

“THE GREATEST CONVERSION IN HISTORY.”

Rev. Robert T. Woodyard

First Christian Reformed Church

September 8, 2019, 10:30 AM

Scripture Texts: Acts 9:1-9

Introduction.

We have before us one of the most famous conversions in the history of Christianity. It is so important it is told three times in the book of Acts.

One scholar said after the death and resurrection of Jesus there is no other greater event in human history than the conversion to Christianity of Saul of Tarsus. Another called him the second founder of Christianity. Paul turned Christianity from a little Jewish sect into a world religion.

Without Paul’s conversion we would have no NT like we have. We would be devoid of the depths of theology and doctrine revealed in Romans. Our understanding of justification by faith and salvation by grace would be anemic. Without Paul there would not be the conversions of Augustine, Luther or Wesley.

In fact, our conversion is tied to Paul’s conversion.

1 Timothy 1:15b–16 I am the foremost of sinners; but I received mercy for this reason, that in me, as the foremost, Jesus Christ might display his perfect patience for an example to those who were to believe in him for eternal life.

Saul, still breathing out murderous threats.

Luke has gone out of his way to make sure we know how bad this Saul character was, that he was a bitter opponent of Christ and Christ’s church.

In Acts 8 Saul is approving of Stephen’s execution.

Acts 8:3 Saul was ravaging the church, and entering house after house, he dragged off men and women and committed them to prison.

Acts 9:1-2 Saul, still breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord, went to the high priest and asked him for letters to the synagogues at Damascus, so that if he

found any belonging to the Way, men or women, he might bring them bound to Jerusalem.

Acts 26:9-17 “I myself was convinced that I ought to do many things in opposing the name of Jesus of Nazareth. 10 And I did so in Jerusalem. I not only locked up many of the saints in prison after receiving authority from the chief priests, but when they were put to death I cast my vote against them. 11 And I punished them often in all the synagogues and tried to make them blaspheme, and in raging fury against them I persecuted them even to foreign cities.

When persecuting them in Jerusalem wasn't enough, he got permission to pursue them to Damascus. It was 140 miles on foot, it would take up to a week to walk that distance. He was a blood-thirsty wolf hunting down innocent sheep. Luke says even women, Saul was no respecter of the more defenseless women. Saul was out to destroy the new-found church and extinguish the name of Jesus.

He was a hell-bent, obstinate, rebellious man on a reign of terror with savage impulses about to bring down the sword on another city filled with sheep. How could a man like this ever possibly change?

In God's sovereign electing love He reached out and grabbed the most violent, hostile, hate-filled anti-Christian in Scripture.

Saul's pride had to be broken, he had to be made to see he was not dealing with a mortal man, but the true Son of God Himself. At noon in the desert a light so bright comes from heaven it knocks Saul to the ground in sheer terror at the divine majesty and power of God. In a moment, in a sudden flash of light Saul was reduced from a somebody to a nobody.

The one he ridiculed as dead, was alive and speaking to him. Luke wants us to see this conversion was an act of sovereign grace, the supernatural work of God.

“Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?”

What does this mean? Why did Jesus take Saul's actions personally? How were they personal?

Paul thought he was just attacking a group of people for their heretical way of worshipping God.

He had no clue he was actually attacking a group of people who had a divine connection, a divine spokesman. His attack on them was an attack of God Himself.

Jesus is intimately connected to every Christian who has been or is being persecuted, tortured, imprisoned, abused. He knows their names and hears their prayers and feels their pain and will get justice for them either now or in the life to come.

Jesus identifies with His own people. “What you have done to the least of these my brothers, you have done to me.”

Luke 10:16 “The one who hears you hears me, and the one who rejects you rejects me, and the one who rejects me rejects him who sent me.”

Jesus is personally linked to His Church and to His Gospel and to the suffering of those who are persecuted for His name sake, who suffer for the sake of His Church and His Gospel.

This truth concerning Christ and His followers would become one of the hallmarks of Paul’s theology, the union and communion between Jesus and believers. Paul would write we have died with Christ, we have been buried with Christ, and we have been raised with Christ. We are in Christ and Christ is in us.

Paul learned that truth on the Damascus Road and never forgot it. In fact, it sustained him in all his trials and suffering.

Jesus loves His Gospel and His Church, it is His, it is Him. He can’t be separated from it. He can no more deny to love and defend her than He can to deny Himself. When we suffer, He suffers. He feels our pain. To speak against or speak ill of His bride is to speak against Him.

Jesus takes personally how anyone talks not just about Him but about His Church, His Gospel, His sheep. Do we persecute Jesus in our words or actions toward our brothers and sisters in Christ?

Do we gossip, do we slander, do we speak critically about one another? Do we neglect the church or deny the importance of the Church, if so, we deny Christ, you cannot have the head without the body.

You will be told what to do.

