

## **“PAUL’S CONVERSION AND COMMISSIONING.”**

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**First Christian Reformed Church, Lynden, WA**

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**Texts for the Sermon: Acts 26:12-23**

### **Introduction.**

Repetition in Scripture is always a sign of significance and importance. There are not a lot of pages in God’s divine book so any pages spent repeating something is a call to pay special attention. Paul’s conversion is told three times in the book of Acts.

This is one of the most famous conversions in the history of Christianity. 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.

Paul wants King Agrippa to know his radical reversal from a devout Jew, violently persecuting believers in Jesus, to a devout Christian, fearlessly spreading the Gospel against all opposition, can only have one possible explanation. Jesus of Nazareth who is the Christ appeared to him and commissioned him to be an apostle to take the Gospel to Gentiles.

### **Acts 26:12, Paul’s earthly mission.**

**Acts 26:12** I journeyed to Damascus with the authority and commission of the chief priests.

There are two sets of plans in our world. Our plans and God’s plans. Paul had a plan. He had a commission from the chief priests in Jerusalem. He was serving his religion, doing what he believed was the will of God. He was on a mission.

Paul was not standing before King Agrippa because it was part of his master plan, or part of his evangelistic strategy. This was not Paul’s idea or his doing. This was all part of God’s plan.

**Proverbs 19:21** Many are the plans in a man’s heart, but it is the Lord’s purpose that prevails.

**Proverbs 27:1** Do not boast about tomorrow, for you do not know what a day may bring.

Two things happen on the Damascus Road. Paul *saw a heavenly vision* and he *heard a heavenly voice*, a vision of seeing and of hearing.

### **Acts 26:13, Paul's heavenly vision.**

Paul explains in detail the heavenly vision. It wasn't an ecstatic out of body experience or an apparition like a ghost. This light was a very great light, brighter than the noon day desert sun. It was experienced not just by Paul or by his imagination, but by witnesses. This great light had a powerful effect, knocking them to the ground.

While the others saw only light, Paul saw Christ who appeared to him in the light. Just as at the creation of the world, light was the first thing created, so in the new creation of grace, light is the first thing.

**II Corinthians 4:6** For God, who said, "Let light shine out of darkness," has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ.

Jesus who is the light of the world came to shine in Paul's darkness.

### **Acts 26:14-15, Paul's heavenly voice.**

Paul hears and understands a heavenly voice. Jesus called Paul by his name twice, Saul. Jesus knew him even though he denied Jesus. Jesus names Paul's sin to him twice, that his sin was against Jesus.

"I am Jesus whom you are persecuting, Jesus, whom you despise and hate and vilify. I am Jesus whose name makes you want to spit in the dust every time you speak it. I am Jesus whose name to you is a lie believed by a bunch of fools. I am Jesus who is a stench to you, who you think is a worthless criminal deserving of the worst kind of death. I am Jesus whom you think is dead and buried in the earth, and then whose body was stolen and hidden somewhere else to fake a resurrection. I am Jesus, the Son of God, seated in heaven, whose glory shines before you know and outshines ten thousand suns. I am Jesus."

The name Jesus rocked Paul's world. Jesus wasn't dead. Jesus was not only risen from the dead, but He was raised up to heaven and seated with God the Father and given all glory and honor and power and authority.

In this moment Paul was made a Christian, a Christ follower by the Holy Spirit. In this moment Paul went from being a persecutor of Christians, to becoming one of those persecuted.

And lest you think this sort of thing doesn't happen today let me remind you. Jesus reveals Himself to our eyes and ears.

**II Corinthians 4:6** For God, who said, "Let light shine out of darkness," has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ.

Isn't this the prayer we pray with Paul in Ephesians:

**Ephesians 1:17-18** ... that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, may give you the Spirit of wisdom and of revelation in the knowledge of him, 18 having the eyes of your hearts enlightened, that you may know what is the hope to which he has called you.

Paul is told three things by the heavenly voice, his purpose, his deliverance and his message.

**Acts 26:16, Jesus' purpose for Paul, his divine commission.**

Jesus tells him to stand up and take courage, He has work for him to do. Jesus changes the commission Paul had from the chief priests, and gives him a new commission, a new purpose, to be a servant of Jesus, a witness, one sent out with divine authority.

What incredible mercy that Jesus doesn't zap him or punish him for all the terrible things Paul had done to Jesus' followers. What mercy that Jesus took the worst enemy of the Gospel and made him the greatest apostle.

Paul who was saved by grace alone, will now testify to the truth of this great doctrine. "As I was saved only by grace, so you can be saved by grace, through nothing you do on your own."

Are we not daily humbled by our sin and disobedience against so great and good a God, and yet Jesus has saved us and saved us for the same purpose as Paul, to serve God and witness to His great grace toward us.

**Acts 26:17, Jesus' promise to deliver Paul.**

Why does Jesus promise that? Jesus is always honest about the bad news. The purpose for which I have saved you and am now sending you is going to need some deliverance.

This is a broken and fallen and hostile world, with many wolves among the sheep. Just as Paul was one of them who attacked the sheep, he will now be attacked. Those to whom Paul is most eager to proclaim the Gospel, will be the most hostile to him and seek to kill him. The servant is not greater than the master, as Jesus suffered so will he.

This is Jesus Witness Protection Plan. He personally promises His protection to His witnesses. The very gates of hell cannot prevail against His Church and His children. Yes, Paul would suffer, but Jesus would deliver him out of them all until his God-appointed work was done.

