

*Acts 9:1-19* [NIV]

Meanwhile, Saul was still breathing out murderous threats against the Lord's disciples. He went to the high priest<sup>2</sup> 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.<sup>3</sup> As he neared Damascus on his journey, suddenly a light from heaven flashed around him.<sup>4</sup> He fell to the ground and heard a voice say to him, "Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?"

<sup>5</sup> "Who are you, Lord?" Saul asked.

"I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting," he replied.<sup>6</sup> "Now get up and go into the city, and you will be told what you must do."

<sup>7</sup> The men traveling with Saul stood there speechless; they heard the sound but did not see anyone.<sup>8</sup> 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.<sup>9</sup> For three days he was blind, and did not eat or drink anything.

<sup>10</sup> In Damascus there was a disciple named Ananias. The Lord called to him in a vision, "Ananias!"

"Yes, Lord," he answered.

<sup>11</sup> 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.<sup>12</sup> In a vision he has seen a man named Ananias come and place his hands on him to restore his sight."

<sup>13</sup> "Lord," Ananias answered, "I have heard many reports about this man and all the harm he has done to your holy people in Jerusalem.<sup>14</sup> And he has come here with authority from the chief priests to arrest all who call on your name."

<sup>15</sup> But the Lord said to Ananias, "Go! This man is my chosen instrument to proclaim my name to the Gentiles and their kings and to the people of Israel.<sup>16</sup> I will show him how much he must suffer for my name."

<sup>17</sup> 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."<sup>18</sup> Immediately, something like scales fell from Saul's eyes, and he could see again. He got up and was baptized,<sup>19</sup> and after taking some food, he regained his strength.

Saul spent several days with the disciples in Damascus.

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First of all, I want to say thank you to Pastor Dwight and to Lee Taylor for preaching these last two Sundays, and for delivering—as I fully expected they would—good, solid, faithful words.

Our family spent a couple days visiting my mom in East Liverpool, Ohio, and then another five days in Lancaster County, central Pennsylvania, "Dutch Country," as I grew up calling it.

We also have one more short trip planned in early August—just over a long weekend, really—and so the Sunday following that is when I'll bring my annual "What I Learned Over Summer Vacation" message. I can't do it yet because I haven't learned all I need to learn. So today we're back to this theme of life's Turning Points—looking at the life of Saul (whom we know better by his Roman name, Paul) there again in Acts, Chapter 9.

Among many other things, this passage is a great example of the tremendous potential that lies within just one, brief personal interaction. It's amazing how *little*

time, really, it takes for a person to experience an *enormous* turning point in life.

It's happened to all of us, probably, to one degree or another. You're going along—going about your day—and out of the blue you encounter someone, and in just the brief conversation that unfolds, something *in* or *about you* is *totally* changed: your opinion, your perception, your level of knowledge about this or that or the other.

And you walk away a different person.

A *turning point*, in other words.

You see, that's just one benefit of living in community with others.

God did not make us to be hermits.

God created us to be relational—communal. He intends that we engage with people, because iron sharpens iron and people shape people.

It's through that sort of engagement that we develop and mature. Relationship is how our world gets bigger, how God works in us. He tends to steer ships that are already moving, and amazingly He does that even when we're not really moving in directions that please Him.

In fact, those are the engagements that often wind up being life's most tremendous turning points—like what we see here with Paul.

Paul's turning point is probably history's *most famous* conversion story.

That's not to say his was the most significant, because every conversion to Christ is significant. Every time someone chooses to follow Jesus, that life becomes filled with new and important potential.

But Paul's conversion story is, probably, the most *famous*—and for good reason. It was so dramatic and so substantial, not only does Paul himself refer to it several times in the letters he writes,<sup>1</sup> Luke reports the account *three times* just in the book of Acts.<sup>2</sup>

And given Luke's typical brevity and conciseness, that level of repetition is meant to catch our attention.

Through the years, lots of scholars have tried to get inside Paul's head regarding this event—offering suggestions as to where he was in his thinking and why.

Since this is really a sequel to the stoning—the martyrdom—of Stephen, some have wondered how witnessing that affected Paul. Did it harden or soften him toward Jesus?

Some think Paul was unable to really forget what Stephen said (Acts 7), so in response, he transferred his guilt into hostility against Jesus' disciples.

Others wonder if that week-long journey from Jerusalem to Damascus gave Paul time to think, and maybe fall into some inward wonder or even turmoil as he reached the city.

<sup>1</sup> Galatians 1:15-16, 1 Corinthians 9:1 and 15:8

<sup>2</sup> Acts 9:1-19, 22:3-21, 26:12-18.

There are lots of different opinions about all that, and they, in the end, remain only opinions.

But we know this for sure: At this point in his life, Paul was no friend of the Church.

We're told right away that Paul was "*breathing out murderous threats against the followers of Jesus.*"

"*Breathing out murderous threats...*" That image, from the Old Testament, is one of a wild beast on a rampage. Think of a great horse – or a bull or a buffalo or a lion – with fire in its eyes snorting through flared nostrils.

