

June 14, 2009  
Saul → Becoming Paul  
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Acts 9:1-19a (The Message)

All this time Saul was breathing down the necks of the Master's disciples, out for the kill. He went to the Chief Priest and got arrest warrants to take to the meeting places in Damascus so that if he found anyone there belonging to the Way, whether men or women, he could arrest them and bring them to Jerusalem.

He set off. When he got to the outskirts of Damascus, he was suddenly dazed by a blinding flash of light. As he fell to the ground, he heard a voice: "Saul, Saul, why are you out to get me?"

He said, "Who are you, Master?"

"I am Jesus, the One you're hunting down. I want you to get up and enter the city. In the city you'll be told what to do next."

His companions stood there dumbstruck—they could hear the sound, but couldn't see anyone—while Saul, picking himself up off the ground, found himself stone-blind. They had to take him by the hand and lead him into Damascus. He continued blind for three days. He ate nothing, drank nothing.

There was a disciple in Damascus by the name of Ananias. The Master spoke to him in a vision: "Ananias."

"Yes, Master?" he answered.

"Get up and go over to Straight Avenue. Ask at the house of Judas for a man from Tarsus. His name is Saul. He's there praying. He has just had a dream in which he saw a man named Ananias enter the house and lay hands on him so he could see again."

Ananias protested, "Master, you can't be serious. Everybody's talking about this man and the terrible things he's been doing, his reign of terror against your people in Jerusalem! And now he's shown up here with papers from the Chief Priest that give him license to do the same to us."

But the Master said, "Don't argue. Go! I have picked him as my personal representative to non-Jews and kings and Jews. And now I'm about to show him what he's in for—the hard suffering that goes with this job."

So Ananias went and found the house, placed his hands on blind Saul, and said, "Brother Saul, the Master sent me, the same Jesus you saw on your way here. He sent me so you could see again and be filled with the Holy Spirit." No sooner were the words out of his mouth than something like scales fell from Saul's eyes—he could see again! He got to his feet, was baptized, and sat down with them to a hearty meal.

I had an interesting experience a couple of weeks ago. I had failed to pick up my shirts from the cleaners, and I had a crazy day ahead of me, first a funeral and then a wedding. The problem was --- with my thyroid condition, I have had swelling in my neck and most of my shirts no longer can have the collar buttoned up comfortably. In other words - I was in desperate need of a clean shirt! I thought that they opened at 7:00 am, so I hopped into my car and drove over --- only to find that they didn't open until 8:00. That was starting to cut things close, but I still should be OK. I planned on picking up the shirt,

heading over to the church to get things finished for the funeral and then head to the funeral home.

At a few minutes before 8:00 I got back into the car, drove once again to the cleaners only to find that they were still not open. At 8:20, I looked up the number and called and had the owner answer the phone – and I told him that the Munster location was not open. At that point I expected a couple of responses:

1. I'm sorry
2. Somebody is on the way
3. Can I get your clothes delivered to you

Instead I was treated to indifference.

Since I was not yet dressed (I had on my suit pants and a tee-shirt, and now I was seriously running late), I had to head back home and find something to wear that I could still breathe in.

They must have caller id, because as I was running out the door, they called my house (Nancy had called while I was sitting in front of the store to see if they were open). They wanted her to know that they were know open --- when she explained that yes, we knew they were having problems, as I had been sitting outside the store for 20 minutes – he kinda chuckled and said – “ah, so you are the one . . .” Again – no apology – no, can we deliver the clothes to you, etc. etc.

The story doesn't end there – but the rest of it is irrelevant to the point that I am trying to make --- but I am looking for a new cleaner!

As I approach Paul – I have to admit, that I tend to see Paul much like I see this cleaning business.

This is the way it is – take it or leave it.  
If you don't like it – go somewhere else.

Now, my hunch is neither Paul nor the owner of the Cleaners would agree with that assessment.

But, many of us see Paul and I see this owner as:

Not very accessible  
Not willing to be very flexible and adopt to the current situation.

Over the summer, I am going to spend five Sunday mornings looking at this man who has influenced Christianity more than anyone else.

