

## A Change of Heart

Acts 9:1-6  
May 15, 2022

First Presbyterian Church  
Pastor Dave Carlson

Imagining what it was like when Paul's travels were suddenly interrupted by a flash of light and the voice of the Risen Lord, theologian N.T. Wright writes this:

"Paul sank into the ground, blinded by light, with the words ringing in his head: 'I am Jesus, and you are persecuting me.' ... We call this event a 'conversion,' says Wright but it was more like a volcanic eruption, thunderstorm and tidal wave all coming together. If the death and resurrection of Jesus is the hinge on which the great door of history swung open at last," "the conversion of Saul of Tarsus (who became Paul) was the moment when all the ancient promises of God gathered themselves, rolled themselves into a ball, and came hurtling through that open door and out into the wide world beyond."<sup>1</sup>

That's quite a description – the promises of God arising out of a come-to-Jesus moment. How many of us along life's journey have sensed a wake-up call like the one Paul got? You know, you're going along doing what seems right and suddenly – or sometimes gradually – you realize you're headed in the wrong direction. It's in those moments that we begin to realize that something's not quite right, that there's stuff about us that's out of line with how we should be living. And we think to ourselves, how did I get here, and how do I get back, can I get back on track?

Like many others, Paul was brought up in a good and faithful home. He refers to this upbringing in Philippians (3:5), where he says, I was "circumcised on the eighth day, a member of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew born of Hebrews...."

As Paul got older, he trained to become a Pharisee, learning religious law from a greatly respected teacher named Gamaliel (Acts 22:3). As a Pharisee, Paul dedicated his life to preserving his people's relationship with God and neighbor by holding himself and all others accountable to the letter of the law.

But Paul had one problem. He was successful enough in life that he never had to question what he believed, what he did, why he did it. Paul knew how to be faithful to the scriptures, to religious law, and it served him well, until it didn't, until the Lord broke through with a new word, a new way of seeing things, a new way of life.

"Saul, Saul," says Jesus, "why do you persecute me?" Paul was originally named Saul, before his conversion. And before his conversion he never would have even considered that what he was doing, the beliefs he held in any way went against the heart of God.

---

<sup>1</sup> N.T. Wright, Acts for Everyone, 141.

“Why do you persecute me?” says Jesus, and Paul asked, “Who are you, Lord?” “I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting.” And then here, Jesus uses one little word to turn Paul’s whole world around. He says, “I am Jesus whom you are persecuting. But get up and enter the city, and you will be told what you are to do.” With that one little word “But,” Jesus speaks volumes.

How many times when we’ve been challenged in our actions or beliefs have we fallen back on the word “but?” “Maybe I shouldn’t,” we think, when something tempts us, “but what the heck? It will be OK. It’s always worked out OK before. I’ll do better next time.” Can anyone relate to that? Yup.

It’s hard to break a bad habit, start off in a new direction, stop and really think before we speak and act. It’s hard to even consider that the way we’ve always been, the way we’ve always seen things might not be quite right.

Take for example the avid golfer named John who came home from the course one day and his wife asks him who he played with. “Oh, no one in particular,” says John. “Why don’t you play with Bill anymore?” she asks. To which John says, “Would you like play golf with someone who throws his clubs, swears all the time, lies about his scores, moves his ball in the rough and won’t stop talking while you’re about to putt?” “Of course not!” says his wife. “Well, says John, neither will Bill.”

There are countless reasons we keep doing things we know are wrong, not good for us, or annoying and hurtful to others. And Jesus hears us in all our excuses and responds with one simple word, “But.” “I hear you, but you know better, if you know me.” Knowing the Lord, and getting to know him better and better - that’s the key, particularly in those areas of life we struggle with.

Notice that when Paul is going about his business and he’s suddenly stopped short, Paul asks, “Who are you, Lord?”

That’s an important question. “Who are you, Lord?” Acts tells us that Paul has been going about “breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord” and this is the first time he actually stops to ask who Jesus really is.

When was the last time you stopped to ask that? As we go about our business, do we stop to ask who Jesus is in the midst of the issues we face, the struggles we encounter, and the confrontations that challenge us. I mean Paul thought he knew who Jesus was – an enemy of the Pharisees and of God – and he comes to find out that he didn’t know Jesus as well as he thought. Paul comes to see that if Jesus really is the Risen Lord, then Paul needs to rethink who he is.

Is he going to continue being Saul the Pharisee or is he up to the challenge of becoming something more: of becoming Paul the Apostle?

If Paul had to rethink his entire way of being to get on the right side with God, what attitudes and actions might we need to rethink? And more importantly, how do we get started?

When Paul's life choices got called into question, Acts tells us, "He fell to the ground..." and when he got up "... his eyes were open (but) he could see nothing..." So he had to be led by the hand into Damascus, where "for three days he was without sight, and neither ate nor drank" – three days in the dark with no food or water.

While in Damascus, Paul meets a man named Ananias, who the Lord sent to open Paul's eyes, both physically and spiritually. After three days of darkness, Paul emerges a new man, able to see things as they truly are for the first time. Paul goes through a mini-resurrection, dying to his old way of being and born to new life in Christ.

We see this where later in Acts, Paul begins praising Jesus, saying, "He is the Son of God." We see this also in Paul's letter to the Philippians, where he has left behind his old, misguided ways and all the comfort and certainty they brought "in order," says Paul, "that I may gain Christ and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but one that comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God based on faith" (Philippians 3:7-9).

Which side do we stand when it comes to righteousness, to living the good life, fighting the good fight, keeping the faith? Do we stand firm in our own way of being how we've always been? Or do we approach life and all its choices and struggles with Jesus in mind, asking for ourselves, "Who are you, Lord," what is good and right in your eyes?

It's not an easy question to ask, particularly in a world that wants to have all the answers. But it is a question we need to be asking: "Who are you, Lord," and then we need to stop and listen, stop the internal dialogue that's always right and take time to listen, listen for what the Lord would reveal, and then follow the spirit of the Lord in coming to know Jesus, more and more. Amen.

## PASTORAL PRAYER

O God of all creation, we pray for help to hear, see and know the clarity of your vision for our future and our service to you.

Give us vision for our church, for our ministry, for our people – for their lives, their hurts, their hunger for a life of tranquility born of faith.

Give us vision for your healing work, to be courageous in times of change, for the future of our community as one of love and hope for all people.

Give us your vision to be a community of faithful disciples who study and discern and share the Good News you have entrusted to us.

We pray, O Lord, for your healing touch upon those recovering from or facing surgery. We pray your Spirit of comfort and peace upon those struggling with illness and disease.

We pray your sense of peace and your Spirit of comfort upon those who grieve.

We pray all this in the name of the Lord of Light, who brings us clarity of vision and teaches us to be faithful disciples, even teaching us how to pray, saying together:

**Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name.**

**Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.**

**Give us this day our daily bread; and forgive us our debts,**

**as we forgive our debtors; and lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil.**

**For thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever. Amen.**