

Acts 26:9-18

TURNED---BY GOD'S GRACE !

Indeed, I myself thought I must do many things contrary to the name of Jesus of Nazareth. This I also did in Jerusalem, and many of the saints I shut up in prison, having received authority from the chief priests. And when they were put to death, I cast my vote against them. And I punished them often in every synagogue and compelled them to blaspheme; and being exceedingly enraged against them, I persecuted them even to foreign cities.

While thus occupied, as I journeyed to Damascus with authority and commission from the chief priests, at midday, O king, along the road I saw a light from heaven, brighter than the sun, shining around me and those who journeyed with me. And when we all had fallen to the ground, I heard a voice speaking to me and saying in the Hebrew language, Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting Me? It is hard for you to kick against the goads. So I said, Who are You, Lord? And He said, I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting. But rise and stand on your feet; for I have appeared to you for this purpose, to make you a minister and a witness both of the things which you have seen and of the things which I will yet reveal to you. I will deliver you from the Jewish people, as well as from the Gentiles, to whom I now send you, to open their eyes, in order to turn them from darkness to light, and from the power of Satan to God, that they may receive forgiveness of sins and an inheritance among those who are sanctified by faith in Me.'

A young man was traveling after dark on an Interstate he had not traveled before. He exited for gas, then proceeded on his way. The problem was he had gotten back onto the Interstate heading in the direction from which he had just come! After fifteen or twenty miles, he got converted! I mean, he figured it out, took another exit, and got turned around. To be "converted" really means to be "turned with"—to be turned with with the rest of the group.

The account in our text is labeled the "Conversion of Paul," whose original name was Saul. Saul had grown up from Jewish ancestry in the city Tarsus of Cilicia (300 miles distant from the land of the Jews), but was trained in Jerusalem under a well-known Pharisee named Gamaliel. Saul himself became an ardent Pharisee—a "separatist," one who lived separate from the common crowd, who strove to keep every Old Testament stipulation flawlessly, and found great pride in his self-accomplished status in life, and—as he and all the Pharisees thought—in his status before God. Perhaps he had seen or met Jesus; we are not told. By the time Jesus returned into heaven (Ascension), sent the Holy Spirit (Pentecost), and the Christian church was becoming established in Jerusalem, Saul was an all-out Christ hater and a persecutor of Christians. Apparently not old enough to take part in the stoning of Stephen ("thirty" was the age of adulthood), yet Saul was present guarding the cloaks of those who did, and giving his approval to their actions (Acts 7:51—8:1).

Saul would become like one of the agents of the Geheim Staats Polizei during World War II—the Gestapo. He hunted down, imprisoned, and voted for the death of Christians. Why? He saw Jesus of Nazareth as a false political figure, a false prophet, one who was destroying the culture and religion of Judaism, and in no way a servant of God, nor the Savior of the world. Who needed such a Savior when a person could set themselves right with God by their own efforts—like the Pharisees thought! He thought he was doing the right thing. He had the approval and the authority from those above him. He thought he was serving God. He was killing Christians in the name of God!

When you live, and act, and support causes that seem right to you, and are approved by many and by the higher-ups, beware! Is it what God says? Is it really what God says? Don't just claim, "Well, God is love. And this sure seems right and loving." I'm talking about the sinful world's moral values, sexual values, marriage values, and pleas for tolerance of anything anyone wants to do. If the Bible says it's wrong, it's wrong. It's easy to rationalize away sinful actions in life, excuse them, and view them as ok—sat least to the Old Adam within you and to warped sinful logic. Beware! Saul, too, was enthusiastically headed in the wrong direction.

Saul was approaching the Syrian city of Damascus, to arrest Christians, when Christ Himself appeared to him! A light, brighter than the sun, shone around him! Think of Jesus shining in all His glory to the three disciples at His transfiguration (Matthew 17:1-8). Consider that in heaven there will be no sun, for the Lord will be the Light (Revelation 21:23). Saul and his companions fell to the ground—overpowered and over-awed by the brilliance and the presence of God. Recall in the Garden of Gethsemane, the soldiers helplessly fell down in the presence of the Son of God. Philippians 2:10 tells us that God has exalted His Son so that "every knee should bow before Him." For the believers it will be a kneeling of joy and love. For the unbelievers a kneeling of dread and terror.

