

**Good Shepherd Lutheran Church
Watertown, WI**

“The Conversion of Saul”

(Acts 9:1-22)

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Saul can't help himself: he is intoxicated with hatred for Christians. He is convinced his mission to arrest and lead Christians toward their executions is righteous and God-pleasing. Therefore, he is focused and energetic.

Now he's turning his attention on Damascus, because he knows there's a good number of Jewish converts to Christianity living in Damascus. Damascus was about 150 miles away. It is the nearest important city outside of Jerusalem. It was a hub for trade caravans. Any merchant going anywhere north launched their journey from Damascus. If Christianity flourishes in Damascus, it would only be a matter of time before it spreads northward, especially among the Jewish diasporas. So, with the Sanhedrin's authority and blessing, Saul heads for Damascus to flush out and arrest Christians (men and women).

Christians in Damascus already know the reputation of Saul, and they fear him. But the Lord doesn't. He sees potential in this man. He sees a zeal and courage that he likes, a good education, and a Roman citizenship which might prove helpful. He sees someone fluent and eloquent in the Jewish, Greek, and Latin. He sees possibilities.

So, while Saul is on that road to Damascus, the Lord knocks him off his feet with a blinding light. “Saul, Saul why do you persecute me?” To persecute Christians is to persecute Christ, for Christians are baptized into Christ (1 Cor. 12:12ff). Jesus takes it personally. To mistreat Christians is to mistreat Jesus. And in the same way, to help them is to help the Lord: “Whoever receives you receives Me . . . If anyone gives even a cup of cold water to one of these little ones because he is my disciple, I tell you the truth, he will certainly not lose his reward” (Mt. 10:40, 42). It's remarkable the Lord so closely identifies Himself with us though we are but poor sinners!

From the ground, Saul asks, “Who are you?” “I am Jesus” says the Lord. Notice the use of “I am”. Jesus is recalling the giving of the Lord's name on Mount Sinai, when God tells Moses, “This is what you are to say to the Israelites: ‘I Am’ has sent me to you. In the Old Testament, the most frequent name of God is “I am”, (“Yahweh”) used over 5,000 times. For Jewish people in Jesus' day, the name for God was so sacred they would not even utter it. You can imagine then the outrage of the Pharisees when Jesus kept describing Himself using the phrase “I am.” “I am the Light of the World.” “I am the Resurrection and the Life.” I am the Door, the Good Shepherd, the Bread of Life.” It's one of the things that got Him crucified. And here, the voice from the heavens says, “I am Jesus.” You cannot separate Jesus from Yahweh. They are One.

Now put yourself in Saul's sandals. He believed his mission to persecute Christians was pleasing to Yahweh. But Saul has just heard the voice say, “I am Jesus”.

Please have a look at the front cover. It's a painting by Caravaggio entitled “The Conversion of Saul.” Saul is on the ground. Both the horse and the guy tending the horse seem oblivious to what just happened. Clearly this business is between the Lord Jesus and Saul. The largest and most massive part of this painting is the body of the horse, and beneath him Saul is very vulnerable. The horse's hoof is lifted and ready to come back down. Saul's helmet has fallen off his head. He can't see; there's something like scales on his eyes. His knees are up, his legs and arms are spread. There's this sense of human fragility and vulnerability in the presence of God.

The text says Saul would be blind for three days. That's important because Christ was in the tomb for three days before He was resurrected, and Jonah remained in the great fish for three days. So, there's this Biblical tradition of three days in the darkness before being saved by God. Now Saul, blind for three days, is part of this tradition.

Surely Saul, as a sworn enemy of Jesus, fears he's about to die. But Jesus doesn't have it in mind to end Saul's life, but to save Saul's life. “Now get up and go into Damascus” he says, “and you will be told what you must do.” Up until now, Saul had always been calling the shots. Now the Lord is calling the shots.

Saul gets up from the ground. The Greek there really says he was “raised up.” It's the same word that Luke uses for the resurrection from the dead. It's hardly an accident. Saul was just given his life back. He was dead in his transgressions, and now he is alive again in Christ (Eph. 2:1).

Because he's blind, his companions lead Saul by the hand into Damascus. His meek dependence here contrasts with his murderous energy earlier. Saul fasts for three days, eating or drinking nothing. This is part of his immediate repentance.

Meanwhile, in Damascus there's a Christian by the name of Ananias. The Lord speaks to him in a vision and tells him to go find Saul and place his hands on him, to restore his sight. Of course, the Lord doesn't need to use Ananias. But this must be part of Saul's healing, to see that Christians are not the enemy. They are his new friends.