We will begin by looking at the transformation that takes place in his life as he was traveling to Damascus.

We will then spend some time exploring what is meant by:

- Justification by faith
- The Nature of Christ
- The role and place of women
- And finally what it means to live with Christ

I think this is going to be a fun and enlightening journey.

So, let's begin!

Our story begins with a young man who is known throughout the area as a great defender of Judaism.

We know from his own accounts that he grew up a Pharisee.

O.K. – I know that I have used that word before – but what the heck is a Pharisee?

The word **Pharisees** comes from the Hebrew *פְּרִישִׁים* *perushim* from *שׁוּרֵף* *parush*, meaning "separated".

The Pharisees were, depending on the time, a political party, a social movement, and a school of thought among Jews that flourished during the Second Temple Period (536 BCE–70 CE).

After the destruction of the Second Temple, in 70 CE, the Pharisaic sect becomes what we know of today as Rabbinic Judaism. That is the Judaism that we are all familiar with today.

Some of the key beliefs of the Pharisees were:

- Strict belief in Mosaic law (both written and oral)
- Belief in the afterlife – resurrection
- Belief in a coming Messiah

In the book of the Acts of the Apostles we are told that: (Acts 7:58–60)

Yelling and hissing, the mob drowned him (Stephen) out. Now in full stampede, they dragged him (Stephen) out of town and pelted him with rocks. The ringleaders took off their coats and asked a young man named Saul to watch them.

As the rocks rained down, Stephen prayed, "Master Jesus, take my life." Then he knelt down, praying loud enough for everyone to hear, "Master, don't blame them for this sin"—his last words. Then he died.

Saul was right there, congratulating the killers.

Saul in his zealousness for Judaism did everything that he could to thwart this new sect that was emerging that saw Jesus of Nazareth as the long awaited messiah.

The Book of Acts goes on: (Acts 8:3)

Saul just went wild, devastating the church, entering house after house after house, dragging men and women off to jail.

This is our first encounter with Saul.

And he is presented as a committed zealot

Focused on saving Judaism from "incorrect" worship

I think this is important for us to understand because it puts things into perspective. Because many of these personality traits that he has and his passion for his religion continues after the strange occurrence on the road to Damascus.

<<Video>>

Something happened on that road.

The story is told three different times – in the book of Acts, and once by Paul, himself in Galatians, --- and each time it is slightly different – which would suggest to me that this was one of those encounters with God that you cannot fully put to words – or maybe I should say – one that words cannot fully capture.

But whatever happened it changes Saul.

And in the great Biblical tradition that when something profound happens in your life and you become transformed Saul is given a new name.

Like	Abram →	Abraham
	Sarai →	Sarah
	Jacob →	Israel
	Saul →	Paul

He is, in words that he will use later – a new creation. A new man.

The question that we must address is: What kind of a man did Paul become?

And that is a very tough question, because we all approach him with so much baggage.

Some of you can't stand him because he seems so self-righteous.  
So dogmatic in his approach to Christianity.

Some of you can't stand him because of his attitude toward women – “Wives be submissive to your husbands.” Or “Women keep quite . . .”

Others can't reconcile his attitude toward homosexuality.

I personally don't think that he was a very fun person and was so certain that he was right that I think I would find him rather obnoxious.

But we need to get over our personal issues toward Saul/Paul and see what kind of man he was and understand the legacy he leaves us.

And it is a powerful legacy that he leaves us all.

Not a perfect legacy – but who does leave a perfect legacy, but a legacy that we are all richer for – IF, we can see beyond our blinders.

In the Bible, the Hebrew word for conversion is *shub*, which means “to turn” or “to return,” and the Greek word is *metanoia*, which means “to turn around.

As defined by *The Dictionary of Bible and Religion*, “To be converted means to have the direction of one's life shifted, so that it no longer points toward self, but points toward God.” And that's exactly what happened to Saul.

The conversions we usually hear about, whether of a religious nature or of some other type, are often accompanied, at least initially, by excitement, zest, intensity, an eagerness to tell others about it and efforts to make significant changes in one's life. And often, the converted person looks back at the time of the conversion as a significant turning point.

