

Saul

Conversion stories are a big part of the book of Acts, and the conversion of Saul is the biggest. It sets the stage for much of the rest of the book. And it brings to us the man whose Greek name is Paul...the man who will become the author or the inspiration for most of the rest of the New Testament.

But if Saul had his way, none of that would have happened. If Saul had his way, the fledgling group of Jesus followers known as the Way would have been stamped out.

You have to wonder what God saw in Saul...why did God look at a man who was breathing threats and murder against the disciples...a man who stood by encouraging the stoning of Stephen...why did God look at him and say, that's my man?

But then God's always worked that way. There's no explanation for any of the people God chose – clear back to Abraham and Sarah. The majority of the people God chose to move creation forward didn't have any particularly clear-cut qualifications. Saul seemed to be the worst of all.

God's call is never about the right qualifications. It's always about God's work in that person.

I'm going to take you back a little bit to the stoning of Stephen.

As the stones were hitting Stephen's body with a sickening thud, as more of them found a target that will end his life, his very last words were "Lord, do not hold this sin against them."

Saul was there, holding coats for those doing the stoning, nodding in approval. "Lord do not hold this sin against him."

We tend to think that repentance has to come before forgiveness. But here, the work to transform Saul began with Stephen's plea to God to forgive him. It began before Saul had any intention of repenting.

In fact, Saul didn't believe he needed to repent. He was sure he was doing what God wanted him to do – he was working to ferret out this sect of people he thought were perverting God's law.

But that was just the beginning. What God does next changes everything. And it does draw Saul to repent...to change course.

When the risen Christ appears to Saul, he is literally brought to his knees. Blinded, he is led into Damascus where his eyes will be opened. He will see the error in his ways and do a complete 180.

But Saul isn't the only conversion in this story. What about Ananias?

If Ananias had had his way, Saul's transformation wouldn't have happened either. Ananias knew Saul was a bad guy...a scary one...one with the authority to throw him in prison...maybe even kill him. I mean, look at what happened to Stephen.

Ananias had to have his eyes opened too...he had to shed his preconceived idea about who Saul was. He had to trust that God saw something in Saul that none of the other disciples did.

Most of the conversions in the book of Acts are like this. They're about gaining a new way to see what God has done and what God is doing, no matter how shocking it might be.

We read about the Ethiopian eunuch a couple weeks ago. He was faithful to God but needed to have his eyes opened to see how Jesus was the fulfillment of the words of the prophets.

Next week we'll get the story of Peter and Cornelius.

Conversion is a difficult topic in the centuries since the early church. Sure they were doing God's will, the goal of too many missionaries has resulted in the devastation of people and cultures.

Saul was sure he was doing God's will, too. Maybe the people who are most in need of conversion are the ones who are most sure they're already doing what God wants. Any time our faith leads us to breathe threats or hatred...anytime our faith leads us to reject people or groups of people or to fear them or view them as irredeemably flawed, we need to remember Saul and Ananias and at least ask ourselves, how sure are you about this?

We can get blinded by our own certainty that we're right. In one of the commentaries I'm using for this Acts series, the author told a story as illustration.

A battleship was participating in maneuvers on the sea on a dark foggy night. The watchman on the ship reported a light on the starboard side. It appeared another ship was bearing down on them and they were on a collision course.

The captain had his signalman send a signal to the other ship to change course 20 degrees.

The return signal flashed back – advisable that you change course 20 degrees.

The captain was angry. He said tell them I am a captain. Change course 20 degrees.

The reply – I'm a second class seaman. You need to change course 20 degrees.

Furious, the captain sent back another signal – I am a battleship! Change course 20 degrees.

The reply – I'm a lighthouse.

The battleship changed course.

Too much certainty about how right we are can be deadly.

I also want to say a little bit about the purpose of conversion in the book of Acts.

At big Christian conferences, conversion stories are often a big thing.

The stories are fairly similar – they tell about a life gone off the rails...drugs...sexual promiscuity...arrogance...crime...greed...general unhappiness... marriage falling apart...kids a mess...sometimes all of it. Some of the stories come from people who have been in prison.

Then, in the language often use, they get saved. They have a life changing encounter with someone who proclaims the love of Christ to them in a way that changes everything.

They can be very inspiring stories. I've heard quite a few at the Freed for Life celebrations for the prison ministries in Nebraska.

But too often, especially at the big glitzy conferences, they present this sense that now my life is totally different. I'm no longer that loser I once was. I've got a great marriage and family, a great job, I'm doing well financially, etc...etc...

There's this clear before picture of someone whose morals are off track and whose life reflects that. Then there's an after picture that's totally different. It creates this image that conversion...that being saved... will make your life better. And in some ways, it does. But in the ways we often measure such things, you can't count on it.

Look at verse 16...God says, I myself will make Saul see how much he must suffer for the sake of my name.

It's hard to argue that Saul's life got better. He got arrested and beat up and imprisoned and run out of town multiple times. He did not get rich nor comfortable.

Instead, he was given a new purpose.

In Acts, and everywhere else in scripture, conversion has a purpose. Real conversion and call will require at a minimum discomfort, and often real sacrifice.

We may think, I don't need to be converted to Jesus – I'm there. But I would argue that we in the 21st century church do need a conversion to a better understanding of what conversion actually does.

The language of the evangelical church is the language often used in those big, glitzy Christian conference stories...conversion happens so that we can be saved. And being saved has come to be narrowly defined as going to heaven when we die.

But the more mainline Christian traditions often don't get it quite right either. When Christ brings transformation to us, it's not just about us and our own personal quest for meaning.

Regardless of tradition, conversion, or if you prefer transformation, doesn't end with what's in it for us.

Saul's conversion – and the others in Acts – don't say anything about heaven or personal quests for meaning. Instead, when conversion, or transformation happens, eyes are opened and hearts are changed. Boundaries and barriers and preconceived ideas are blown out of the water. Crosses are taken up in the name of love.

The community of the church grows and becomes stronger.

We are not all called to be a Paul. But we can all be Ananias – willing to risk trusting that God can use people we're suspicious of. We can pray with and listen to those who have rejected the church...and those who have been rejected by the church.

We can be ready to have our eyes opened to the shocking ways God might work in the life of someone we can't even imagine God loving.

And we can be ready to have our own hearts broken open in ways that might take us in directions we never even imagined.