

The Conversion of St. Paul
January 25, 2004
Acts 9:1-19a

Sermon by Pastor Paul Janke

The Chief of Sinners Makes a Stunning Discovery

1. Jesus lives 2. Jesus loves 3. Jesus is able to transform lives

NIV Acts 9:1 Meanwhile, Saul was still breathing out murderous threats against the Lord's disciples. He went to the high priest 2 and asked him for letters to the synagogues in Damascus, so that if he found any there who belonged to the Way, whether men or women, he might take them as prisoners to Jerusalem. 3 As he neared Damascus on his journey, suddenly a light from heaven flashed around him. 4 He fell to the ground and heard a voice say to him, "Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?" 5 "Who are you, Lord?" Saul asked. "I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting," he replied. 6 "Now get up and go into the city, and you will be told what you must do." 7 The men traveling with Saul stood there speechless; they heard the sound but did not see anyone. 8 Saul got up from the ground, but when he opened his eyes he could see nothing. So they led him by the hand into Damascus. 9 For three days he was blind, and did not eat or drink anything. 10 In Damascus there was a disciple named Ananias. The Lord called to him in a vision, "Ananias!" "Yes, Lord," he answered. 11 The Lord told him, "Go to the house of Judas on Straight Street and ask for a man from Tarsus named Saul, for he is praying. 12 In a vision he has seen a man named Ananias come and place his hands on him to restore his sight." 13 "Lord," Ananias answered, "I have heard many reports about this man and all the harm he has done to your saints in Jerusalem. 14 And he has come here with authority from the chief priests to arrest all who call on your name." 15 But the Lord said to Ananias, "Go! This man is my chosen instrument to carry my name before the Gentiles and their kings and before the people of Israel. 16 I will show him how much he must suffer for my name." 17 Then Ananias went to the house and entered it. Placing his hands on Saul, he said, "Brother Saul, the Lord-- Jesus, who appeared to you on the road as you were coming here-- has sent me so that you may see again and be filled with the Holy Spirit." 18 Immediately, something like scales fell from Saul's eyes, and he could see again. He got up and was baptized, 19 and after taking some food, he regained his strength.

Brothers and Sisters in Christ, Fellow converts to Christianity,

If you were a Jew or a Muslim in Spain in the late 1400s, the mere mention of a single name would have struck fear in your heart. It was the name of Tomas de Torquemada, the Grand Inquisitor of Castile, and one of the leading figures in the Spanish Inquisition. It's estimated that as many as 2,000 people may have been

burned alive due to Torquemada's efforts to root out heresy in the kingdom of Ferdinand and Isabella.

Christians in the early church reacted with fear at the mention of a different name: Saul. Saul was an intelligent, cosmopolitan, highly educated Pharisee. For a time it was his obsession to see to it that Christianity was destroyed. By his own admission he intimidated, beat, imprisoned, and even killed followers of Christ. But one day, as he was attempting to export his persecution of Christians to Damascus in Syria, this man who would later call himself the "chief of sinners" would make several stunning discoveries. They were 1] that Jesus lives, 2] that Jesus loves, and 3] that Jesus is able to transform lives.

1. Jesus lives

Stunning discovery #1 for Saul was that Jesus was alive. Up to this time Saul had considered Jesus to be a false Messiah whom the Sanhedrin had rightly condemned and executed. He must have considered stories that Jesus had risen from the dead to be the desperate lies of Jesus' disheartened disciples. To Saul, those who persisted in worshiping Jesus were liars and heretics. Like the Spaniard Torquemada, he believed that to allow such heresy to go unpunished was to risk the wrath of God on his church and on his country. Jesus once warned his disciples, **"A time is coming when anyone who kills you will think he offering a service to God."** That warning was a perfect description of Saul.

But then came the famous trip to Damascus, the light, and the voice from heaven. *"Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?"* A confused, *"Who are you, Lord?"* was all that the formerly-ferocious persecutor could muster in response. Then came that short reply that spoke volumes: *"I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting."* What a stunning discovery that was! Jesus wasn't dead and his followers weren't lying. Jesus was alive.

For Saul, that run-in with the glory of the risen Jesus changed everything. With his eyes seared by the glory of Christ, he couldn't see a thing. And yet, in another sense, he could see better than ever. The eyes of his heart had been opened and he now saw Jesus as his living Lord. The risen Jesus became the new object of his zeal. He had barely recovered his sight when he entered a synagogue to preach that Jesus is the Son of God. You know how some people have a way of pulling their favorite topics into most any conversation—grandparents like to talk about their grandchildren and golfers like to talk about their latest round? Well, Saul wanted to talk about Jesus. This was no half-convinced, fence-sitter. This was a man who was stunned and elated to discover that Jesus lives. He wrote about his new, Godly obsession in one of his letters, **"I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the fellowship of sharing in his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, and so, somehow, to attain to the resurrection of the dead."** (Php. 3:10)

Those two little words—“Jesus lives”—are a brief summary of the most precious truth we can know. There is so much comfort that flows from Jesus’ resurrection that it’s difficult to summarize it briefly. “Jesus lives” means that the sacrifice Jesus made on the cross worked. All sin has been paid for. God signaled his acceptance of Jesus’ sacrifice by raising him from the dead. “Jesus lives” means that death has been transformed. Now, for Christians, it is no longer the end of our existence but the means by which our souls go to be with God. “Jesus lives” means that the Day is coming when Jesus will return for every eye to see and that he will then reunite our bodies and souls for a feast that never ends in heaven. Even now, “Jesus lives” means that life isn’t just a grand exercise in futility that ends in oblivion. “Jesus lives” means that our lives have meaning and that even our most painful adversities have to serve in God’s master plan for our lives. It may be true that “Jesus lives” is no longer a stunning discovery for us, but it remains a precious truth.

