

**Sunday, 10 April 2016**

**[The real God will make us uncomfortable- Paul's conversion](#)**



**[Acts 9:1-20](#)**

You'll notice in our reading today that "Paul" is called "Saul". We are used to biblical characters having a couple names Jacob is also Israel; Simon is also Peter; Abram is Abraham. Paul wasn't actually given a name change. "Saul" is his Hebrew name and it would have been his name among his fellow Hebrew speaking Jews. It's a very Hebrew name. You might remember the first king of Israel was named Saul. "Paul" is his name among gentiles (non-Jewish folk). We probably know him as Paul because he embraced his call to be the apostle to the gentiles and "Paul" became his name because it was associated with the gentiles he was called to serve.

Saul's conversion on the road to Damascus is probably the most famous conversion in Christianity. It is dramatic not only in how it happened, but also in who it happened to. You'll hear people talk about a "Damascus road experience". And people who haven't have that kind of dramatic conversion will wonder if there's something wrong with them- especially if you grew up in the church. Let me just say that there are all kinds of

conversions. God converts us in the way that he wants to. Some are dramatic. Some of us need to be knocked to the ground before we will take him seriously. I had a kind of Damascus road conversion. Some of us need that, especially if we were enemies of Christianity. Some of us don't have fireworks, but have a slow consistent burning. There isn't a standard way of being converted, so not everyone should compare themselves to Saul's Damascus road experience.

What is more important is continuous conversion- that we have moments of growth. As Christians we should all be continuously converted. We should be having moments when the Bible seems to come alive to us. We should have moments when we really do want to love and serve the people around us for Christ's sake. We should have moments when we suddenly desire prayer. I remember going through times when I was first converted when the desire to pray was so strong it was like a fire in my chest. I would have to leave what I was working on and go hide in the bathroom to pray because it felt like my chest was going to burst. We should have moments of desire to learn more about God or about his people. We should all have moments when we suddenly overcome some character flaw that has enslaved us for years- maybe bitterness, anger, resentment, fear. These are all ways that we are continuously growing as Christians. We may or may not have a dramatic conversion we can point to, but we should have many small conversions as we grow as Christians. If you don't feel like you are growing then that is a good thing to bring to God in prayer and a good reason to seek out some help from a Christian brother or sister.

Well let's turn back to Saul to look at his experience. Often

when people have dramatic conversion experiences they will speak about who they were before their conversion. So who was Saul of Tarsus. He may have been a bit like the biologist Richard Dawkins, who said that teaching our children Christianity is the equivalent of child abuse. Or maybe Christopher Hitchens who wrote a book criticizing Mother Teresa, and another book called “God is not Good: how religion poisons everything”. Hitchens has recently died, and as angry as Dawkins is, he and those like him are not likely to physically hurt a Christian. A better comparison might be members of ISIS, the Islamic State, as they sometimes call themselves. They have hunted down Christians to kill them. [1] They believe they are in keeping with the ways of the Quran and believe they are in keeping with God’s purest laws. They see Christians as basically a kind of heretic. They believe Jews and Christians twisted the events of history and didn’t record them honestly. Christianity is a twisted view, a dangerous view, of the God they know more purely.

This is kind of who Saul of Tarsus was. He was fanatical about hunting down and destroying what he saw as a heretical sect of wayward Jews. We read that Saul was watching the coats of those who were stoning Stephen and giving his approval (Acts 7:58; 8:1). We read that “Saul was ravaging the church, and entering house after house, he dragged off men and women and committed them to prison” (8:3). We read today that, “Saul, still breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord, went to the high priest and asked him for letters to the synagogues at Damascus, so that if he found any belonging to the Way, men or women, he might bring them bound to Jerusalem” (9:1-2). Saul is a fanatic. Later in Acts he says, “I

myself was convinced that I ought to do many things in opposing the name of Jesus of Nazareth. And I did so in Jerusalem. I not only locked up many of the saints in prison after receiving authority from the chief priests, but when they were put to death I cast my vote against them. And I punished them often in all the synagogues and tried to make them blaspheme, and in raging fury against them I persecuted them even to foreign cities” (26:9-11). In his letter to the Galatians he says, “For you have heard of my former life in Judaism, how I persecuted the church of God violently and tried to destroy it. And I was advancing in Judaism beyond many of my own age among my people, so extremely zealous was I for the traditions of my fathers” (Gal 1:13-14). Saul was a fanatic. John Calvin described Saul as a wild and ferocious beast.