Paul was angry – even enraged – at the Christians. Why?

Well, *not* because he was an evil person, and *not* because he was unreasonable.

Ironically, Paul was angry at Christians because he was passionate for God.

It's funny, really, how both the martyr Stephen and the "martyrer" Paul had at least this one thing in common: both realized that Christianity and Judaism were, ultimately, incompatible.

The thing that got Stephen killed was his assertion that in Jesus, the new had come – which meant – the old must go.

Paul was convinced that the old was right and the new was wrong, so it was the old that must stay, and the new that had to go.

You see, it wasn't Paul's *godlessness* that took him on this snorting rampage. It was his *godliness* – his commitment to truth and right and to the God of His fathers, Abraham, Isaac and Jacob.

Paul considered the Church a cancer – a heretical lie that needed to be stamped out. That's why he went to Damascus.

And so how ironic it is that this one, who was so entirely committed to Godly truth, winds up being so powerfully confronted by the God of truth that he was brought to his knees!

The light was like the light that shone for Moses at the burning bush. That kind of light indicates God's presence.

And then there was the voice, again, like God's engagement with Moses. God speaks to make sure His purpose is clear.

Others were there with Paul. Luke says they experienced something, but what they saw and heard was not clear, not refined.

You see, God picked the one He knew would listen. God chose the one who was already committed to Him at heart, but with a commitment that was incomplete because it was based in ignorance and unbelief.

And God still talks this way to people in our day, you know? Like faith-filled Muslims to whom God speaks through dreams. God speaks to people who are open to Him, but who are operating in ignorance. They're walking in the light they have, but that light is dim and incomplete.

It was like God took Paul aside and said, "Look – I appreciate your passion and zeal and commitment, but I'm here to tell you that you're on the wrong team.

You're backing a loser, and unless you open your eyes and your heart here, you're going to wind up on the dark side of salvation history. I'm giving you the chance to get on the right track."

That was God's offer to Paul.

And Paul asked just one question: "*Lord, who are you?*"

You see, the message was convincing. Paul was ready to believe. He just needed to know who was doing the talking.

And the voice reveals, "*I am Jesus, the one you are persecuting.*"

Now, just parenthetically here, it's worth noting that Paul had been persecuting the Church: the disciples and Christ's followers.

But Jesus says to him here that Paul has actually been persecuting *Him – personally.*

That's how tightly Jesus identifies with the Church – His followers, His body, His bride. Paul was hitting the Church, but Jesus was feeling the pain, you see?

That is a fact that should soothe and encourage us when we experience persecution because of our faith.

At the same time, it should also restrain us when we're tempted, ourselves, to knock around our brothers and sisters in faith.

We don't want to be hitting Jesus.

Paul asks, "*Lord, who are you?*"

And the voice says, "*I am Jesus, the one you are persecuting.*"

And that's basically it. That's the extent of the conversation.

And because of just those few words, spoken in just those few seconds, the man who set out to arrest followers of Christ finds himself arrested by that very Christ.

The man who was so determined to bind and break God's people now finds himself bound and broken.

The man whose mission was to enter Damascus like a raging fury and drag people to prison, that man now has to be led into the city by the hand – as helpless as a child.

The man who had so self-confidently planned out his every move must now, for three days, fast and pray and wait for someone else to tell him what to do.

The man who was so fearsomely powerful was, in just a moment, completely humbled by one encounter with the One True Power.

Without a doubt, this was the ultimate turning point in Paul's life, which, we're tempted to say, changed *everything* about him. But you know, that's not really so.

This meeting on the Damascus Road changed Paul's world-view and his understanding, and consequently, it did change the direction and purpose of his life.

But you notice what did *not* change about Paul was his *passion*, his *zeal*, his *commitment to God* and to *truth*.

That part of Paul's personality remained – you see it throughout the rest of his life. It just needed to be informed, educated, refined and properly directed.

For that reason, some have said that what happened here to Paul was not so much a *conversion* as it was a *surrender*.

Paul didn't need to be converted to God. Paul already knew God—the one true God. He'd long ago given himself to doing God's will.

Paul just needed to accept a reality about God that he was, for whatever reason, unwilling to accept before: the fact that this God he already knew and loved—this same God—so loved the world that He gave His only Son that whoever would pledge allegiance to Him would have everlasting life.

Paul needed to embrace the fact that this Jesus really was Immanuel, God with us—God with *him*, in fact—and so surrender his life to Him.

Without ever intending to, Paul shows us here, really, what Christianity is all about—in a word: surrender.

That's what it took for Paul to be right with God, and that's what it takes for

- you and me,
- for all those sitting in church sanctuaries around the world today,
- for those in our classrooms and offices and on our factory floors,
- for those in our world who don't believe in a god,
- for those in this world who believe in some other god,
- for those who believe that they themselves are god,
- for those who have rejected all light,
- and for those who walk only in the light that they have.

To all of these, the one true God calls and asks to do just what He called Paul to do on that Damascus road: very simply, *"to do what He tells us to do."*

That's what it means to be a Christ-follower—a Christian: to surrender ourselves to Jesus and to what He tells us to do.

