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# Saul Sees the Light

Sermon • Rev'd John Shoaf • 25 January 2026

Acts 9:1-22 • Matthew 19:23-30

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May the words of my mouth and the thoughts of our hearts give glory to you, O Lord. Amen.

The amazing conversion of Paul (then known as Saul) from a Christian-hating Pharisee to the greatest missionary of all time always amazes me. These days, God does not seem to intervene in human events as he did in the Old Testament, many centuries ago. But here, God reaches out and touches this man and instantly changes him, and changes the course of his life. This brings to my mind several questions:

- Why such a dramatic conversion?
- Why Paul?
- Why doesn't God do this more often?

Let's start with the last question: why doesn't God do this more often? There are millions of people who do not know Jesus, all around the world. God wants everyone to come to faith. The direct method certainly worked with Saul; couldn't God just send his flashes of light down upon all those people who don't

know him, who would then stand up and follow God thereafter? What a wonderful world that would be!

This question is just a variant of the general question: why doesn't God act? There are wars to be stopped; famines to be eased; natural disasters to be avoided. We know that God has the power to do all these things. This is a difficult question to answer; the partial answer is perhaps that the way the world is, is the way God set it up to be. Humans act; God guides. God gives no shortage of guidance. Those who do bad things know they are doing bad things. They do them anyway, but they can't claim they didn't know they were doing wrong. We have plenty of guidance from our God. Why God set the world up this way is a big question. I believe it is because God did not create us all just for his pleasure, although he loves us and does take pleasure in us. God wants us to work with him to bring about the eternal kingdom. Humans have a God-ordained part to play in this process. So God will guide and encourage us; but we have to step up and do the work. Again, God is capable of doing all the work; but chooses not to, so as to engage us. We matter to God; God gives us work to do. So when God flashed his lightning on Paul as he walked along the road to Damascus and knocked him to the ground, it not only got Paul's attention; God also gave Paul the tools and knowledge to do the job God wanted him to do. When Paul recovered from the shock, he set to work.

But that's not God's usual way. I often speak of my own conversion, saying something like, "Well, it wasn't a road to Damascus moment." It usually isn't, although I've spoken to some people whose conversions felt pretty dramatic. The thing is, it isn't necessary for God to throw the lightning at each one of us. God sent his Son to accomplish the same thing in a different way. That way involves all of us, spreading the word to other people. First, the twelve disciples and their companions; then Paul and the other early missionaries; then everyone else. This plan wasn't in effect in Old Testament times, although it was already in the mind of God, since the beginning. Abraham was not told to go forth and tell everyone about God. The word of God spread through deeds of power. God cleared out other nations to make way for his chosen people; and their successes in battle, enabled by God, let other nations know that the God of Israel is the true God. But that era of violent action ended with the coming of Jesus Christ. From then on, the word of God was intended to spread through peaceful means, from person to person.

So God called on Paul to be one of his most important servants. But why Paul? We can't know all the reasons God chose him, but we can see that Paul was an active and dedicated worker. Before his conversion, the Bible tells us that "Saul was ravaging the church by entering house after house; dragging off both men and women, he committed them to prison" (Acts 8:3). He had gone "to the high priest and asked him for letters to the synagogues at Damascus, so that if he

found any who belonged to the Way, men or women, he might bring them bound to Jerusalem.” Although he was acting against God, God could see that, once redirected in the right way, Paul could be a great servant of Christ.

Paul was also a learned and devout Jew, one of the Pharisees, who were known for their learning. In Paul’s later letters, he identifies as a Pharisee; when he testifies before the council in Acts 23, he declares, “Brothers, I am a Pharisee, a son of Pharisees” (23:6). This identification would carry some weight with the Jews; they would listen to a fellow Pharisee with more attention, and be more likely to accept what he testifies concerning Christ, than if he had been a common Jew. And if even Paul, who was, if you will, the opposite of a Christian in his persecution of Christians, could become a believer, that might help convince others.

The Bible tells us that as Paul approached Damascus, “a light from heaven flashed around him” and he hears the voice of Jesus. This dramatic event was necessary to convince Paul of the truth; a more subtle approach, such as a dream, perhaps, might have been dismissed by a man so zealous as Paul. He is left blinded for a few days, and this again would serve to convince Paul of the truth of the vision.

The fact that it took Paul three days to recover from this conversion is significant too. When we accept Jesus, it really does transform us. God works in our hearts and our minds to allow us to see the new reality of living and serving in God’s creation as one of God’s children. It is not a little thing that happened to Paul. It changed everything in his world. Symbolically, when Paul became blind, it was God showing him how truly blind he had been, not to see the reality of the love of Christ. And when God gave him his sight again, it was to enter into a new world.

And furthermore, Ananias was part of the awakening, just as most of us, I suspect, were brought into the truth of Christ through the help of some other person. For me it was my wife Melissa, who encouraged me to attend a church service where God began to work on me. God made the change in me, but graciously allowed Melissa to be part of the process.

It was a big change for Paul, and great news for the rest of us, for Paul gives us his wisdom through his letters. This is one of the most important stories in the Bible. We give thanks to God for Paul’s conversion and how it has enabled us to know God better ourselves.