

“Saul to Paul: The Great Turnaround”

Date: September 3, 2017 Place: Lakewood UMC
Texts: Acts 9:1-22 Occasion: People of the Bible, series
Theme: Conversion, Paul,

Before he encountered Christ, Paul had been somewhat of a hero among the Pharisees. Good Jewish moms held him up as an example of a good Jewish boy. He was given the seat of honor at the Jerusalem Lion’s Club Wednesday luncheon. He was selected “Most Likely to Succeed” by his graduating class. He was quickly establishing himself as the heir apparent to his teacher, Gamaliel.

If there is such a thing as a religious fortune, Saul had it. He was a spiritual billionaire, born with one foot in heaven. Blue blooded and wild-eyed, this zealot was hell-bent on keeping the kingdom pure – and that meant keeping the Christians out. He marched through the countryside like a general, demanding that backslidden Jews salute the flag of the motherland, or kiss their family and hopes goodbye.

All of this came to a halt, however, on the shoulder of a highway. Saul was on his way to do a little personal evangelism in Damascus, that is to arrest the Christians there and have them imprisoned for abandoning and betraying the Jewish faith.

That’s when it happened. Saul gets knocked off of his high horse, the lights go on and he hears the voice. Whose voice? The voice of the Lord Jesus. Now that got him a little bewildered. Saul was just on his way to Damascus to prosecute a few of those Jesus followers, and who should talk to him? - but the Lord himself.

God left him that way for a few days – with scales on his eyes so thick that the only direction he could look was inside himself. And he didn’t like what he saw. He saw himself for what he really was – to use his own words, “the worst of sinners.” (1 Tim. 1:15). A legalist. A killjoy. A self-righteous judge who weighed salvation on a scale. That’s when Ananias found him.

As renovation projects go, the one assigned to Ananias was daunting. Saul of Tarsus hadn’t just burned bridges with the Christian establishment – he had blown them up. He was Public Enemy # 1 as far as Jesus’ followers were concerned – a man to be feared and certainly not to be embraced as a brother.

However, embracing Saul was exactly what Ananias had been called to do. He was given the task of preparing one of the most notorious enemies of first-century Christendom for...Christian service.

Ananias hurried through the narrow Damascus streets. Friends called as he passed, but he didn't pause. He murmured as he went, "Saul? Saul? No way. Can't be true."

He wondered if he had misheard the instructions. Wondered if he should turn around and inform his wife. Wondered if he should stop and tell someone where he was headed in case he never returned. But he didn't. Friends would call him a fool. His wife would tell him not to go.

But he had to go. He scampered through the courtyard of chickens, towering camels and little donkeys. He stepped past the shop of the tailor and didn't respond to the greeting of the tanner. He kept moving until he reached the street called Straight.

The inn had low arches and large rooms with mattresses. Nice by Damascus standards, the place of choice for any person of significance or power, and Saul was certainly both.

Ananias and the other Christians had been preparing for him. Some of the disciples had left the city. Others had gone into hiding. Saul's reputation as a Christian-killer had preceded him. But the idea of Saul the Christ-follower?

That was the message of the vision. Ananias replayed it one more time. "Arise and go to the street called Straight, and inquire at the house of Judas for one called Saul of Tarsus, for behold he is praying. And in a vision he has seen a man named Ananias coming in and putting his hand on him, so that he might receive his sight."

Ananias nearly choked on his matzo. This wasn't possible. He reminded God of Saul's hard heart. "I have heard from many about this man, how much harm he has done to your saints in Jerusalem." Saul, a Christian? Sure, as soon as turtles learn to two-step.

But God wasn't teasing. "Go, for he is a chosen vessel of Mine to bear My name before Gentiles, kings and the children of Israel." Ananias rehearsed the words as he walked. The name Saul didn't couple well with chosen vessel. Saul the thickhead, yes.

Saul the critic, okay. But Saul the chosen vessel? Ananias shook his head at the thought. He thought about turning back and going home.

Too late for that, he arrived at the house and was summoned inside. He ascended the stone stairs. The guards stepped aside and Ananias stepped inside. He gasped at what he saw.

A gaunt man was sitting cross-legged on the floor, half shadowed by a shaft of light. Hollow cheeked and dry lipped, he rocked back and forth groaning a prayer. "How long has he been like this?" "Three days."

By the time Ananias arrived, blind Saul had begun to see Jesus In a different light. Jesus had already begun to work on his heart. All that remained was for Ananias to show Saul the next step. "Brother Saul, the Lord Jesus who appeared to you on the road as you came, has sent me that you may receive your sight and be filled with the Holy Spirit."

Tears rushed like a tide against the crusts on Saul's eyes. The scaly covering loosened and fell away. Paul blinked and saw the face of his new friend. Ananias's instructions to Paul are worth reading. "What are you waiting for? Get up, be baptized and wash your sins away, calling on His name."

Paul didn't have to be asked twice. The legalist Saul was buried and the evangelist Paul was born. Within the hour he was stepping out of the waters of baptism. Within a few days he was preaching in a synagogue, the first of a thousand sermons.

Soon, Paul is preaching from the hills of Athens, penning letters from the bowels of prisons and ultimately stirring a genealogy of theologians, including Aquinas, Luther and Calvin. Stirring sermons, dedicated disciples, and 6,000 miles of travel. If his sandals weren't slapping his pen was writing.

All of his words could be reduced to one sentence: "We preach Christ crucified." (1 Cor. 1:23) It wasn't that he didn't have another sermon; it was just that he couldn't exhaust the first one.

The turn-around was complete and total; Saul no longer existed. Paul was an entirely new man. The whole thing seems absurd. Jesus should have finished him on the road. He should have left him for the buzzards. He should have sent him to hell, but he didn't. He sent him to the lost. Bring salvation to the world.

The message is gripping: Show a man his failures without Jesus and the result will be found in the roadside gutter. Give a man religion without reminding him of his filth, and the result will be arrogance in a three-piece suit.

But get the two in the same heart – get sin to meet the Savior and the Savior to meet a man’s sin – and the result just might be another Pharisee-turned-preacher who sets the world on fire.

Because that’s what Jesus does when he meets sinners. He doesn’t condemn them, nor does he simply let them off the hook. He turns their lives around. Evidence number one – Saul turned Paul, the great turnaround. Amen? Amen!

This sermon borrows heavily from the book *Ten Men of the Bible* by Max Lucado, Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 2015. Chapter 10: “Paul: Never Too Far Gone for a Turnaround,” pp. 217-225.