

Saul's Conversion
Acts 9:1-19
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When I was a little boy, we had a Bible story picture book called *Hurlbut's Story of the Bible*. Before my brother and sister and I were old enough to read, our parents would read to us those Bible stories. Of course, I would just look at the pictures—like the one of Noah's ark and that long line of animals two by two cooperatively filing onto the ark; or the picture of the boy David bravely taking on the giant Goliath. Who wouldn't be drawn in by such great, captivating stories?

This summer we have been looking at some of the most familiar stories of the Bible. And we've been trying to discover ways that these familiar stories from scripture have helped to shape our own stories of faith. Where does your story intersect with the Bible story? That's an especially appropriate question as we look at the well-known story of the conversion of Saul.

So as we prepare to listen again to this familiar story, let us pray.

God of grace and love, open our ears so that we can hear, and open our hearts so that we can receive your word to us today. And let that word guide us as we live every day. Through Christ we pray. Amen.

Acts 9:1-19

One summer, when I was in college, I got a summer job working at Montreat. Back then, all the new Presbyterian missionaries who were about to go out to the mission field, spent the summer at Montreat getting prepared for their assignment. Then at the World Mission Conference it culminated when all these new missionaries from our church would be commissioned in what was always a very moving worship service.

I was talking to one of these soon-to-be new missionaries, and I asked him how he knew he was called to be a missionary. And he told me that one day he was out taking a walk—this guy was a very successful businessman, and, in his words, a rather marginal church person—but on his walk that day, he heard an audible voice call him by name and say, "I want you to be a missionary." Clear as a bell. Just like that.

Then he asked me about my experience, and I didn't really have anything to say.

Ever since this story of the conversion of Saul, this has been the standard by which all conversion experiences are measured. In fact, the phrase "road to Damascus experience" has become synonymous with any dramatic, life-changing experience. One moment you're going one way, and, BAM, it happens and you're heading in a whole new direction. It's like a light switch being turned on. It's dark...click...it's light. You hate Jesus...click...you love Jesus. You're blind...click...you see. In an instant.

But it never happened that way for me. So for a long time I would have said that there was no intersection between my story and Saul's story. But thanks be to God, God works in many ways.

This book, *Conversions*, tells the stories of the conversion experiences of fifty people—people like St. Augustine, the Roman emperor Constantine, the reformer John Calvin, former slave Sojourner Truth, and former slave ship captain John Newton. Even up to more modern times, like the stories of the conversion of the poet Francis Thompson, the gospel singer Ethel Waters and Watergate conspirator Chuck Colson. In their own words, these people tell of how God worked in their lives.

Some of the stories tell of dramatic turn-arounds. C. S. Lewis, for example, says that he became a believer against his will. The day of his conversion, he described himself as “the most dejected and reluctant convert in all England.” He went on:

I did not then see what is now the most shining and obvious thing: the divine humility that will accept a convert even on such terms. The Prodigal Son at least walked home on his own feet. But who can duly adore that Love which will open the high gates to a prodigal who is brought in kicking, struggling, resentful, and darting his eyes in every direction for a chance of escape? (*Conversions*, p. 201-2).

Some of the conversion stories in this book are pretty dramatic. But others are less so. John Wesley, for example, the founder of Methodism, who had been raised in the church, one Wednesday evening was attending a church meeting on Aldersgate Street in London when “I felt my heart strangely warmed” (p. 59).

That's it. No thunderbolt, no audible voice, just some mysterious, spiritual stirring in his heart.

As I read these stories, I noticed one common thread that ran through them all—not a single one of these people intended to be converted. Not one said, “I think I'll get converted today.” Not a single one lays out an action plan for what you have to do if you want to be converted. No, the one common thread that runs throughout every one of these stories is that the prime mover in each instance is God.

And that was certainly the case with Saul. The farthest thing from Saul's mind that day was that he was about to become a follower of Jesus. But it was not the farthest thing from God's mind.

One of the things that I love about this story in Acts is that there are really two conversions that take place here. First, and best known, is the conversion of Saul—a light flashing from heaven, Saul falling to his knees, a voice calling his name, and Saul being struck blind. Pretty dramatic stuff.