It's not just something we do in concept or on paper.

It's not about some long-ago baptism or confirmation.

It's the present reality—in this moment, just as with Paul there on the Damascus Road.

Surrendering to Jesus, and doing what He tells us to do: that's what made Paul—and that's what makes any person—a true Christ-follower.

And once Paul realized and embraced this: why, just look at what God does with him! Look at how God uses Paul!

God actually tells Ananias—this Christian fellow living in Damascus at that time—what He's going to do with Paul (v.15). He says, *"This man [Paul] is my chosen instrument to carry my name before the Gentiles and their king and before the people of Israel."*

You see, right there, that's why the Apostle Paul is considered the most significant missionary and spokesman for Christ who ever lived. Look at the breadth of his influence! God Himself describes it for us.

That is the kind of turning point that's possible. That's what God can make of a person, even one who at the moment is working *against* His purposes, if only that person will surrender to Christ.

Before I close here, let me mention just a few lessons we can learn from this turning point of Paul's.

First of all, this account reminds us that God is both willing and able to act directly in our lives in order to accomplish his purposes.

Don't believe for a moment that the days of miraculous happenings, visions, dreams and things like those, are over.

Now, we can't demand them of God—that's not ours to do.

But we should live our lives open to them, looking for them, expecting them!

Scripture clearly tells us that, with the ascension of Jesus and the coming of the Holy Spirit, the frequency of things like this will only increase.

God still speaks to people as He spoke to Paul—when He can find someone who's willing to listen.

Do we live with that sort of expectation? Are we willing to listen?

A second important lesson for us here is that you and I, as Christ-followers, need to choose carefully *whom we travel with*—whom we make our closest companions.

Paul's traveling companions on the road there? Even though they were right there with him, they could not hear with any clarity God's voice. And so they were left wondering about, and likely denying, what had happened. If Paul had been a weaker person, likely they would have dragged him down.

Paul may have been the one to lose vision, but his friends were the real blind ones here.

Christ-followers need to make sure that our closest companions—the ones we travel life with in the most intimate ways and the ones we turn to for counsel—are at least as open to Jesus as we are, so they can hear His voice along with us.

We need to choose our companions wisely.

Also, we ought to notice that, as in Paul's case, our ability to hear God's word clearly and completely may very well depend on the witness of other Christ-followers.

You see, Jesus did not just send Paul off on his own here. Jesus sent Paul to another disciple, to Ananias, for further instruction and ministry.

And Jesus spoke to Ananias about all that, which confirmed Paul's experience and the word he heard.

This gets to the wisdom of the multiplicity of counselors. If God is really saying something to us, then chances are He's saying the same thing to other committed Christ-followers who can confirm His message.

We need to make sure we're listening to the input of the greater Church.

We should also realize from Paul's experience that a true turning point with Christ does not necessarily lead to a life of ease.

Paul's spiritual enlightenment came while he was physically blinded, and that was just the beginning of his hardships.

In fact, Jesus spells out very clearly to Ananias how part of Paul's purpose involves suffering (v. 16).

You and I can't fall into the trap of thinking that following Jesus will remove trouble from our lives.

Chances are that following Jesus, as Paul found, will do just the opposite.

We can't imagine that we somehow missed the boat just because life in Christ gets difficult.

And then finally, given what happens here to Paul, of all people, and what then happens in the world *through* Paul, you and I *dare not ever think* or *pronounce anyone hopeless*.

If our God is *powerful enough* to take someone working *against* Him as *hard* as Paul was, and in just a few-second conversation, turn him into the most *significant voice* for Christ who has ever lived, then surely, He can take hold of anyone:

- anyone we know
- anyone we pray for
- anyone in our family
- anyone of our friends and neighbors
- anyone in our classrooms and offices
- even those in the world who we'd call enemies
- enemies of the Church
- enemies of God
- enemies of Jesus.

This experience of Paul's should convince us that no one is beyond Christ's reach, and so there is always, always hope!

Prayer:

Father, our prayer today is that you'd somehow make this turning point in the Apostle Paul's life a turning point in our lives – one that speaks to us:

- about the way You work,
- about using wisdom in our relationships,
- about the place of the greater Church in our lives,
- maybe about the tremendous hope that is ours even when circumstances suggest otherwise,
- or maybe about the need for surrender.

Let Paul's turning point become a turning point in us, so our lives would bring you more and more glory. Amen.

Closing Song: *Change My Heart, O God*

Benediction:

You know, it strikes me that the last thing the Apostle Paul ever intended to do was to become a Christian. And all it took was a seconds-long conversation with God to change his mind and to bring surrender.

The same sort of thing happened to C. S. Lewis. Of his one conversation with Christ, he writes, "I gave in and admitted that God was God and knelt and prayed – perhaps, that night, the most dejected and reluctant convert in all England."

Whatever road we're walking today, may we leave this place more open to God's voice than when we came, listening for the turning point He'd like to bring in our lives.