

## Anatomy of a Conversion

Acts 9:1-21

*“Who are you, Lord?...I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting.”*

A sermon preached by Rev. David Handley

at the First Presbyterian Church of Clarksville, TN

July 1, 2012

### Introduction to the Scripture Lesson

Today in our summer sermon series from the Book of Acts, we have “the tale of two disciples.” First there is Saul of Tarsus (or “Paul” as we know him after his conversion). Saul grew up in a Jewish family in Tarsus, on the coast of Asia Minor. Tarsus was a center of learning, and from there he went on to “graduate school” in Jerusalem, studying under the beloved and progressive rabbi Gamaliel, grandson of the famous rabbi Hillel. But Saul had a very different temperament than his teacher. Gamaliel was known for his moderation; there was nothing moderate about Saul of Tarsus. He had a firebrand zeal that expressed itself in a dedication to wipe out this wild-eyed Jesus-sect that called themselves “The Way.” We meet Saul for the first time at the end of chapter 7 and the beginning of chapter 8, when he was present at the death of the first Christian martyr, Stephen.

The hero of this account is a little man named Ananias; not to be confused with Ananias of Jerusalem, the husband of Sapphira, we read about in chapter 5, the one who lied to the apostles about the gift he was making to the Church. Ananias of Damascus was quite a contrast to Saul of Tarsus. Also a Jew, as all the first Christians were, Ananias was quiet, unassuming, timid; and he was a fully devoted follower of Jesus. If Saul of Tarsus provides for us a picture of the living power of Jesus Christ to change a life, Ananias provides a picture of what a fully-converted disciple looks like. In our scripture lesson for today, these two stories come together into one.

Let us listen for the Word of God. [**Read Acts 9:1-21**]

### Anatomy of a Conversion

It has been said, “Life is what happens when you’re making other plans.” Nothing could be more true in the life experience of both Paul and Ananias. Both had their plans, and both had their lives interrupted by something totally unexpected. In the mystery of God’s timing when the scriptures are read, perhaps you found yourself strangely attracted to the story of Paul’s

conversion. Maybe there is even a hint of spiritual envy that puzzles you. If that is the case, just maybe God is getting ready to do a new work in your life. Maybe this is your day of “conversion,” when your eyes are opened to a whole new way of knowing and relating to God. Do not think it odd that conversions happen in Church. They happen all the time, not as dramatic as the blinding flash of light and the Voice. But the vivid conviction, the ring of truth, the scripture read, the anthem sung that seems to have your name on it, the strange “coincidence” of the message you hear in church with the events of your week. These are the kinds of weekly experiences in worship that spark conversions in churches. Isaiah the prophet was a priest presiding “in church” when he had his conversion moment. He tells his story in Isaiah chapter 6.

Yes, there are moments in time. We might call them “conversions,” or “teachable moments,” or life defining events that forever change our perspective and values of life. A life-threatening illness; a surgery; a divorce; the loss of a child, or spouse; the loss of a job.

But in another sense, “conversion” is a life-long process of God intervening to help us turn over different aspects of our lives to Christ. Two weeks ago, we talked about turning our Money over to God. Last week, we talked about turning our Ego’s over to God when we receive criticism. Next week, we’ll talk about turning our cherished Traditions over to God. In Marriage we are always needing to turn over our disappointments or our hurts or our anger over to God, so we can forgive and grow. In parenting we continually have to turn over our children to God. Each one is a “conversion” of another compartment of our lives in the process of letting Christ be “Lord.”

In your personal relationship with God, I hope you come to church each week praying, “Lord, convert me!” I hope you come to church each week asking the question Saul asked of the Voice from heaven, “*Who are you, Lord?*” I hope you come to church each week, listening for the response that Saul heard, “*I am Jesus...*,” and expect to receive a new understanding of what that means for your life.

Now, there is a certain “Anatomy” of conversion, described in Paul’s experience and relevant to our own “conversion moments” at different stages of our lives. First, there are what we could call “stirrings.” It could be a troubled conscience; or some “unfinished business” of something we have known for a long time we need to confront. It could be something more positive, like an inner expectation, an anticipation that something new is in the offing, like Ryan’s anticipation of what God might do in him and through him as he goes off to Ethiopia. Our graduating seniors are getting ready to go off to college; perhaps you have that sense of anticipation of how you will be growing in new ways, while we parents are praying that those new experiences and learnings will be managed by a Hand greater than ours.