For example, consider how the folk singer Judy Collins describes her turn from classical music performance to folk music performance. She was 14 years old when this happened, had been playing piano for 11 years and loved classical music. Her piano teacher was the famed conductor and pianist Antonia Brico, and she told Collins that she had a bright future in classical music performance.

But then one day, while Collins was preparing to perform Rachmaninoff's *Second Piano Concerto* with a local orchestra, she happened to hear the 17th-century English ballad "Barbara Allen" on the radio, sung by Jo Stafford. It was the first folk song Collins had ever heard, but it captured her. Here's how she describes the moment:

... the poignancy of Stafford's music about a woman's remorse over her lover's death changed everything. Its message was so potent; it overpowered the richness of Rachmaninoff and tapped into my adolescent yearnings of love and loss. Hearing its poetic, antique lyrics made me sit up and say, "That's what I want to do: tell stories with my music." It was like hitting a vein of gold.

She goes on to say that the full switch took about a year. She continued studying piano while immersing herself in folk music. She taught herself to play a guitar, practicing till her fingers bled. Her parents and her piano teacher opposed the change, but Collins had become convinced that her future was in folk music. And once she made the change, she says, she "felt ecstasy, as if a burden had been lifted."

That sounds like conversion to me.

Alice Flaherty is a neurologist at Massachusetts General Hospital who also teaches at Harvard Medical School. She says that when, as a student, she first applied to med school, she wasn't especially committed to being a physician. She just wanted to know how the brain works. But then, on her first day in class, there was a case presentation of a young man who'd had a brain hemorrhage after a bike accident. To decompress the injured man's brain, the

surgeon had removed a piece of his skull and sewn it into the patient's abdominal cavity for sterility and safekeeping until it could be later put back over his brain. Flaherty says that this radical but simple rearrangement of someone's body to save his life "riveted" her. She continues:

And the fact that the someone was a specific person, with a particular girlfriend and parents who were worried sick, was a revelation after years of reading about neuroscientific abstractions. I became abruptly convinced that I was in the right profession, that I had a calling to be a doctor. The exaggerated, perhaps even pretentious, feeling of duty and joy that filled me was such that I am embarrassed to describe it. But I still feel a little of it every time I turn on a new stimulator in a Parkinson's patient and watch her go from being frozen to walking nearly normally.

Neither Collins' conversion nor Flaherty's was truly what you would call of a religious nature, and yet both were life-changing turning points.

They were both marked by deep feelings, a sense of calling and other characteristics that often accompany conversion.

These three conversions — Saul's, Collins' and Flaherty's — are to some degree models of what any conversion, including a religious one, can look like.

I have to say "can" because God deals uniquely with each one of us.

Still, some of us may have had something similar occur, perhaps a dramatic opening of ourselves at church camp or a youth rally or a revival service where we committed ourselves to follow Jesus. And that may have been a real milestone experience that we can look back on and say, "Right there. That's when I really became a Christian. And my life has been different because of the turn I made at that point."

But others of us cannot point to a moment of conversion.

We may have attended church since childhood and never questioned the faith as it was presented to us.

We may have accepted Jesus along the way without ever wandering deeply into sin or recognizing a moment of turning from it.

Or we may have entered the church as a teen or an adult and rationally opened our mind to the faith and recognized that we agreed with it. There may have been no precise moment when that happened, but we know today that we are disciples of Jesus Christ.

While it's essential that one be committed to follow Jesus today, it's not essential that one can point to a calendar date as the moment of one's conversion. The lack of a conversion story is no shortcoming in terms of our acceptance by God and Christ.

But those of us who are not conscious converts to Christianity have missed out on some of the passion and intensity that often marks converts. And when we don't have a faith-conversion story to tell, sometimes we tell nothing at all about our faith. Not only don't we "proclaim it freely" and "spread the word," we sometimes act as if our spiritual stance is strictly a private matter. Yet the fact is, whether we've had a turning-point experience or not, we do have a story about the content of faith that we can share.

Paul spends the rest of his life trying to explain and live out what happened to him on the road to Damascus.

And we will spend the rest of the summer trying to understand how Paul put that experience into action and what that means for us.