

The Return of Saul

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Roger's life was not heading in a good direction. Running with a tough crowd in Richmond, California, F average in high school, Roger's future prospects were dim at best – until a Lutheran pastor in Richmond encountered Roger with the Gospel and Roger's life was turned around. Conversion. But that didn't make his life any simpler.

His high school GPA rose to 4.0 but, when averaged with two years of F, he found that colleges were not interested – until that same pastor got involved and explained to the admissions folks what they were seeing.

Roger got into college. He went on to seminary where, he said, he couldn't decide whether to become a Lutheran or Baptist pastor since both had had great influence in his life. Finally, he said, he decided to become a Lutheran pastor because Lutherans needed more saving.

I'm so glad for that decision because, years later, Roger Veum was the pastor under whom I went through confirmation – and years after that he did my ordination service.

Conversion. This morning, we continue our sermon series on the book of Acts – a letter actually, written by Luke to tell us about the earliest years of the church and its growth. This morning we come to chapter 9, the Conversion of Saul. We first briefly met Saul two weeks ago in Joe's sermon on the stoning of Stephen in Acts 7. Stephen had been a Greek-speaking Jew – a Hellenist – and when he became a Christian he immediately tried to go back and argue with his former Hellenist brethren, trying to convince these Greek-speaking Jews that Jesus was the Jewish Messiah. The Greek word there for arguing or disputing was *suzhtew*. That's what Stephen tried to do with these former colleagues. Hold that word – *suzhtew*; we'll come back to it later.

Well, these Hellenists were not amused. Faithful Jews, they saw Stephen as a traitor, a heretic. At the end of Acts 7, we read: "Then they cast [Stephen] out of the city and stoned him to death; and as they did they

laid down their garments at the feet of a young man named Saul.” That makes Saul sound rather like a passive observer – “Here, kid, watch these coats while we take care of this guy” – but that turns out not to be the case. Chapter 8 continues with a hint of what is about to follow:

And Saul was consenting to [Stephen’s] death. And on that day a great persecution arose against the church in Jerusalem Devout men buried Stephen, and made great lamentation over him. But Saul was ravaging the church, and entering house after house, he dragged off men and women and committed them to prison. (Acts 8:1-3)

We then momentarily leave this brief introduction to Saul and read about *Philip*. Philip ends up explaining the prophet Isaiah to an Ethiopian headed back home from Jerusalem in his chariot, as shared with us by Pastor Jonna *last* week. Luke has a real gift for making us wait for the second shoe to drop. This morning, it drops, and we have “the return of Saul.”

The fact that all this starts off with the stoning of Stephen by fellow Hellenists, who *didn’t* share his faith in Jesus, is important. You see, Saul was also one of those Hellenists – Jewish, but Greek-speaking. He was not merely a passive young man standing by and watching.

Furthermore, Saul, though young, was one of the most highly educated members of that group, a Pharisee, an expert in the scriptures – indeed, a young man, but with a rising career and a great future – and one who, because of all of this, felt that followers of Jesus were just dead wrong in believing that Jesus was the crucified and risen Messiah. And yet God turns and looks at Saul and, like that old poster of Uncle Sam, says, “I want you!”

This morning, our scripture readings tell us how God’s project with Saul got launched. Saul, on the road to Damascus, has an encounter with the risen Jesus and his life is turned upside down. He is left blind for a period until a very wary Christian named Ananias is sent to him and Saul’s eyes are opened. Two things happen – though the second one not really. First, God says that he is going to send this highly trained young Pharisee, who has what appears to be the perfect skill set for bringing the Gospel to fellow Pharisees and other Jewish religious leaders – God is going to send him ... to the Gentiles!

Second, the not-really thing, is the sense that Saul's name changed to Paul when he became a Christian. Actually, that was not the case. As happens even today, Jews of Paul's day, who moved in and out between the Jewish and Gentile worlds, often had two names – their original Jewish birth name, but then also a similar Latin or Greek name used when they moved in Gentile circles. Today you might have Reuben and Robin; in Acts, we have Saul and Paul. So Paul always remained Saul and continued to use whichever name fit the occasion. Turns out, he ends up using the name Paul for the rest of Acts because it tells of his going to the Gentiles.

Well, *eventually* he goes to the Gentiles. It takes a while, as we will hear in weeks to come. God tells Saul he's going to send him to the Gentiles, but, in spite of this word from God, again and again he tries first to go to his fellow Jews. Yet, when he does, again and again he – to use the proper theological phrase – gets his backside kicked. For instance, remember how Saul starts off as part of that group of Hellenists which had already stoned Stephan when Stephen tried to argue with them? Well, the first thing Saul does as a new Christian, after God says he'll be going to the Gentiles, is to turn back to that group of Hellenists and start arguing with them, just like Stephen did. Almost gets himself *killed* just like Stephen did. In Acts 9.29 and following we read of Saul

preaching boldly in the name of the Lord. And he spoke and disputed against the Hellenists; but they were seeking to kill him. And when the brethren knew it, they brought him down to Caesarea, and sent him off to Tarsus. (Acts 9:29-30)

He “disputed against the Hellenists.” Disputed; again that Greek word *suzhtew* which I mentioned earlier. It occurs only two times in the whole book of Acts – the first time when Stephen disputes with his former brethren, the Hellenists, and gets himself killed, and the second time right here when newly-converted Saul immediately turns around and tries to do it again. And when the Christian community saw Saul about to do what Stephen had just done, they pull him back from the brink and get him out of Dodge ... sending him back up the coast to Tarsus, the town in south-central Turkey where he had been born. “Saul, we really appreciate what you are trying to do, but ... we think

you need to take a little time out.” So Saul gets sent back home to Tarsus, after which we read:

So the church throughout all Judea and Galilee and Samaria had peace and was built up; and walking in the fear of the Lord and in the comfort of the Holy Spirit it was multiplied.