But it’s important to also realize that Saul saw himself as a warrior of truth. He saw himself as defending the ways of his people- Defending the Law and the dignity of the Temple. He saw Jesus and his followers as dangerous liars and tricksters drawing people into falsehood- leading the people of Israel away from God. Paul saw himself as a defender of truth. He didn’t see himself as cruel. He saw himself as standing up for truth and tradition. He saw himself as ultimately defending God. So now he is on his way to Damascus on official duty, under the authority of the high priest, he is going to arrest disciples of Jesus and bring them back to Jerusalem to receive their punishment. He wants to stop this infection before it spreads any further.

Saul is on his way to destroy the church in Damascus, who possibly went there from Jerusalem to get away from him. And "... suddenly a light from heaven flashed around him. He fell to the ground and heard a voice saying to him, 'Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?' [Saul] asked, "Who are you, Lord?" The reply came, 'I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting. But get up and enter the city, and you will be told what you are to do'" (9:3-6). Saul, who was ferociously defending God and truth, was suddenly humbled and thrown to the ground. Saul thought he knew God. He was so confident in who God was that he was willing to imprison and kill those who threatened that truth. He believed the temple and the sacrifices were eternal elements of what it meant to be God's people. Jesus and his followers threatened that. Jesus claimed to be the new Temple, and he claimed to be the only sacrifice needed.

Subtly, Saul was actually believing a god of his own creation. We all do that to some degree. We often prefer a God that doesn't challenge us. We prefer a comfortable God. We are often less concerned with the real God that exists and more concerned with "the god I believe in". The real God challenges us to do difficult things, to change, to think differently, to grow in love towards people we don't want to love. When we make the "god we believe in" more important than the God who actually exists, then we are creating an idol. I know that distinction is subtle. What it means is being open to being wrong about who we think God is, rather than trying to stuff God into a box. We should always recognize that God is bigger than we can imagine and will continuously surprise us. The real God will tell you things you don't want to hear. That is the God we meet in the pages of the Bible. That is why the God in the Bible

sometimes offends us, and disturbs us.

John Calvin described the human heart as an idol making machine[2]. An Idol is something besides God that, if you lost it, you would feel like life is not worth living. For some people that is an image of success- a certain amount of money, a prestigious position, expensive vacations, etc. There isn't anything wrong with money, positions, or vacations, it's only when they become idols- when they are all that's worth living for- that they become dangerous to our souls. Saul subtly, created an idol- a god of his traditions- a god of his culture- a god of the institution.

When Jesus shows up to talk to Saul on the road to Damascus his idol was shattered. Though this probably wasn't the first time he thought "what if these Jesus followers are right". Later when Paul is describing his experience he described himself as kicking against the goads (Acts 26:14). Goads are kind of like an ancient cattle prod. It was pointy and it hurt. The shepherds would use the goads to direct the sheep towards food or away from danger. To kick against the goads is to hurt yourself, like punching a brick wall, but it's also resisting what is good for you- the direction of the shepherd. It sounds like Saul must have had some sort of doubts about how right he was. Maybe his doubts came when he heard Stephen teaching the people about Jesus and then saw him get stoned to death while praying for God to forgive those who were killing him.

Now Jesus has appeared to him. Paul will later describe this experience as experiencing the resurrected Jesus. For him this was not a vision or a dream. Jesus, who he thought was dead, came and spoke to him. His train of thought must have been

overwhelming: If Jesus is resurrected, then God raised him; If God raised him, then God approved of him; If God approves of him, then he approves of his teaching; If he approves of his teaching then he approves of those who follow his teaching. ... Jesus says this amazing thing to Saul, “why do you persecute me?” Not only are his followers right in following the true teachings approved by God, but Jesus so identifies with his followers that to attack them is to attack the messiah. In that short interaction Saul suddenly realizes he has been fighting against God’s Messiah. He has been fighting against God, which is what his teacher Gamaliel warned the Council in Jerusalem about when he said, “keep away from these men and let them alone, for if this plan or this undertaking is of man, it will fail; but if it is of God, you will not be able to overthrow them. You might even be found opposing God!” (Acts 5:38-39). Saul encountered the real God. Not the god he imagined. Saul is thrown into darkness- a physical blindness that matches his spiritual blindness. Paul has to be led to the city of Damascus. There he refuses to eat or drink. He is fasting and praying in a state of repentance.

