

SCALES FELL FROM HIS EYES

SERIES: GOD'S SERVANTS IN THE WORLD

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Last summer I had the opportunity to visit St. Paul's Cathedral in London. It is an immense, beautiful building designed by the great architect Christopher Wren. But surely the apostle Paul, for whom it was named, would have been taken aback to know that someday such a structure would be built to honor him. He spent most of his life as a traveler. He was often alone and had no family. He was poor most of his life, dependent on the generosity of other people. He was born an ordinary son of an ordinary family, a Jew from Tarsus. We clearly see in his Christian life that he was a man of immense intelligence. But there is also evidence that he was awkward socially, because most people didn't understand his intense God-centeredness. There is a physical description of Paul that comes to us from the early church: "small stature, with a bald head, and crooked legs, in a good state of body, with eyebrows meeting and a nose somewhat hooked, a face full of friendliness."

It turns out, with history in view, that we probably should agree with those who built St. Paul's Cathedral. Though Paul himself would have recoiled at the thought, he is one of the greatest figures of history. His writing, ministry, insights, and telling of the gospel have done more to shape history than any other servant of God we can name. His influence is growing, in fact, as more and more people come to Christ. He wrote almost half of the books of the New Testament, and they continue to change the world.

Luke first mentioned him in Acts using his original name, Saul, which was later changed to Paul (Acts 13). Now in chapter 9 we hear the dramatic story of Saul's conversion.

A story of conversion

I want us to consider Saul's conversion as a template, if you will, for understanding what it means to give our lives to Christ, to step out of the darkness into the light. This account is dramatic and intense, and of course it's doubtful that any of us have been knocked to the ground by light and a voice from heaven. Probably none of us began as a vicious persecutor of Christians, either. But this account can teach us about important lessons about the nature of conversion.

This story is told three times in the book of Acts: in chapters 9, 22, and 26. The last two times Paul tells the story himself in his testimony while he is on trial. All three versions are dramatic, and Paul doesn't pull any punches about his terrible past. It's important to note that he is willing to speak of his violence and blindness, and of the transforming love of God. This man became the greatest exponent of the grace of God and the love of God for sinners who has ever lived. He experienced it himself. What God did for him informed everything that he would later come to understand. As he heard Jesus instruct him, heard the Old Testament come to life, his understanding was filled out to an extraordinary degree. But it never changed the fact that he knew himself to be someone who did not deserve it, yet was given a great gift.

Let's begin reading the text. Acts 9:1-2:

Now Saul, still breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord, went to the high priest, and asked for letters from him to the synagogues at Damascus, so that if he found any belonging to the Way [following Jesus], both men and women, he might bring them bound to Jerusalem.

Note the phrase "both men and women." Luke is probably the most careful of the New-Testament writers to include women in his story. Perhaps you noticed in 8:12 (Discovery Paper 4751) that he spoke of those in Samaria who were coming to Christ and being baptized as "men and women alike." The privilege of baptism belongs to all, just as the hard suffering of persecution for our faith belongs to all.

Verses 3-19:

And it came about that as he journeyed, he was approaching Damascus, and suddenly a light from heaven flashed around him; and he fell to the ground, and heard a voice saying to him, "Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting Me?" And he said, "Who art Thou, Lord?" And He said, "I am Jesus whom you are persecuting, but rise, and enter the city, and it shall be told you what you must do." And the men who traveled with him stood speechless, hearing the voice, but seeing no one. And Saul got up from the ground, and though his eyes were open, he could see nothing; and leading him by the hand, they brought him into Damascus. And he was three days without sight, and neither ate nor drank.

Now there was a disciple at Damascus named Ananias; and the Lord said to him in a vision, "Ananias." And he said, "Behold, here am I, Lord." And the Lord said to him, "Arise and go to the street called Straight, and inquire at the house of Judas for a man from Tarsus named Saul, for behold, he is praying, and he has seen in a vision a man named Ananias come in and lay his hands on him, so that he might regain his sight." But Ananias answered, "Lord, I have heard from many about this man, how much harm he did to Thy saints at Jerusalem; and here he has authority from the chief priests to bind all who call upon Thy name." But the Lord said to him, "Go, for he is a chosen instrument of Mine, to bear My name before the Gentiles and kings and the sons of Israel; for I will show him how much he must suffer for My name's sake." And Ananias departed and entered the house, and after laying his hands on him said, "Brother Saul, the Lord Jesus, who appeared to you on the road by which you were coming, has sent me so that you may regain your sight, and be filled with the Holy Spirit." And immediately there fell from his eyes something like scales, and he regained his sight, and he arose and was baptized; and he took food and was strengthened.

There are five stages that we can observe in Saul's story of coming to faith.

Desperately wrong

The first stage is seen in Luke's description of Saul as someone "breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord." This doesn't describe a judicial interest in stopping people from misrepresenting God. He is so zealous that his very breath exhales hatred of Christians. Burning inside him is a longing for their destruction. Thus he plans harm not only for those nearby, but also for some five days' journey to the north in Damascus.

Why is it helpful for us to start by considering the kind of man Saul was before he was converted? First, we would do well to think about those today who hate Christians, often in the name of God. We would do well to pray for them rather than hope for their demise.

But more importantly, Saul's pre-Christian life helps us understand ourselves.