Well, clearly we haven't heard the end of Saul – whom God has indeed called. Saul is about to start using his second name, Paul, more than he ever had before. But it continued to take time. Again and again, as the story unfolds in the chapters ahead, Paul will go into an area and first try to go to the synagogues ... in spite of God sending him to the Gentiles. Have you ever done that? Continued to plunge on ahead with your own project even when you're pretty sure God has said, “Not *that* ... *this*.”

A major theme in the book of Acts is what a struggle it was for the early church, made up of believing Jews, to become convinced that, yes, God really did care about Gentile lives, too. That they were supposed to *go* to the Gentiles with the message of Christ crucified and risen from the dead – to reach out beyond their comfort zone – to change their attitudes. Next week it will be Peter's turn to learn this lesson. But for now, we're looking at Saul also named Paul.

When I first started seminary, back in the days when dinosaurs still roamed the campus, one of the profs taught a class on Christian Apologetics. Apologetics – not apologizing for being a Christian but rather giving a strong and rational defense of the Christian faith. His starting point? The conversion of Saul. Why? Attempts can be made to explain away all kinds of things in the Bible, but the conversion of Saul – from an up and coming, well-trained and educated young Pharisee with great future ahead of him – to a life of Christian missionary work that got him only prison, beatings, shipwrecks and hatred from his former friends – this conversion can only be understood as a miracle of God which indeed took place. Why would someone *do* what Saul did? Yet, anyone reading his letters can see he was clearly not mad, irrational, uneducated or a fool. Nothing else makes sense other than to accept Paul's explanation that he had been encountered on the road to Damascus with the risen Christ.

So the conversion of Saul stands out as one of the major hinge points in the Bible, one of those places where things swing from night to day – not to the same extent as Jesus Resurrection, of course – the greatest of all those hinge points – but perhaps similar to God calling and sending Moses to his people enslaved in Egypt. In this case, though, the move from night to day is about to take place for the Gentiles.

And it happened in three stages. We start with Saul the **Misguided Disciple**. Yes, Saul was a disciple – not of Jesus but of the Jewish Law and of Phariseeism. He was young, up and coming, intensely faithful, and saw himself as a defender of the faith. Other Pharisees saw him that way, too. Saul was a good, highly moral, young man. He was sincere. But it's simply not true that, as you sometimes hear, "it doesn't matter what you believe as long as you are sincere." Being sincerely wrong can be sincerely serious.

So God got hold of Saul in an astounding way and it resulted in his conversion. Now, I've used that word "conversion" several times this morning, so just what *is* conversion? One of the best examples I've heard is of a man setting out on a business road trip. In the middle of the day, halfway down the highway to his destination, his cell phone rings and he gets news that completely changes his outlook. Whatever the news, it renders the business trip unimportant and he turns around to return home. Now, suddenly, the world looks very different.

Everything that had been in front of him is now behind him; that which he had left behind is now before him and is his goal; everything formerly on the left is now on the right, the right now on the left. That's conversion: when the very purpose of your day and even of your life suddenly changes and takes a new direction.

That's what happened to Saul; has it happened for you? You, like me, may simply have been raised in the church knowing Jesus. Yet even for me, I still remember a time in junior high when, in part because of a good youth worker, the light went on and it struck me, "Yes, faith in Christ is real and it's important." And for you? Well, every story will be different, and I give thanks to God for those video testimonies from our members which we occasionally get to hear. Because, however it

happens, God wants to bring about a conversion in your life, too – from a centering on self and the Old Adam to a centering on Jesus and his call to discipleship. Even tied down at home, as most of us are, God is able to lay a specific challenge before you. Do you trust him enough to ask him to bring that about?

So Saul starts out as a misguided disciple and gets turned around. And then what? Saul the misguided disciples gets turned into **Paul, the Repurposed Tool**. Have you ever used a screwdriver as a chisel? You shouldn't, you know; but I would guess even the guys among us who consider themselves pretty savvy when it comes to shop work have on occasion done it. Why? Well, you just need to get some small thing chipped away in an upstairs bathroom and you've left the chisels down in the garage – and so you just make it work. You repurpose that screwdriver, if only for a very short time, and it usually survives to get the job done.

Paul was, in some ways, a repurposed tool. When you look at his training as a young Pharisee – his knowledge of the Hebrew Scriptures and Jewish traditions, his ability to speak the lingo to fellow Pharisees and other Jewish religious leaders – when you look at all that, you say, “This guy is the perfect tool for God to send back to the leadership of the Jewish religious community.” And what does God do? He sends him to the Gentiles. God must, indeed, have a fine sense of humor and irony.

Actually, though, God seems to do this fairly often – repurposing human tools – and he does it very well. Now neither you nor I are Apostle Pauls but, like, Paul you may find God sometimes pushing you in directions you just don't feel called to. Challenges that, in *your* eyes, just don't play to your strengths. Things that others just seem so much more equipped to handle. But then, like it or not, you find God talking to you and not to them. Come to think of it, it seems this is God's pattern more often than not. He delights in showing his strength through weakness. The Cross is the greatest example, of course, but it starts early: the unwilling Moses, David a mere shepherd boy, Jeremiah a very complaining prophet ... