

### **Christ Came to Save Sinners**

This morning through Paul's experience we focus on the amazing power of Christ to bring sinners to repentance and breathe life into their spiritually dead souls.

This directly relates to Paul, you and me. Please mark two places in your Bibles; 1 Timothy chapter 1, which you just heard read by Brother Shawn and Acts chapter 9. These two passages relate to each other and they have much to do with Christ's relationship with Paul and you.

Paul begins in verse 12 of 1<sup>st</sup> Timothy, with words I can echo as I look at my own salvation and maybe some of these words are yours also. Paul writes, "I thank him who has given me strength, Christ Jesus our Lord, because he judged me faithful, appointing me to his service, <sup>13</sup> though formerly I was a blasphemer, persecutor, and insolent opponent. But I received mercy because I had acted ignorantly in unbelief, <sup>14</sup> and the grace of our Lord overflowed for me with the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus. <sup>15</sup> The saying is trustworthy and deserving of full acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, of whom I am the foremost. <sup>16</sup> But I received mercy for this reason, that in me, as the foremost, Jesus Christ might display his perfect patience as an example to those who were to believe in him for eternal life." Paul writes this as a public declaration of his faith and obedience to Christ, to encourage Timothy and all who read these words. Does this describe your life? Do you publicly declare your love, faith and obedience to Christ who saved you? Do you share what Christ has done in your life, to awaken others to the need for Christ as their Savior? Or, is your faith something personal and quite?

In the *New York Times* there appeared a full-page ad for Columbia University. It advertised seven fields of study in which a person can get a Master of Arts in Liberal Studies: AMERICAN STUDIES, ANCIENT STUDIES, EAST ASIAN STUDIES, ISLAMIC STUDIES, JEWISH STUDIES, MEDIEVAL STUDIES, AND SOUTH ASIAN STUDIES. But, this ad leads one to ask, “Were are the Christian Studies?” Richard John Neuhaus, religious leader and author, spotted this ad and wrote an editorial about it, here is an excerpt, “Nervousness is caused by the awareness that there are an awful lot of people who really believe in Christianity. The university is a cosmopolitan space where ‘religious traditions’ can be subjected to critical examination but are not to be taught as though they might be, well, you know, true. Even in religious studies departments, faculty members who are Hindus, Buddhists, and believers in Mystical Crystals can quite openly profess their faith. Muslims and, usually, Jews can, too. Nobody raises a question about their ‘proselytizing.’ Not so with Christians. The fear is that Christianity might be taken altogether too seriously. The absence of Christian Studies in the Columbia program, it turns out, is not an insult to Christianity” You know, I think Mr. Neuhaus is right. We live in land where the rising prejudice and discrimination against Christianity is a backhanded tribute. It's an honor. Satan has no interest in attacking the false religions for they are already serving his purpose. When Christianity is treated fairly and openly and given serious attention it makes secular people and even people from other religions nervous. Despite the evidence they want to live their lives they way they want to and without conviction from the only source of eternal truth. Christianity is the only religion that is open to challenges and critical research because truth always stands. True believers in Christ who voice their beliefs as Paul did make the world uncomfortable because they believe

God and Christ and the Bible are true and they believe these are true for everybody!

### **Christ Converts Sinners**

Those who “believe in.” Let me stop and explain what I mean when I say, “believe in” and what the Apostles meant, especially John, who was so clear in his writings. The writers make a distinction between believing “on” and believing “in” Jesus Christ. There is a difference in believing “on” Jesus as a historical person, a man who was a gifted teacher and a man who worked to help those in need or believing “in” Jesus as the Christ, God incarnate. The difference is that of damnation or salvation.

Christians believe everybody has sinned against the one and only Holy God, and that His one and only Son has come into the world to die once for all in the place of sinners. Therefore, anyone and everyone who repents and believes in Christ will be reconciled to God and have eternal life. However, those who do not believe in Jesus as the Christ will perish. Millions of Christians believe the most loving thing in the world you can do is to pray and witness and live so as to persuade others to change the way they think and feel and live is the hope they may become Christians.

This is the way it was from the beginning. Christianity was seen as a converting religion. It tried to win converts from all other religions because as Peter and John witnessed before the Jewish Council, “There is **salvation in no one else**, for there is **no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved.**” (Acts 4:12)

The Pharisee Saul, who later became the missionary Paul, saw this very early. He saw Christianity as a threat to his own religion, so he attacked it with tremendous zeal. He attacked the followers of the Way until the undeniable truth of Christ overcame him and made him one of the greatest converts Christianity has ever had.

### **Christ Converts Paul**

What I want to do this morning is look at the story of Paul's conversion. I want you to see it from different view than it is normally seen. I want you to observe Paul's conversion was for you personally. That is, God's design in converting Paul is to give you hope for yourself and hope for the people you want to see converted. I want to be sure you see this passage as meant for you personally.

Beginning at 1 Timothy 1:15, reading about half way through the verse, “**Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, of whom I am the foremost. <sup>16</sup> But I received mercy for this reason, that in me, as the foremost, Jesus Christ might display his perfect patience as an example to those who were to believe in him for eternal life.**” (1 Timothy 1:15-16) In other words God had you in mind when He saved Paul and had Paul write these words, “**Jesus Christ might display his perfect patience as an example to those who were to believe in him for eternal life.**” God saved Paul for more than his salvation, God saved Paul for your sake. God saved Paul so that his conversion and his witness would, as verse 14 reads, overflow with the grace of our Lord and people could see Christ's grace and love and mercy given to one of the worst enemies of God's church. If God saved Paul, He is able to save anyone.

I remember, like Paul what a horrible sinner I was. Pursuing my ambitions, denying Christ so I could live as I pleased. I was a terrible husband and father. The problems Joyce and I were having in our marriage certainly couldn't be my fault; Joyce had to be the problem. I left Joyce to pursue my selfish desires. Much like Paul, God began orchestrating my life so I had to face reality of who I was. Then when I was at the end of myself through a vision He brought me to the foot of the cross. Being saved by Christ was wonderful, but at the same time so very painful as I was made fully aware of what a wretched sinner I was. I think that Apostle Paul and John Newton, the author of Amazing Grace and I experienced similar joy of salvation and the pain of the realization of our sin that hurt so many. As Paul and John Newton's transformations were radical, Joyce can tell you how radical mine was. As with all converts to Christ, "If anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold, the new has come. <sup>18</sup> All this is from God, who through Christ reconciled us to himself." (2 Corinthians 5:17-18) Paul took no credit for his salvation and neither do I! In fact, I use to wonder at times why God saved me, such a wretched sinner, then I remembered the wonderful words of Newton that begin with, "Amazing grace, how sweet the sound - that saved a wretch like me. I once was lost, but now I am found, was blind, but now I see." How could I ever fully express my gratitude to Christ for my salvation? I think Paul felt the same and this drove him to express Christ's love for others with a stronger zeal than he had when he persecuted believers.

I want to travel back, by reading of Paul's conversion and as I read, I want you to view his conversion from the viewpoint of how God wanted to use it to encourage you for your salvation and His calling in your life. Turn in your Bibles to Acts, chapter 9, "But Saul, still breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the

Lord, went to the high priest <sup>2</sup> and asked him for letters to the synagogues at Damascus, so that if he found any belonging to the Way, men or women, he might bring them bound to Jerusalem. <sup>3</sup> Now as he went on his way, he approached Damascus, and suddenly a light from heaven shone around him. <sup>4</sup> And falling to the ground he heard a voice saying to him, <sup>5</sup> and he said, ‘Who are you, Lord?’ And he said, ‘I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting. <sup>6</sup> But rise and enter the city, and you will be told what you are to do.’ <sup>7</sup> The men who were traveling with him stood speechless, hearing the voice but seeing no one. <sup>8</sup> Saul rose from the ground, and although his eyes were opened, he saw nothing. So they led him by the hand and brought him into Damascus. <sup>9</sup> And for three days he was without sight, and neither ate nor drank.”

<sup>10</sup> “Now there was a disciple at Damascus named Ananias. The Lord said to him in a vision, ‘Ananias.’ And he said, ‘Here I am, Lord.’ <sup>11</sup> And the Lord said to him, ‘Rise and go to the street called Straight, and at the house of Judas look for a man of Tarsus named Saul, for behold, he is praying, <sup>12</sup> and he has seen in a vision a man named Ananias come in and lay his hands on him so that he might regain his sight.’ <sup>13</sup> But Ananias answered, ‘Lord, I have heard from many about this man, how much evil he has done to your saints at Jerusalem. <sup>14</sup> And here he has authority from the chief priests to bind all who call on your name.’ <sup>15</sup> But the Lord said to him, ‘Go, for he is a chosen instrument of mine to carry my name before the Gentiles and kings and the children of Israel. <sup>16</sup> For I will show him how much he must suffer for the sake of my name.’ <sup>17</sup> So Ananias departed and entered the house. And laying his hands on him he said, ‘Brother Saul, the Lord Jesus who appeared to you on the road by which you came has sent me so that you may regain your sight and be filled with the Holy Spirit.’ <sup>18</sup> And immediately something like scales fell from his eyes, and he regained his sight. Then he rose and was baptized.” (Acts 9:1-18) Christ