Somewhat less dramatic, but no less real, is the conversion of Ananias. You see, after Saul was converted, the voice of God spoke to a believer named Ananias and told him to seek out Saul. But Ananias was understandably reluctant to do that. He said, “Lord, I have heard from many about this man, how much evil he has done to your saints in Jerusalem.” In so many words, Ananias said to God, “No, Lord. I

don't want to go meet this man." But God persisted, and Ananias did what God told him to do. And when he met Saul, Ananias said to him, "Brother Saul." Brother Saul! From a feared enemy to brother. Now that's an amazing conversion.

The one common thread in both conversions—the conversion of Saul and the conversion of Ananias—was that God was in charge.

For a long time, I thought there was something missing in me because I never had a dramatic conversion experience like Saul's. But I don't see it that way any more. I do think that there have been times in my life when God has been at work, calling me to change directions, nudging me into new ways of thinking and acting. And it was not by my own doing, but by God's doing.

I grew up hearing Bible stories, going to Sunday School and Vacation Bible School. I memorized the Child's Catechism. On one level I have never known what it is like NOT to believe in God, NOT to know that Jesus is my savior. But even so there have been times when it was clear to me that God was working on me.

One example of that came in my first year in seminary. I was in New Testament class, and the professor, a wonderful man of God named Balmer Kelly, was talking about the parable of the prodigal son. I couldn't begin to tell you how many times I had heard that story. I'd seen the Sunday School picture of the boy kneeling before his father; I'd seen my Sunday School teacher act out the story using flannel cut outs on the flannel board. I knew that story. I had no idea that I was about to hear it as if I had never heard it before. But that day as Dr. Kelly told that familiar story, I saw myself in it. I was that prodigal son, that selfish, wasteful son. And I was that boy who was being welcomed home by a loving Father. That day I knew this story was about me...that God loved/loves me...that in spite of all the ways I had messed up and failed to be the kind of person God wanted me to be, God still loved me. That day I knew it wasn't because I had done anything to deserve God's love; it was solely about God and God's love that can change us.

We started planning this summer sermon series several months ago, and ever since I've known that I would be preaching this story of Saul's conversion, it's been running around in the back of my mind. But about three weeks ago, I began to see this story of the conversion of Saul in a new light.

Since we know how this conversion experience changed Saul into Paul, and how he became a powerful evangelist, I think we tend to airbrush or downplay the first part of Saul's life. But the first part of Saul's life is not very pretty. In fact, the first time we meet Saul, he's standing with the crowd, holding the cloaks of those who are stoning to death the follower of Jesus named Stephen (Acts 7:58, 8:1). Being stoned to death is a gruesome and painful and horrible way to die. And as the rocks were being hurled at this defenseless man, Saul stood by approving of what was taking place. That's the first we hear of Saul.

Then as our scripture opens, we read, "Saul, still breathing threats and murder against the followers of Jesus...." Threats and murder. Saul had even gone to the trouble to get all the necessary papers from the authorities so that if he happened upon any followers of Jesus, he could round them up and persecute them.

Saul was so sure he was in the right and those followers of Jesus were such a dangerous threat to his way of life, that he was willing to do whatever he thought

was necessary to stop them—even if it meant murder. Saul was a violent, hateful man.

About three weeks ago, we saw the violent actions of another hateful man, when Dylann Roof, entered Mother Emanuel church in Charleston, sat with a group of Christians studying the Bible, then cruelly opened fire, killing nine people. Dylann Roof was so sure he was in the right, and so sure that these people were a threat to his way of life that he was willing to act in this violent and hateful way.

Here's my question: might there be some possibility that God could work in the heart of Dylann Roof in the same way that God worked in the heart of Saul? One thing I do know is that if we decide to put Dylann Roof to death for his evil deeds, then what we are really saying is that we don't believe that God can change his heart.

Where do our stories intersect with the stories of scripture? In the fact that God is still at work, and God's will shall be done. Amen.