We struggle to understand, if Jesus promises to protect us then why do we suffer? How do we reconcile suffering with Jesus' promise of deliverance? First, His promise is to be with us in the midst of and through the suffering.

"Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, you are with me."

But it is also true God sometimes leads us into trials and troubles, even into the hands of persecutors so that He may have the glory to deliver us out of trouble by His grace, which we would not see or know otherwise.

Paul is being prepared, living for Jesus and following Jesus will bring suffering. Keep sharing the Gospel regardless of how you are treated.

### **Acts 26:18, Jesus' message for Paul, the Gospel.**

Verse 18 is a one verse brief but glorious description of the Gospel, of the message Jesus was giving to Paul to proclaim to the world. In one verse this is what it means to be a Christian.

First, the Gospel *opens our eyes*. Creation begins with light, salvation begins with light. Our world sits in darkness, it desperately needs a great light, the light of Jesus. The Gospel delivers us from blindness, when the Holy Spirit renews our minds and enlightens our eyes to see spiritual things. By the light of the Gospel we see things we have never seen before.

Faith in Jesus is never a blind faith, it is a seeing faith, it is light bringing us out of darkness. When Jesus comes to us He first opens our eyes to open our hearts.

Second, the Gospel *snatches us out of the grasp and bondage of Satan*, that we may turn to God as His children.

**Colossians 1:13-14** He has delivered us from the domain of darkness and transferred us to the kingdom of his beloved Son, 14 in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins.

Some of you because you are in school every day or in the work place encounter the darkness with greater frequency. You see what your classmates or co-workers are doing, you hear what they are saying, you notice who is drinking the Kool-Aid of the world, the flesh and the devil.

You are constantly faced with choices whether to be salt and light or participate in the darkness, to follow the voice of the world or of Jesus. Who has the truth, who has the light?

**Ephesians 4:22-23** ... put off your old self, which belongs to your former manner of life and is corrupt through deceitful desires, 23 and to be renewed in the spirit of your minds, 24 and to put on the new self, created after the likeness of God in true righteousness and holiness.

*This bring us to the fruit of the Gospel*, the great blessing and benefit, forgiveness and inheritance.

In the Gospel we receive *forgiveness*, the complete remission of all our sin, by which God reconciles us to Himself, and gives us a place with Him, a share in the *inheritance* of all the saints for all eternity. The past is forgiven, and we are given a future and a hope.

Do you hear the contrast? There is no more wretched condition on earth, than to be without Christ in your life. And there is no richer blessing and benefit now and forever than to have our blind eyes opened and by faith see the glory of the Gospel in the face of Jesus.

Few of us are called to be a Paul. But we are called to be witnesses willing to testify for Jesus. And here is how to do it.

Jesus has brought us to this community of Lynden, He has scattered us all throughout the neighborhoods, He has scattered us all out into all kinds of different jobs and opportunities and groups. We are hundreds of seed sowing into this community.

Our being here means there are still people who Jesus wants to turn from darkness to light, to forgive their sins that they might enjoy the same inheritance we have through faith in Him.

**I Peter 2:9** You are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for his own possession, *that you may proclaim the excellencies of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light.*

Jesus calls us to open the eyes of unbelievers and turn them from Satan to God.

How can we do that? What is Satan's power? Deception and lies. Our power is the Spirit of Truth. As we witness to the truth of the Gospel, the Holy Spirit opens eyes and destroys the power of Satan. Jesus calls us to hold out the forgiveness of sin and an invitation to come into the family of God. The rest is the Spirit's work.

**I Peter 3:15-16** Always being prepared to make a defense to anyone who asks you for a reason for the hope that is in you; yet do it with gentleness and respect, 16 having a good conscience.

Could you share a testimony of God's grace in the time it takes to read Paul's? Make the same three points, a brief testimony of your life without Christ, how Christ encounter you and persuaded you, and what your life has been like since, the challenges, victories, and your hope for eternity. Point to Jesus who brings us out of our darkness and out of Satan's grasp, point to the forgiveness of sins and an invitation to come into God's family.

**Acts 26:19-23, Paul's obedience to heavenly vision.**

Now Paul testifies to the complete fulfillment of everything Jesus said. Paul was obedient to the commission given to him by Christ. He was faithful in sharing the Gospel of repentance and proclaiming light to both Jews and Gentiles. And Jesus was faithful to deliver Paul, giving him the help that comes from God.

How can you tell if a person is really a Christian? If they profess to be a Christian how do you know their profession is real? How do you know a tree? By its fruit.

Obedience is a mark of true faith and Paul's entire post-conversion life is marked by obedience, even under the severest tests and trial. He never wavered. Paul did not do what Jonah did, receive a heavenly vision and run the other direction. Paul heard the divine commission and accepted it and obeying it.

Don't be a chronological snob and think you have to have 21<sup>st</sup> century evidence. The changed lives of those who have gone before us also testify and bear witness and leave us without excuse.

If you are looking for evidence on whether or not Christianity is real, the life and example of Paul is good fruit. Paul's transformation went down to the root and it showed in his fruit.

Are we obeying what we have heard from God?

**Matthew 28:18-20** Jesus came and said to them, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. 19 Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, 20 teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age."

### **Conclusion, implications and application.**

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.

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, and see His light, and come to real faith in Jesus, surrendering to Him in faith and repentance. 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."