converted Paul, who was an enemy to His church. But, **the truth is that everyone is an enemy of God until Christ regenerates their soul and causes them to fall in love with Him.** Paul was just more dynamic and zealous than most of us. Luke records that, **“Saul was ravaging the church, and entering house after house, he dragged off men and women and committed them to prison.”** (Acts 8:3) Paul was an enemy of God given salvation to testify to God’s great love, mercy and power.

In Acts 9:1 Luke says, Paul was **“breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord.”** It is as though persecution was the air he breathed. This was not a minor thing in Paul's life. It went right to the core of who he was as a Pharisee. Christianity with its message of salvation by faith apart from works turned Paul's religious achievements into a pile of rubbish. As Paul wrote to the Philippians, **“Indeed, I count everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things and count them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ.”** (Philippians 3:8) Paul knew that he had no boasting in his salvation and neither do we. We boast of Christ and how He resurrected our souls from the dead.

As we read, Paul was breathing threats and murder against Christians. He was even taking his persecution 150 miles north to Damascus and planning to bring Christians back to Jerusalem for punishment. This is the kind of person that no one, certainly not the Jewish leadership, expected to be converted. His opposition to Christianity is too deep. So much of his life would be threatened if Christianity were true! He had taken such a public stand that it would be utterly humiliating to change his mind and support what he had so earnestly fought against. Let me try and put Paul’s conversion into perspective. Can you imagine the impact if Terry

O'Neill, the current president of the National Organization of Women (NOW), who has worked for Planned Parenthood, Hillary Clinton and Barack Obama came to Christ and traveled the breadth of America evangelizing in the name of Christ! Or, can you imagine Salman bin Al Saud, King of Saudi Arabia, Custodian of the Two Holy Mosques in Mecca and Medina becoming a Christian missionary to Muslims! This is the shock wave created by Paul's conversion.

So what God wants us to see in Paul's conversion is that the most unlikely people can be converted and are converted by His power. God's mercy and power are not limited to people who have been born into a Christian family or are raised in the Church. Paul, the chief of sinners was converted. That means hope for the lost is found first in Christ, then in Christians evangelizing and it means grace for you, who falters at times in your walk with the Lord.

### **Christ Converts Suddenly and Unexpectedly**

The second thing to notice about Paul's conversion is that it was sudden and unexpected. Reading verse 3 of Acts 9, "Now as he went on his way, he approached Damascus, and suddenly a light from heaven shone around him." Paul's conversion came "out of the blue." Paul shared with the Galatians saying, "For you have heard of my former life in Judaism, how I persecuted the church of God violently and tried to destroy it. <sup>14</sup> And I was advancing in Judaism beyond many of my own age among my people, so extremely zealous was I for the traditions of my fathers. <sup>15</sup> But when he who had set me apart before I was born, and who called me by his grace." (Galatians 1:13-15) Paul had set himself on a career path and his advancement was being built upon the suffering and deaths of believers in Christ. We think how could Paul have been so ambitious that he had no concern for those



he hurt. But is this not what we see in our society today! People have no feeling of remorse for killing babies in the womb or lying to advance their careers in industry and politics. You see they are spiritually dead until God breathes life into the souls. This is where Paul was and this is where you and I were before God saved us. God changes people sometimes slowly, but often the change is dramatic as with Paul and John Newton and me. How did God change you and now that you have been saved, how are you sharing Christ with the lost?

This means that we should not be despairing for those who show no signs of being prepared for conversion. It is a mistake to think that prayers for others are only effective if they have immediate effect in some kind of openness or spiritual sensitivity. Paul was not open and not interested and not spiritually sensitive. He was utterly closed and utterly convinced that Christianity was untrue and he was spiritually dead in trespasses and sins. He says in Ephesians, “You were dead in the trespasses and sins <sup>2</sup> in which you once walked, following the course of this world, following the prince of the power of the air, the spirit that is now at work in the sons of disobedience— <sup>3</sup> among whom we all once lived in the passions of our flesh, carrying out the desires of the body and the mind, and were by nature children of wrath, like the rest of mankind.” (Ephesians 2:1-3) Paul was not due salvation, nor were you. We were not spiritually “ripe for the picking.” We were either, hard and dried up or rotten and smelly. What happen to Paul was sudden and demonstrates God can save the worst of sinners. You need to keep praying for the lost. Joyce prayed for me for 11 years and then God acted suddenly. Just because someone does not respond quickly does not mean they will never be saved. Pray and pray and keep on praying, speak the truth and speak it in love.