The bright light was accompanied by a voice, ***Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting Me?*** [This account is recorded three times (Acts 9, Acts 22, Acts 26), each account giving a few different details.] We read that his traveling companions heard the sound, but could not “hear” the voice. The words were addressed directly to Saul. Imagine if you were with a group, and a voice from heaven spoke specifically to you—unsettling! The Lord had Saul’s attention! Saul was “called out” for his actions. The voice let Saul know that he is going the wrong direction—like a car on the Interstate driving against the oncoming lanes! ***It is hard for you to kick against the goads.*** “Saul, you and your life are wrong and are displeasing to Me.” Paul was like the ox trying to go the wrong way, like an ox kicking against the ox-goad. A goad was a long pointed stick that was used to prod oxen forward. (What’s the battery version called today—a hotstick? Something like that.) To kick against the goads is to show self assertion, whether it’s a person, cow, horse, or ox. “I’m not doing it your way!” But it’s hard to kick against the goad. ----- Have you ever run into a stretch in life where nothing seemed to click? Perhaps the Lord was leading—prodding—you in a different direction. Stop kicking!

Saul was not clear on what was happening. He knew this was a supernatural experience. But who could be talking? It surely couldn’t be God! Saul was doing what God wanted—so he thought. “Who are you *Lord?*—“*Lord,*” definitely someone superior to him. Jesus answers him straight out, ***I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting.*** Imagine the lump in Saul’s stomach. “Jesus is for real, and I am on the wrong side of the line!” One of the other accounts tells how Saul became blind and ate or drank nothing for three days. His entire world was turned upside down. Saul realized that his actions were WRONG, that in fact he was a sinner not able to save himself, that Jesus of Nazareth was true God and true man, crucified, dead, and buried for sin; but risen again, the life-giving and forgiving Savior. We know from Acts 22, God sent a believer named Ananias to talk to “brother Saul” and to restore his sight. Ananias told Saul, “Arise and be baptized, and wash away your sins, calling on the name of the Lord!” (Acts 22:16). Saul did. This was Saul’s conversion—his “turning” to travel together with the other believers in Jesus. He was clinging tightly to God’s Grace—God’s undeserved love, pardon, and mercy in Jesus. He had been turned from death to life!

You have also been converted—by God’s grace—by His undeserved love and pardon in Jesus. The Good News of Jesus has worked in your heart, for many of you from infancy, through hearing the Word and through Baptism. “The blood of Jesus His Son cleanses [you] us from all sin” (I John 1:8). You have been turned in the right direction—to God through Jesus, not away from God through Satan. In Christ, God loves even you.

The Lord had work for Saul the Christian to do. ***Rise and stand on your feet; for I have appeared to you for this purpose, to make you a minister and a witness both of the things which you have seen and of the things which I will yet reveal to you. I will deliver you from the Jewish people, as well as from the Gentiles, to whom I now send you, to open their eyes, in order to turn them from darkness to light, and from the power of Satan to God, that they may receive forgiveness of sins and an inheritance among those who are sanctified by faith in Me.*** Saul had been on the other side and knew the dead-end that it really offered. He would be an apt servant and witness for the Truth of forgiveness and salvation in Jesus. What a treasure! He changed his name to Paul—a new man. He speaks of his treasure in Philippians *But what things were gain to me, these I have counted loss for Christ. Yet indeed I also count all things loss for the excellence of the knowledge of Christ Jesus my Lord, for whom I have suffered the loss of all things, and count them as rubbish, that I may gain Christ and be found in Him, not having my own righteousness, which is from the law, but that which is through faith in Christ, the righteousness which is from God by faith (Philippians 2:7-9).* He wrote thirteen New Testament epistles. He made four missionary trips.

When people who have known the dark side of life come to see the Light of Jesus, what wonderful witnesses they become. There is a book *Thirty Years a Watchtower Slave* written by a man converted from the slavery of the Jehovah Witness cult to the love and freedom of God in Christ and genuine Christianity. He was a good witness. Do not feel badly if you have grown up in a Christian home and in the Christian faith all your life. There is nothing wrong with that! You have received great blessings from God to hold you strong all your life—blessings given to you by God’s grace. You also have work to do for the Lord. Likely it won’t be as dramatic as that of Saul / the Apostle Paul, but important work nonetheless. To be a messenger for the Gospel of Jesus in whatever capacity and with whatever talents God gives you. Whether it is raising your own children, influencing your grandchildren, honoring Christ with mouth and with actions, having strong ties to Bible and to your congregation. The Lord gives the privilege of labor for your Savior’s Name and kingdom. *I am the least of the apostles, who am not worthy to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God. But by the grace of God I am what I am, and His grace toward me was not in vain; but I labored more abundantly than they all, yet not I, but the grace of God which was with me (I Corinthians 15:9-10).* You too have been converted by Grace. Serve your Savior!

So be it! Amen!

Pastor Kanzenbach---