For Saul, another stunning discovery followed on the heels of learning that Jesus was alive. He must have been almost as stunned to discover that Jesus loves.

2. Jesus loves

After introducing himself, Jesus said to Saul, *“Now get up and go into the city, and you will be told what you must do.”* But the “doing” here was not a case of Saul trying to atone for having hounded Christians to their deaths. It wasn’t within Saul’s power to atone for that. But now, in a blinding flash, Saul had come to the sudden, troubling awareness that his obsession with persecuting Christians had not been in the service of God but in the service of evil. If he began immediately and spent every waking hour trying to make up for what he’d done, he still couldn’t balance the scales. How could he give Christian families their mothers and fathers again? The Christian church was deprived of the wisdom and godliness and Spirit-filled preaching of the deacon, Stephen, due in part to Saul’s approval of Stephen’s death by stoning. How do you undo that? How could he make up for depriving people of their freedom or inflicting painful injuries on them? What if, in his zeal to persecute believers, he had persecuted some of them right out of the Christian faith? What amount of good works would you have to do to atone for that?

The truth is that Saul couldn’t possibly come close to atoning for his sins...but Jesus already had. When Ananias came to Saul, he first laid his hands on him and then baptized him. Simple water wasn’t going to give Saul peace of mind or forgiveness, but water joined with God’s word of forgiveness would do it. This is stunning love. Saul saw the story of how he had been forgiven as one of the all-time great testimonials to the love of God. He wrote to Timothy, **“Here is a trustworthy saying that deserves full acceptance: Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners—of whom I am the worst. But for this very reason I was shown mercy, so that in me, the worst of sinners, Christ Jesus might display his unlimited patience as an example to those who would believe on him and receive eternal life.”**

Understand what this means! It means that when we come to the staggering realization that we deserve nothing but God's wrath and condemnation on account of our sins, we too, through faith in Jesus, have a place to turn, a Savior who pardons and restores us. He forgave a threat-breathing persecutor of Christians like Saul and he's forgiven you and me, too. Don't doubt it. Believe! Every one of us can confess our sins to God and then trust his matchless ability to forgive. It has to be for this reason that the conversion of Saul is recorded not once but three times here in the book of Acts.

The final stunning discovery is one that Saul may not have thought about until some time later, but as you read the book of Acts you see that there had been a stunning transformation in that man.

3. Jesus transform lives

So unexpected was the conversion of this archenemy of the Christian Church that even a faithful believer like Ananias was moved to question God's order to go to Saul. He protested, "*Lord, I have heard many reports about this man and all the harm he has done to your saints in Jerusalem.*" But Ananias had not yet seen how God had made a changed man out of Saul. The Grand Inquisitor of Christians by the grace of God became the most productive of the apostles of Christ. The man who'd once made it his mission to inflict suffering on Christians was now himself suffering for the cause of Christ. It was a long way from a seat on the Sanhedrin where he voted in favor of executing Christians to that Philippian dungeon where he rejoiced to be counted worthy to suffer for his Savior's name, but the love of God effected that stunning transformation. Jesus has the power to transform lives.

It's important for us to believe that transformation is possible. It's important for our own sake because sometimes in frustration and discouragement over our struggle with sin, we all but resign from the fight. And then there are the times that we mentally write someone else off, as if they were too far from the grace of God. I think if anyone ever seemed to be ripe for being written off, it was Saul. His conscience didn't even seem to bother him about the horrible suffering he inflicted on nearly defenseless people. And still God transformed him. The Word of God, that is, the gospel of Jesus Christ, is the agent of change. There's an amazing passage in 1 Corinthians where Paul teaches us that by the power of the gospel we can speak of soul-destroying sins in the past tense. He starts by saying, "**Neither the sexually immoral nor idolaters nor adulterers nor male prostitutes nor homosexual offenders nor thieves nor the greedy nor drunkards nor slanderers nor swindlers will inherit the kingdom of God.**" But then Paul continues, "**And that is what some of you were. But you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of our God.**"

The power for such transformation does not lie within human beings. Any philosophy that urges transformation but leaves it to us to effect that transformation is giving human beings too much credit. But that doesn't mean we can't be positive about the prospect of transformation. In his ministry Paul did adopt a kind of can-do approach. Paul was nothing if not positive and optimistic. But the source of his optimism was Jesus Christ. When he said, "**I can do all things,**" he hastened to add, "**through Christ who strengthens me.**" (Php. 4:13) That's our confidence, too. In Christ we aren't doomed to remain forever in sinful patterns of living that rob us of the joy of serving him. By the power of God's grace, change can take place.

When Saul set out for Damascus, he hoped to discover Christians that he could round up and bring back to Jerusalem for trial and punishment. What he discovered instead was that Jesus was alive, and that Jesus loved him, and that Jesus has the power to transform our sinful lives. In the annals of stunning discoveries, this one is the best of all. Its consequences last for eternity. And by God's grace, these are stunning discoveries that we've made, too. Amen.