## Christ's Divine Grace

Paul's conversion was a work of God's divine sovereign grace. Jesus has total control on the Damascus road. Christ was not responding to anything Paul had done to win God's grace. It was utterly sovereign—that means it was completely unmerited and that it came with overwhelming authority and power. **Whatever resistance Paul might have been able to put up against God's sovereign grace gave way before the triumphant love of God.**

Look at the evidences of God's sovereign work here. First, God causes a light to flash from heaven with blinding brightness. In fact, it left Paul blind for three days until Ananias laid hands on him and prayed. So God blinded Paul and then God took the blindness away. He gave Paul a powerful sign of the actual spiritual darkness he was living in.

Second, notice that the voice that speaks to Paul from heaven does not ask for Paul's free decision to believe in Jesus; it tells him exactly what he is to do. In verses 5 to 6 we hear, **"I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting. <sup>6</sup> But rise and enter the city, and you will be told what you are to do."** Jesus is seen here as totally authoritative. He means to have Paul in His service and there is no question but that He will succeed.

Third, verses 15–16 make this crystal clear. Ananias is afraid to go pray for Paul, but Jesus says to him in a vision, **"Go, for he is a chosen instrument of mine to carry my name before the Gentiles and kings and the children of Israel. <sup>16</sup> For I will show him how much he must suffer for the sake of my name."** Jesus has chosen Paul long before Paul chose Jesus. In fact Paul says in Galatians 1:15, It was **"he (God) who**

had set me apart before I was born, and who called me by his grace.” Since, Paul is chosen by Jesus, there is no thought that Paul might not go along with Jesus. He will comply! So Jesus speaks of the great ministry Paul is going to have with kings and nations and Israel and He also speaks of how much Paul must suffer. Jesus says Paul will suffer, not that he might suffer. So it is clear that this conversion is a work of divine, sovereign grace. God moved in on Paul's life and Paul found peace even in his suffering.

There is so much more we could draw out of Paul's conversion. We could talk about the fact that it involved three days of darkness and fasting; that it involved miraculous signs like a light and voice from heaven and blindness and visions and healing; that God used another person, Ananias, to complete His sovereign work; that the call to Christ was also a call to serve and to suffer; and that the climax of the conversion involved the laying on of hands, the filling of the Spirit, and baptism.

But we don't have time to delve into all these. I want to close with the point we started with.

### **Christ Converted Paul for Your Sake**

Paul's conversion was for your sake. I want you to take this very personally as we close. **God had you in view when he chose Paul and saved him by sovereign grace.** I am the foremost of sinners as Paul says in verse 16, “**But I received mercy for this reason, that in me, as the foremost, Jesus Christ might display his perfect patience as an example to those who were to believe in him for eternal life.**” Paul’s conversion was an example for you and for all who will see.

If you believe in Jesus for eternal life—or if you may yet believe in Him for eternal life, then, Paul's conversion is for your sake. It is to make Christ's immense "longsuffering" vivid for you. Paul's pre-conversion life was a long, long road to Jesus, as Christ said, "Why do you persecute me?" Paul had been set apart for God since before he was born. So all his life was one long abuse of God, and one long rejection and mockery of Jesus who loved him. Your road may have been short or long, but Christ brought you to Him as He planned before you were born and He will bring those who do not know Him as He has planned since before the creation of the world.

That is why Paul says his conversion is a brilliant demonstration of Jesus' longsuffering. It was for our sake that Jesus did it the way He did. Jesus saved Paul in the way he did so that we would not lose heart and we are to grow in patience. Patience! Lest we think Jesus could not really save us. Lest we think Jesus is prone to anger. Lest we think we have gone too far away from God. Lest we think our dearest love ones cannot be converted— pray with perseverance for suddenly, unexpectedly, by the sovereign, overflowing grace Jesus will come.

Paul's conversion was for you – to encourage you and to bolster your faith. My beloved live for Christ! Go as Paul went, go as Christ has commanded, "Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, <sup>20</sup> teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age."

(Matthew 28:19-20) Amen and Amen!