

A Change of Heart©

Acts 9:1-22

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The Message (MSG)

¹⁻² 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.

³⁻⁴ 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?"

⁵⁻⁶ 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."

⁷⁻⁹ 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.

¹⁰ There was a disciple in Damascus by the name of Ananias. The Master spoke to him in a vision: "Ananias."

"Yes, Master?" he answered.

¹¹⁻¹² "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."

¹³⁻¹⁴ 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."

¹⁵⁻¹⁶ 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."

¹⁷⁻¹⁹So 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. Plots Against Saul

¹⁹⁻²¹Saul spent a few days getting acquainted with the Damascus disciples, but then went right to work, wasting no time, preaching in the meeting places that this Jesus was the Son of God. They were caught off guard by this and, not at all sure they could trust him, they kept saying, "Isn't this the man who wreaked havoc in Jerusalem among the believers? And didn't he come here to do the same thing—arrest us and drag us off to jail in Jerusalem for sentencing by the high priests?"

²²But their suspicions didn't slow Saul down for even a minute. His momentum was up now and he plowed straight into the opposition, disarming the Damascus Jews and trying to show them that this Jesus was the Messiah.

Today, in our journey through Acts, we have the story of the conversion of Saul – one of the greatest, most zealous persecutors of the early Christians to Paul – one of the most prominent missionaries to the gentiles and one of the greatest influences in the growth of the early church.

We first heard of Saul at the stoning of Stephen. Stephen was ordained to be a deacon in the new community of believers and was committed to speaking about Jesus and the good news of forgiveness and of resurrection and of God's love shown through Jesus, God's Son – the promised Messiah.

Those who stoned Stephen to death – including Saul who was there watching – believed with all their hearts that they were doing what was right for the sake of Yahweh, the one true God. They were totally committed to protecting the Jewish faith and believed that Stephen and other believers were blasphemers against God – just as they had believed Jesus was, holding himself up as God, forgiving sins, healing as if he were God. They executed Jesus for that reason and they were now executing his followers for the same reason. It was getting out of hand and spreading throughout Jerusalem and they intended to nip it in the bud.

Saul was a young man who was highly educated and steeped in the Jewish faith. He was completely committed to God, to the temple, to all that he had been taught. He was zealous, passionate and determined.

When Stephen was stoned to death, the believers were scared and they scattered out from Jerusalem to other areas like Damascus. Saul asked the Chief Priest for warrants to take with him as he traveled to Damascus so he could arrest those Jesus believers and drag them back to Jerusalem for trial and execution. Both men and women were being sought out and Saul was known by them all. He had made quite a name for himself and no one wanted to run into him.

So it was in this frame of mind and with this intent that he headed down the road to Damascus on this mission to arrest the Christians.

What was he thinking and doing as he rode along? Some scholars who are knowledgeable of the Jewish beliefs think it might be quite possible that Saul was meditating and praying. Perhaps even thinking on the visions of the prophets and seeking that very presence of God with him. He was, after all, on this mission for Yahweh, for God.

Whatever he was doing or thinking, we can't really know, but what happened on that road, according to Luke, caused a complete change of heart for Saul.

He suddenly had his own vision – a blinding light that struck him down and caused him to hit the ground with full force. The strong man becomes weak and humble in the presence of this divine light.

Luke tells us that the other men who were with Saul heard a noise but had no idea what was happening and didn't see anyone or know what was being said to Saul.

“Saul! Saul!” says the voice, calling his name in the same repetition that called Abraham! Abraham! And Moses! Moses!

When the Lord calls your name, he wants to be sure you know it is YOU he wants! We find this repetition often in the Scriptures where we are to take notice of something – where an important thing is emphasized.

“Saul! Saul!” It's like – “yes Saul, I'm talking to you!”

“Why are you persecuting me?” The voice asks.

And Saul has the audacity to ask, “Who ARE you, Lord?”

We almost want to hear the voice say, “REALLY? You can't figure that out? Who is it you are persecuting?”

But, no. The Lord gives it to Saul straightforward. “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.”

So the men help Saul up and lead him – now completely blind and weak – into the town to meet Ananias on Straight Street, whom the Lord will speak to about receiving and healing Saul.

