Famous Conversions: Paul Memory Verse: Acts 9:17a

July 9th 2023 Scripture Reading: 2 Corinthians 11:21b-31

**SLIDE 1: Title**

Today we begin a new series for the summer and in our staff meetings, we thought it would be a good idea to do a series that was much more modular, meaning each one can be taken on its own. Oftentimes series build on one another and one message leads into the next, but with summer being what it is, we thought it would be a nice change of pace to do something that focused on stories, stories of people we may or may not know, but each story revolving around the person and work of Jesus Christ. When people come into contact with Jesus, things change. Lives change. When you come into contact with the light then you can no longer be in the dark! We have a very important word for this phenomenon: we call it conversion.

 Now conversion is a pretty common, well-used word. When I was a kid, I remember we had a white behemoth with grey stripes sitting in our driveway. My parents must have gotten a good deal on this very well used but well loved conversion van. At the time, I didn’t pay any attention to what type of vehicle it was, all I knew is that we had a van with tables in it!

**SLIDE 2: Van**

 I never thought about how efficiently the vehicle used fuel or how hard it might have been to navigate in a small parking lot. All I knew was that we had a big old van with multiple uses. It had the ability to be converted for a special purpose. A special trip, or event, this van could be changed and then used for a special purpose.

 Now of course we believe this is Jesus’ call to each of us: Live into my special purpose for you. Be converted. Be changed. Be made new.

**SLIDE 3: Be converted. Be changed. Be made new.**

 See, the conversion that Jesus offers is permanent…eternal. Unlike a van or some other multi-use product that can be adjusted to the situation, Jesus brings a complete and permanent change. He comes not to empower us to adapt or shape-shift or make us into some kind of spiritual Swiss army knife. Rather, Jesus offers to us conversion, something totally new, a change of heart and life.

 Conversion as the bible describes it, uncludes a U turn, a turn around. It’s a change from one life style to another. And this change involves all that we are, spiritually as well as physically. It’s a change in thinking, in preferences, in habits, in affections and in choices. It’s body, soul, mind and heart.

**SLIDE 4: Conversion begins with a vision of truth.**

 Conversion begins with a vision of truth. The dawning of a new understanding. It is like a flame of light in a dark room. Once you see it, you can’t go back. The goodness and power of the light brings new reality. This reality however, this truth, is not pain free. The truth hurts as the saying goes. When we live in the truth, we become aware of something called sin. We know that we are unworthy, that there is a major problem with the way we carry on. But truth also points us to Jesus and in him we find relief from this pain. In him we find forgivenss for our sins and the result is joy…joy in the freedom of unmerited grace. Once we know this forgiveness we step into a new purpose for our lives, a new mission and we get to work. So converted people go to work. There is no such thing as benchwarmers, or maybe we should say pew warmers in the kingdom of God. God’s people get to work.

**SLIDE 5: Saul**

So today we are going to dive into the story of an up-and-coming Pharisee named Saul. And as we hear Saul’s story today, be on the lookout for these characteristics of conversion: This initial vision of truth, the conviction of sin, the joy of forgiveness and the acceptance of a new life and mission.

We first encounter Saul by way of the public execution of a man named Stephen. In Acts chapter 6 we are told that Stephen was a man full of grace and power who performed miraculous signs. He spoke with wisdom and authority, much like another hated man named Jesus. Stephen as a good disciple! He imitated Jesus! And like Jesus, the religious leaders took issue with him and brought up false accusations against him. He continued to talk too much we might say and they moved to stone him. In this scene at the end of chapter 7, we find a young man named Saul who watched over the cloaks of those who took up stones with which to hurl at Stephen. Saul, we are told, approves of this execution. From then on, those who followed Jesus were on high alert. Faith in Christ had now become a reason for which one could be killed. So they ran and hid and scattered, and Saul set out to destroy the church. As we hinted at earlier, Saul was a pharisee extraordinaire. He was zealous for the Law of God and these Christians were flouting that Law. Saul, motivated by his commitment to God’s word, set out to destroy the church. It was not an easy job. Church buildings did not exist on every street corner like they do now. Saul had to sniff these Christians out. He had to investigate from house to house in order to drag off to prison those who followed what was becoming known as the Way.