It could be the “stirrings” provoked by an inspirational example. You have seen someone who inspired you, someone who had some quality you lack, and it makes you want to reach higher. I’ve had three people in the last few weeks who told me that Dr. Atkinson had that effect on them, and it changed them. If you have those stirrings, positive or negative, embrace them as God stirring you up, getting you ready for some new work in your life.

We have a hint this was going on in Saul’s life. It seems he never got over this event, because in different settings when he was called on to point to Jesus Christ, he would refer back to the Damascus Road. Chapters 22 and 26 of the Book of Acts are two examples when he does this. In chapter 26, Saul (now referred to as “Paul”) is speaking to King Agrippa about Jesus, and he elaborates a bit on the condensed version Luke gives us in chapter 9. He says, “I saw a light flash around me; I fell to the ground; I heard a Voice speaking to me in Hebrew, ‘Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?’” And then he adds this detail we do not get in chapter 9: the Voice said, “... *It hurts you to kick against the goads.*” (Acts 22:13-14)

What do you think was goading Paul? What was stirring in his soul? Was he having a troubled conscience about the stoning of Stephen?<sup>1</sup> Was he, perhaps, shocked and impressed with the way Stephen died, calling for the forgiveness of his executioners? Was he remembering his beloved teacher, Gamaliel, who had so much grace and tolerance about his teaching?<sup>2</sup> We don’t know; but the Voice of God seemed to be saying, “It was I who has been goading you, Saul; it hurts you when you kick against the goads.” So if you found yourself longing for something about Paul’s story today, and there are “stirrings,” please move closer, embrace them; don’t push them away! Give those stirrings to Christ today as you receive the Sacrament. And then watch for what will happen next! Again, the mystery of God’s timing: you have heard this message today, not by accident, I presume; something relevant to it will may very well appear in the next few days. Stay alert!

So, in the “anatomy of a conversion,” there are often these stirrings. And then there is a kind of a “blindness”; we might call it a self-questioning, or a loss of confidence...in our rightness, or our ability to know which way to go, or what to do, or how to relate to a special person.

And then someone appears who, knowingly or unknowingly, helps. There is a Zen saying, have you heard it?: “When the student is ready..., the teacher will appear.” That is the Wonder of God’s providence in our lives. Who comes into Paul’s life? Ananias, that simple, unassuming witness. There is something so endearing about him; an “ordinary hero.” Timid, open to God, yet afraid. He protests the Lord’s instructions; maybe hopes he heard it wrong: “*Lord, I have heard about this man!, how much evil he has done to your people!...*”

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<sup>1</sup> See Acts 7:54-8:1.

<sup>2</sup> We get a window into Gamaliel’s tolerance and wisdom in Acts 5:33-39.

When the Holy Spirit speaks (at least this has been my experience; it seems to be borne up in the New Testament), the Spirit usually uses few words. The Lord simply says to Ananias, *“Go, for he is an instrument I have chosen to take my name to the Gentiles...”* Ananias’ response is equally simple. He goes. At risk to his own life, he goes. Without knowing what he was doing, he goes. Without knowing how he was going to do it, he goes. He follows the prompts, step by step. He goes simply because God told him to go. And because of that simple obedience, he changed the world.

We don’t hear anything about Ananias after this. He probably led a great life as a faithful witness to Christ; but if this were the only significant thing he did in his whole life—to obey God at one point of uncertainty; to trust God at one point where he was afraid...his life would have been a flaming success! Why? Because you and I are here today, being disciplined by Jesus Christ...because of Ananias! The Apostle Paul took Christ to the Gentiles. But it was Ananias who took Christ to Paul. He was the true and faithful witness. And because he said yes to God, at a point of uncertainty and fear...he opened up the entire Gentile world to the Gospel. Unbeknowns to him, when Christ called him to go, the student was ready,...and he was the teacher who was supposed to appear!

I want to be like him. How about you?

Alleluia! Amen.