I had a football coach once who would say, "Men, we are going into battle, and I want you to leave everything out on that field today." He meant we were to crawl off the field with the last ounce of our strength spent, to play to the very last drop of energy. That's the kind of man Paul was. He threw himself at things. He went as far as he could go. He would pay any price. He outstripped his contemporaries in keeping the law. He was determined that God be pleased with him, both in law-keeping in his own life and in destroying those he presumed to be enemies.

But one day he woke up and had to say, "Everything I have been doing was completely and shamefully and violently wrong! I am blind. I don't understand myself. I don't understand the world. I don't understand God. And I can't change." He came to realize that he was an enemy of God, whom he had attempted to please.

The things that are wrong with you and me go so deep, the blindness is so complete, that we have no way out. We can't fix ourselves, because the very effort to change only makes matters worse. Most of us were not violently angry in the days just before our conversion. We probably had other issues—feeling sorry for ourselves, fighting with people we thought were doing us wrong, trying to impress the people around us, building thicker facades so they would stand up a little longer under harsh treatment, and so on. Saul's conversion is dramatic, but we ordinary individuals are just the same: if God does not intervene, we have no hope. It's important if we are to be dispensers of grace to remember that we are recipients of grace.

The initiative of Jesus

The second stage to note in Saul's conversion is that the initiative for change is entirely with Jesus. He is the one who finds the lost soul. It is not the needy, angry, self-destructive person who is seeking to find Jesus. Sometimes you and I

will say about our conversion something like this: “I found Christ under such and such circumstances,” or “I came to faith in such and such circumstances.” But we have it backward. Christ found us in these circumstances. He sought us and gave himself to us as the initiator of a love relationship.

Maybe you were once a lost sheep who had no idea of the way home, who didn't even know how to use language for God. Maybe you were once a proud intellectual whose heart got broken. Maybe you were a beaten child. Maybe you were a highly skilled competitor who found you had no answer to the fear of death. Maybe you were an empty shell. Whatever the case, the discovery that changes everything is that we are known well and loved anyway.

Born again

We note the third stage of Saul's conversion when he has fallen to the ground. His eyes are open but he can't see. He cannot eat or drink. He is, we assume, mostly silent, waiting for something to happen. He is praying and wondering, not knowing what will happen next.

Consider the similarity of this condition to that of an infant waiting to be born. Jesus used the language of new birth to describe coming to faith:

“Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter into the kingdom of God. That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit. Do not marvel that I said to you, ‘You must be born again.’ The wind blows where it wishes and you hear the sound of it, but do not know where it comes from and where it is going; so is everyone who is born of the Spirit.” (John 3:5-8)

Saul was struck blind and his old way of life ended in a moment. When the scales fall from his eyes, when he is able to eat and drink, and touch people and speak with them, when his prayers are answered, he will be someone completely different, a new creature.

Why is that important to observe? If we don't realize that Christian faith is a revolution, our tendency will be to try to add Christianity to what we already are, like getting an advanced degree to improve ourselves, or else undertaking a moral reformation of some kind. Having come to Christ, we'll clean up our act, make new friends, add some discipline, hoping to become a better version of the person we once were. But like Saul, we will never again be the person we once were. The revolution comes at the core. The foundation is destroyed and a new one is built. We are now the residence of the Holy Spirit, children of God. Everywhere we go and everything we say and do, the way we influence the world, comes from a change that is rightly described as new birth. The challenge is to not let ourselves believe anything less than that. However much we might feel as if we are still who we once were, we are not.

A new member of the family

The fourth stage of Saul's conversion is that he is invited into a community. As he waits in blindness for God to do something, thirsty, silent, praying, the Lord sends a man named Ananias. The day Saul is allowed to stand on his feet and be baptized, receive the Holy Spirit, and complete the process of new birth, he is embraced by somebody in the community who calls him “Saul, my brother,” though he was well known as a violent persecutor of Christians. Saul is joined to a family. There is no Christian conversion without Christian family.

Ananias, we know from Acts 22, is a good man, well liked by everybody, honest, the salt of the earth, kindhearted. Otherwise he is nobody special, but Jesus chooses him to participate in something magnificently special: the new birth of the great apostle to the Gentiles! I hope Ananias' story will inspire us to think about what God might send us to do, and to be willing to go when he does send us.

But the crucial observation here is that Saul is joined to a new community from the very beginning. Once he has been embraced by Christ, he is the brother of every other Christian. And lastly on this point, we do well to observe the touch of Ananias. Jesus could heal him from a distance by commanding the scales to fall from his eyes. But he sends this

gentle, loving man who puts his arms around his new brother in tender acceptance, and Saul stands up as part of a new family.

A fruitful life

The fifth stage of Saul's conversion we will consider over a number of messages, because it's really the story of the rest of the book of Acts in many respects. What is going to happen to this man now? Ananias is told, "This man is my chosen instrument." The final stage is that he is given a new place of influence, of service, of significance.

The book of Romans is the magnum opus of the grace of God. The greatest teller of the Christian gospel is the apostle Paul, and his greatest telling of it is his letter to the Romans. At the heart of it he reflects on what happened to him and says this (5:10):

"For if while we were enemies, we were reconciled to God through the death of His Son, much more, having been reconciled, we shall be saved by His life."

If God loves his enemies this much, if he invites those who hate him to come to him, if he wins those who terrorize his beloved, if he is vitally interested in failures and enemies and rebels, how much more is he going to shower life on his friends? And if we are rebels won to sonhood, then shall we not believe he has good in mind for us as his children? How much more is he going to give us who love him? The more convinced we are that we are rebels who have been gifted, the more certain we are to partake of the life he has to give us as his children.

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