Ananias hesitates. He knows of Saul and Saul's plans to round up Christians like sheep for the slaughter. But the Lord tells him, "Go, for he is a chosen instrument of mine to carry my name before the Gentiles and kings and the children of Israel."

Once again, the Lord chooses the least likely to serve in His plan of salvation, whether it's old Abraham being promised he will be the father of a great nation, or little David taking down Goliath, or a poor, unmarried girl being the mother of our Lord. Surely in reference also to himself, Paul wrote, "God chose the foolish things of the world to shame the wise; God chose the weak things of the world to shame the strong. He chose the lowly things of this world and the despised things – and the things that are not – to nullify the things that are, so that no one may boast before him" (1 Cor. 1:27-29).

In any case, Ananias finds Saul, and He doesn't take advantage of the blind man with recriminations and blame. Instead, he calls him Brother Saul, welcoming him as a fellow Christian and co-worker for the Gospel. Bringing Ananias and Saul together shows how the Lord brings disparate people into fellowship, people who have nothing else in common other than the Gospel. Similarly, most of us are unrelated by blood. Yet having been adopted into the Body of Christ, we are siblings, one to another.

Ananias puts his hands on Saul, and by God's power restores Saul's sight. Then, Ananias baptizes Saul and restores Saul's broken soul. Saul starts eating again to regain his strength, and then after a few days, he goes straight to the synagogue in Damascus. There, to the astonishment of everyone, Saul preaches that Jesus is Lord. Imagine, this coming from the pharisee of pharisees, right there in the synagogue of Damascus. As first sermons go, it would have been a whopper. Already, Saul is not ashamed of the Gospel but knows it to be the power of God unto salvation (Rom. 1:16).

Saul's conversion was dramatic, violent even. Some Christians feel the need for something similar, to show their conversion is genuine. They want to hear the voice from heaven or be able to tell a story of how God pulled them up out of their sin and transformed them. They may even magnify their former depravity to demonstrate the genuineness of their conversion. Some may look down upon those who were raised in the church from infancy and cannot point to a dramatic conversion experience.

Let no one question your salvation because you came to faith quietly, without some dramatic experience. Though God can and does work in people's lives through crises, conversion is always the work of the Holy Spirit through Word and Sacrament. Besides, when you were baptized, you went through a conversion every bit as dramatic. Paul writes in Romans 6 that in baptism the old man in you was crucified, and again a new man brought forth (Rom. 6:3-4). Anything more dramatic or violent than crucifixion? "If anyone is in Christ he is a new creation" (2 Cor. 5:17). The scales of unbelief fell off your own eyes through the Word. So don't let anyone question your salvation because it came about quietly. Your Damascus Road moment happened when you were baptized.

Well, you know what happened with Saul. His name would be Paul and God would use him mightily. It wouldn't be easy. He was on the road a lot, and when he wasn't on the road he was in prison. The persecutor would become the persecuted. He was flogged eight separate times. Once he was stoned. Always he was in danger from people, Jews and Gentiles. He was often sick and speaks of a "thorn in the flesh". The wonder of it all is that he was *able* to get around at all. But get around he did, planting and tending churches wherever he went: Corinth, Ephesus, Thessalonica, Galatia, Colossae, not to mention side trips to Jerusalem, Cyprus, Crete, Malta, Athens, Rome.

In a very real way, Saul's life began on a dusty road, and on dusty roads is where he spent most of his life, and his life ended on a dusty road. Somewhere about three miles outside of Rome he had his final run-in with the authorities, and there they unceremoniously lopped off his head. But if their goal was to kill the church, they were wasting their efforts because in persecuting Christians they were only trying to fight the risen Lord Jesus Christ. "Where, O death is your victory? Where, o death, is your sting?"

Despite the challenges and hardships, gratitude exuded from Paul. In 1 Timothy, he writes, "I thank Christ Jesus our Lord . . . Even though I was once a blasphemer and a persecutor and a violent man, I was shown mercy. . . The grace of our Lord was *poured* out on me, along with the faith and love that are in Jesus Christ. Here is a trustworthy saying that deserves full acceptance: Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners – of whom I am the worst" (1:13). And again, in Romans chapter 7, Wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death? Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord!

One last thing. Most of the heroes in the Bible have more than a few flaws. Abraham tried to save his own skin by passing his wife off as his sister. David was an adulterer and murderer. Rahab was a prostitute. Saul persecuted Christians to the death. It's a roster of rascals and reprobates and it goes on and on, begging the question: Why does the Lord use these people? Why does He tell their stories? Why not use better men and women? I think the Lord wants us to know He loves sinners, died for sinners, forgives sinners, saves sinners, and can use sinners to accomplish His purposes. And you know what? That means he can use you and me too. Amen.