you on your way here, has sent me so that you may regain your sight and be filled with the Holy Spirit.*

18. And immediately something like scales fell from his eyes, and his sight was restored. Then he got up and was baptized, 19. and after taking some food, he regained his strength. For several days he was with the disciples in Damascus, 20. and immediately he began to proclaim Jesus in the synagogues, saying, *He is the Son of God.* 21. All who heard him were amazed and said, *Is not this the man who made havoc in Jerusalem among those who invoked this name? And has he not come here for the purpose of bringing them bound before the chief priests?* 22. Saul became increasingly more powerful and confounded the Jews who lived in Damascus by proving that Jesus was the Messiah. 23. After some time had passed, the Jews plotted to kill him, 24. but their plot became known to Saul. They were watching the gates day and night so that they might kill him; 25. but his disciples took him by night and let him down through an opening in the wall, lowering him in a basket. 26. When he had come to Jerusalem, he attempted to join the disciples; and they were all afraid of him, for they did not believe that he was a disciple. 27. But Barnabas took him, brought him to the apostles, and described for them how on the road he had seen the Lord, who had spoken to him, and how in Damascus he had spoken boldly in the name of Jesus. 28. So he went in and out among them in Jerusalem, speaking boldly in the name of the Lord. 29. He spoke and argued with the Hellenists; but they were attempting to kill him. 30. When the believers learned of it, they brought him down to Caesarea and sent him off to Tarsus. 31. Meanwhile the church throughout Judea, Galilee, and

Samaria had peace and was built up. Living in the fear of the Lord and in the comfort of the Holy Spirit, it increased in numbers.



The Church Born, The Church Afire, The Church Still Alive

Rethink
CHURCH

Acts of the Apostles Sermon Series, 2010

August 22 – November 21, 2010

Acts Sermon Series Study Guide: Rethinking Church – Paul’s Surprising Conversion

In the evening I went very unwillingly to a society in Aldersgate Street, where one was reading Luther’s preface to the Epistle to the Romans. About a quarter before nine, while the leader was describing the change which God works in the heart through faith in Christ, I felt my heart strangely warmed. I felt I did trust in Christ alone for salvation; and an assurance was given me that He had taken away my sins, even mine, and saved me from the law of sin and death.

~ from the Journal of John Wesley as he describes his Aldersgate experience

Kathleen Norris has a very insightful view of the conversion experience that fits Paul’s experience as it is actually described in the Bible: *...we do not suddenly change in essence, magically becoming new people, with all our old faults left behind. What happens is more subtle, and to my mind, more revealing of God’s great mercy. In the process of conversion, the detestable parts of our selves do not vanish so much as become transformed. We can’t run from who we are, with our short tempers, our vanity, our sharp tongues, our talents for self-aggrandizement, self-delusion, or despair. But we can convert, in its root meaning of turn around, so that we are forced to face ourselves as we really are. We can pray that God will take our faults and use them for the good.* Paul was a true believer before his conversion, unstoppable, adamant, insistent on the way and after his conversion all of those qualities were still present, but Christ was his center and Christ used those strong, strident qualities to spread the Gospel against amazing resistance and opposition. Do you have qualities in your life that are problematic that could be turned by God’s grace to be redemptive and helpful to others? Name them. Pray for God to transform them for His uses. _____

C.S. Lewis in his classic book, *Mere Christianity*, resulting from his own conversion says: *Fine feeling, new insights, great interest in religion mean nothing unless they make our actual behavior better...* What are areas of your life where behavior needs to change? Where do you know that God expects more or different things from you and you are falling short? Name those places and pray that God’s Mercy will guide you to real change in those areas of your life. _____

One of the great spirituals in our book of hymns speaks of this experience of conversion and its effects on us: *There is a balm in Gilead to make the wounded whole; there is a balm in Gilead to heal the sin-sick soul...If you can’t preach like Peter, if you can’t pray like Paul, just tell the love of Jesus, and say he died for all.* BOH, p. 375. The classic conversion hymn is *Amazing Grace* (BOH, p. 378). It tells of the conversion experience of John Newton from slave trader to instrument of God’s grace and mercy. *Amazing grace! How sweet the sound that saved a wretch like me! I once was lost, but now am found; was blind, but now I see. ‘Twas grace that taught my heart to fear, and grace my fears relieved; how precious did that grace appear the hour I first believed.* Describe your own conversion experience and its effects on you - whether it was a dramatic, sudden transformation or the fruit of a long process or the quiet assurance early in your life of God’s mercy and love for you. _____

We too easily focus on Paul or the person having the experience and not on the central at the heart of all conversion stories. Rev. Joseph Harvard put it this way: *The main character in this and every conversion story is God. It is God who changes lives. The one thing clear about Saul’s Damascus Road experience is the power of God that turned him from someone ‘breathing threats and murder against the disciple of the Lord.’ (9:1) to someone who ‘proclaimed Jesus’ so that ‘all who hear him were amazed’ (vv. 20-21). Saul’s conversion was not something he decided to do on his own. It was God’s doing.* What is God doing in your life? _____

Pray this prayer each day this week in your daily meditation:

Lord, you have sought me out so often in my life. I call to memory those times, those places and lift them up to you in gratitude. Keep me open to your guiding presence that I might know your leading, guiding presence. Lead me Lord in your righteousness, in your ways. And give my life and integrity that will be a witness to others of your healing love. Amen.