Once we get to Acts chapter 9, Saul, still breathing out murderous threats against believers, plans a trip to Damascus to root out any Christians there. We pick up the story in verse 3:

**SLIDE Acts 9:3-23**

 As we look at Saul’s story, our first thought might be that it seems pretty incredible…unbelievable maybe. Blinding lights and voices….flakes or scales over his eyes…it’s not something that tends to happen within our normal experience. It’s far-fetched. But the proof of conversion is in the changed life. In fact, the story of Saul’s conversion has a few iterations throughout the book of Acts. In this initial version we read, Luke, the author, writes that Saul’s companions “stood speechless; they heard the voice but saw no one.” So they heard the Lord ask Saul “Why are you persecuting me?” Later, in Acts 21 Saul, is captured by a crowd of angry Jews and as Saul mounts a defense for his position, he begins to tell his conversion story. As he does so, he reports that his companions saw the light but did not hear the voice. “Aha!” critics say, “This is an irreconcilable inconsistency! The two accounts cannot both be true!” And a response to that might be, “But you’re missing the point…In both we do have a blinding light, a voice asking a question, and companions who assist Saul in his blindness. The details are just that. Maybe some of them heard the voice and some didn’t, maybe some of them saw the light and some didn’t. We don’t know, and we don’t need to know all these details necessarily, because the proof of conversion is in the changed life. Saul went on with a transformed life. He was filled with the Holy Spirit, he was baptized. And he proclaimed the truth about Jesus Christ to the bafflement of the Jewish people, his own people. In fact, they were so confused by Saul that he ended up being added to the hit list. And living life in the crosshairs was just the beginning. In verse 15 we learn that Saul was chosen to carry the name of Jesus before Gentiles (that is, non-Jews), kings and Israelites. We learn that Saul will suffer for the sake of the name of Jesus. And he does. We read a summery of all his adventures earlier in our services: Imprisoned, beaten, aways on the run. Saul, the defender of the Law, the jailer of Christians, the Pharisee of Pharisees, had now become a follower of Jesus in the worst way. Saul’s life was completely changed, and everyone knew it. Details being what they are, his conversion story checks out.

**SLIDE 9 Ananias**

 But there is one more aspect of this story we need to address and that is a fellow named Ananias. Let me just ask, has God ever told you to do something you did not want to do? Then you can relate to Ananias. He is a faithful Christian, minding his own business, when he hears from the Lord. Ananias loves the Lord, and he eagerly responds to God’s call; “Yes, Lord, what is it?” And God says, “Go and see Saul of Tarsus, put your hands on him and restore his sight. Here’s the address.” The blood sort of drains from Ananias’s face. He wants to obey but he also wants to make sure that God has all the pertinent information. Surely there has been a bit of a mistake. Ananias counters in verse 13, “Lord, Saul has done horrible things to your people. And I am your people. I’m pretty sure he came here specifically to arrest people like me!”

 God said, “Go!”

**SLIDE 10: , “Lord, Saul has done horrible things to your people. And I am your people. I’m pretty sure he came here specifically to arrest people like me!” God said, “Go!”**

And Ananias went; our memory verse for this week. I am willing to bet he was mumbling to himself, wiping the sweat from his brow, nervous about how all this might turn out. But he went. He entered the house. He placed his hands on Saul and listen to what he says, “Brother Saul, the Lord sent me so you could see again and be filled with the Holy Spirit.” Every fiber in my being knows you are my enemy. My brain understands what jail is and my ears have heard the stories about your murderous threats against me! But I am coming here, out of faith, out of obedience, and I am going to force myself, against my better judgement, to proclaim you as my brother. Ananias prays for Saul, the scales fall from his eyes, he is baptized, and Saul spends the next several days being discipled.

 We have a phrase around here that we like to use; admittedly not often enough: disciples make disciples and this story here is a great example of how this works. We would not have a dynamo missionary church-planter like Saul, who is also called Paul, if it were not for the faithfulness of Ananias. There are no self-made saints. We rely on each other. By God’s design, we disciple one another.

**SLIDE 11: But conversion ultimately is a mystery of God.**

 But conversion ultimately is a mystery of God. We might not have the blinding light events. We may not have the dramatics or the instantaneous results. We may be more like Ananias. Living life, faithfully serving and being called to that task that sounds like a bad idea. But we do it anyway because we know that disciples make disciples. We might play a more supportive role to those disciples who go on to change the world. God’s will be done. It is not for us to dissect and categorize, or to understand as a formula. It is for us to accept, a gift for which to be grateful, a miracle to take on as your identity, to live as one who has been converted. A new life; that is the miracle. Somewhere along the way, most likely through the words or actions of some faithful disciples somewhere, you came to know Jesus. You came to believe, you were converted. You are set onto a new journey. And if you haven’t experienced Jesus, if you haven’t met him, you can! He is here, he is available. He is the Son of God who came and died so that we might be saved from hell and the sins that put us there. He is the Savoir who loves us with an everlasting love and is able and willing to takes us as enemies of God and not only put into relationship with God, but to make us sons and daughters. Adopted, part of his family… that’s the miracle.

**SLIDE 12: Adopted, part of his family… that’s the miracle.**

If you want that relationship, if you want to leave the orphanage, I want to invite you to come up to this front pew. If you want to renew your role as a disciple and follower of Jesus, I want to invite you to come to the front pew. We want to pray with you and help you to know this Jesus. Come as you are and come to be changed. Come as you are and come to be discipled. We may not have blinding light moments, but we do have “A-ha!” moments, moments in which God reveals himself, moments in which the scales fall and we can see clearly. We thank God for such moments. Come, be filled with the Holy Spirit, come and be converted.