When you have moments of conversion you encounter these moments of blindness. You might have read the Bible your whole life, and suddenly it’s like you are reading it for the first time. You might have heard that you are forgiven over and over, but suddenly you feel like this is the first time you really understood it and received forgiveness. You feel like you were blind before.

Jesus then speaks to one of the men Saul was probably coming to arrest, Ananias. "Get up and go to the street called Straight,

and at the house of Judas look for a man of Tarsus named Saul. At this moment 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" (9:11-12). Ananias, rightly has some reservations. "But Ananias answered, 'Lord, I have heard from many about this man, how much evil he has done to your saints in Jerusalem; and here he has authority from the chief priests to bind all who invoke your name'" (9:13-14). This is like Jesus coming to you and telling you to go knock on Richard Dawkins' door and tell him you have been sent to pray for him. Or, actually it would be more dangerous. Dawkins would give you a tongue lashing but he probably wouldn't hurt you. Maybe it's more like Jesus saying, "Go to this member of ISIS and tell him Jesus sent you to pray for him". So Ananias has reservations. But because this is the God who is real, he will challenge you. He will make you uncomfortable. "... the Lord said to him, 'Go, for he is an instrument whom I have chosen to bring my name before Gentiles and kings and before the people of Israel; I myself will show him how much he must suffer for the sake of my name'" (9:15-16). Ananias believed in the real God and so was willing to do what made him uncomfortable.

Then we read, "Ananias went and entered the house. He laid his hands on Saul and said, 'Brother Saul, the Lord Jesus, who appeared to you on your way here, has sent me so that you may regain your sight and be filled with the Holy Spirit.' And immediately something like scales fell from his eyes, and his sight was restored. Then he got up and was baptized, (9:17-18). Can you imagine being Saul? Suddenly this man, maybe the leader of the church in Damascus who Saul was coming to imprison and kill, comes to Saul and calls him "brother", lays



his hands on him and prays for him and then he receives his sight. That would be an overwhelming example of courage and love. To come to your enemy and call him brother- Someone who was responsible for imprisoning and killing your friends.

It's interesting that Jesus speaking to Saul wasn't enough. Jesus wanted to connect him to the community. His conversion wasn't complete until he connected with other Jesus followers. Saul's experience is confirmed in the community as Ananias is told directly about what happened to Saul. He knows these Jesus followers hear God- they have intimacy with God. He sees that they are willing to sacrifice. They are willing to risk their lives to come to him and show him love. They live unselfishly. He is baptized and joins that Body he was persecuting. He becomes willing to do the uncomfortable and unpredictable thing as he follows the God who exists.

We want to follow the God who is real- the God who exists. The "god we believe in" is comfortable. We can put that god in a box and make it obey us. That god will never call us to do anything difficult. It will never make us uncomfortable. It will never tell us to change. It will never tell us things we don't want to hear. It is a god of comfort, but it is not a god worth believing in. It is worshiping self. I want to follow and serve the God who is real. And even as I say that it makes be a little nervous because I know that God loves me, but He loves me too much to leave me as I am. That means I will be called into places of discomfort. The real God encountered Saul and changed his life forever. It wasn't an easy life. The real God encountered Ananias and asked him to do something very uncomfortable. He might have thought it was going to a cross, but he went. The real God will

make us uncomfortable, but the real God is the only one worth believing in. AMEN

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[\[1\]](#) (If you go to the Voice of the Martyrs website, you will find stories and places where Christians are not allowed to openly practice their beliefs and are sometimes even hunted down and killed.)

[\[2\]](#) “Man's nature, so to speak, is a perpetual factory of idols.”