This is interesting, I think. A strong, self sufficient man, headstrong about what he was doing, with the power and the aids to accomplish his task, suddenly comes face to face with the risen Lord and he becomes like a helpless infant, being led away and cared for, completely humbled, completely changed.

But the change wasn't complete yet. The period of three days (we've heard of the three day wait before with Jesus' own transformation after death) is a time for thinking, for waiting on the Lord, for being completely dependant on the one who has called his name and made a believer out of him. Saul has seen the light and he is going to be a new man.

When Ananias heard that he was to meet this dreaded Christian killer, Saul, he did a little balking! But the Lord assured him that Saul was chosen for God's purposes and Ananias was obedient. He laid hands on Saul and Saul's sight was restored. Saul ate and drank and his energy and strength were renewed.

Saul – now becomes Paul and is baptized and sent out to serve Jesus Christ, the one who had transformed his life. He traveled throughout the land from city to city and country-to-country, winning people to Christ – now himself a sought man by the Jewish leaders. Eventually, Paul would lose his life for the sake of the gospel.

There are important things in this that stand out for us and I think should be emphasized. (Perhaps I should repeat them as the Bible does!)

1. Conversion – a complete transformation – a come to Jesus moment – is not something we initiate. Christ himself is the initiator. He comes to us, sometimes at the least expected moment. He chooses us. We do not choose him. He told us that in John 15.

2. We must be humbled, we must become like little children so that our transformation can be complete. It is like the potter who forms clay and slaps it on the wheel and works it but then, if it isn't right, it's taken and slammed down, pounded flat and reshaped to become a beautiful thing. We must be open and willing to allow God to re-form us.

3. Third, you never know who God will choose, who God will use to serve him. It might be someone who, in our eyes, is the worst offender – someone we think can't possibly be changed; someone who rubs us wrong, who seems hateful and hard to be with. Maybe we can't imagine how they could ever have a change of heart.

But if Christ can change Saul, the murderer into Paul, the amazing missionary – He can do the same with others – and yes, even with you and me!

Years ago, Fred and I were introduced to a great storyteller. Edward Hays, the author of many bestselling books of parables, and a catholic priest himself, wrote the book *The Magic Lantern*.

In this book he tells a parable about Jesus walking along the road with Peter. Coming upon the rich man, Jesus invites him to be a follower. The rich man says that he thinks he would like to but has to go home and talk it over with his wife and his father; he needs to give it some time to think about it.

Jesus tells him “never mind. I made a mistake. If you have to think about it, if you can’t make a full commitment to me then you cannot be my follower.”

“Then they come to the synagogue where a group of men were visiting on the front steps. Jesus stopped and eyeing a short, stocky man said, “Come, follow me.”

The man spat on Jesus and yelled, “You are the last man in the world that I would want to follow! You heretic, you blasphemer!” And he began picking up rocks and throwing them at Jesus. At this, the man’s companions joined him in pelting Jesus and Peter.

Jesus, running as fast as he could with the rocks whistling by him, gave Peter a big grin, saying, “I like that man!”

Panting, Peter moaned, “Rabbi, I’m confused. I don’t get it. You were so rude to that ‘good’ man back there. He only wanted time to think over your invitation. Now you invite this man, and he abuses you, calls you names and throws rocks at you. How can you be fond of such a person?”

Ah, good friend Peter, you don’t understand human nature. The young man who needed time to think was afraid of making a mistake. He’s wishy-washy, undecided about *all* of life. The man who spat at me, on the other hand – ah, there’s real passion! Peter, the flip side of great love is great hate! For the man who spat at me, who hates me, it takes only a spit second, a lightning experience, to somersault great hate into great love. By the way, do you know his name?”

“I’m not sure,” answered Peter. “I think he is called Saul.”¹

¹ Edward Hays, *The Magic Lantern*, p. 94, Forest of Peace Publishing, Inc. PO Box 269, Leavenworth, KS, 1991

We might be surprised at the people around us who we think might seem a hopeless cause, yet Jesus sees beyond the attitudes, the personality, the skewed thinking. Jesus sees the passion they portray toward what they think is right and knows that passion can be used for the good, once the heart has been changed. And that can happen in an instant ...

Because when the Holy Spirit fills a person with the power of Christ – anything can happen. And it probably will!

Let us pray ...

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