This is a staggering statement, what a reversal. This proud, arrogant, insolent, zealous man is now being led by the hand into the city he came to ravage. Humble, blind, surrendered. Instead of telling others what to do, he is being told what to do. Christ interrupted Saul's life and has claimed him for Himself.

Is that not the essence of Christianity? Surrendering our wills to God's will. No longer saying, my will be done, but thy will be done. Up until now Saul had been driving the boat, running the show, dictating what should be done.

Now he is humbled, broken, surrendered, submitted to a higher authority.

A Christian is a person who ceases to do what he wants to do and wants to do what Jesus wants him to do.

How could so profound and transforming of a change happen so quickly? Only one answer. He saw and met face to face the risen and living Christ, the Son of God in His resurrection glory.

It is like if we hear about someone for a long time and then finally meet them in person and all our impressions give way to a new reality.

Phama and I met someone recently that we had only heard about before. We both commented afterwards that they were nothing like we imagined. Nothing bad, just totally different.

Whatever Saul had heard about Jesus was totally changed when he met Jesus.

Implications and applications.

Every conversion is a supernatural event, a sovereign intervention, a divine hand touching the human heart. There is no other event on the face of the earth that comes close to comparing to the deliverance of a soul from eternal torment to eternal bliss.

To be born in the flesh is a wonderful thing, but to be born of the eternal Spirit of God is a mystery beyond full human understanding.

We must all have a personal encounter with Jesus, a coming to real faith in Jesus, a surrendering to Him in faith and repentance.

But must we all have a Damascus Road, and if we don't, does ours count? Lightening, bright lights, voices from heaven?

No, for some it's at a time and a place, others so slowly and imperceptibly no one time can be discerned. Some never remember a time when they didn't know Jesus. For some it comes in a conversation, or a sermon, or some music, or a book. Some early in life, some late.

None of us may have been so outwardly violence, rebellious and disobedient, but all of us were just as proud in our hearts and old nature, resistant, rebellious, stubborn. We have to be broken, humbled, brought to a place of surrender and submission before God and His Word.

Our souls and our wills are not bit different than Saul's, not one bit less proud and stubborn, and Jesus is the one who changes our hearts and makes them willing ready from now on to follow Him and live for Him.

What happens in our conversion is against our nature, against our flesh, against our old man. It is accomplished by the sovereign and secret power of God.

What did Saul contribute to his conversion, to his redemption? Nothing, but a hard, rebellious heart. That's what stands out so starkly in Saul's conversion, the absolute sovereignty of it. He did nothing, he thought nothing, he brought nothing. Blind, wretched, breathing out fire and hate. Christ subdued him, in the same way He does each of us.

Conversion at its core is not a decision or a change of mind, it is a surrender to a Lord and Master. Paul didn't decide for Christ, Christ decided for Paul.

I still remember so well my conversion and that is exactly how I experienced it. Wrestling in thought and prayer and not so much deciding but being made to surrender, being chosen and taken and made to be His. It was His will over my will, a sweet violence, a subduing grace.

We should pause and thank God for the conversion of Paul and what it means for us. In fact, think about this for a moment. God was thinking about your conversion when He converted Paul to be an apostle to Gentiles. God had your salvation in view. God was going that far back to connect the dots leading to your coming to a saving faith in Jesus, by grace through faith alone.

1 Timothy 1:15b–16 I am the foremost of sinners; but I received mercy for this reason, that in me, as the foremost, Jesus Christ might display his perfect patience for an example to those who were to believe in him for eternal life.

You need to take Paul's conversion as personally as Jesus took his persecution. Jesus wants us to see His patience and long suffering and mercy and grace.

This is meant to show us the incredible patience of God and just how slow to anger and willing to forgive that He is.

Saul was a man who had seen Jesus and was completely forgiven and saved by grace and turned from a murderer to a lover. This is the power of what you believe. This is the life-changing hope we have and hold out.

Don't write anyone off, if a hate-filled, violent murderer like Saul can be saved and redeemed and used by God in God-glorifying ways, anyone can. Don't grow weary in your prayers for the lost. Never underestimate God's power to turn anger and hate into love and life-long service.

Don't underestimate what God can do in a friend, a family member, a prodigal child, or the Muslim Hausa people in faraway Nigeria.

Is there any greater conversion in all of history? Is there one that can eclipse it? Yes, there is one other. One that when we get to heaven will truly be seen as the greatest one ever. When our eyes are opened to the very depths of our own sinfulness and rebellion and when our eyes are opened to the hell we were spared from and the glory we were saved for, we will know the greatest conversion ever. Our own.

There are two kinds of people in this story. Saul, who saw and heard and believed and Saul's companions who had some sense of something going on, some sense of spiritual realities, but never come to know them or embrace them. Don't be those guys. Ask Jesus to come to you.

In Paul's own words:

Romans 10:9-10, 13 If you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. 10 For with the heart one believes and is justified, and with the mouth one confesses and is saved. ... 13 For "everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved."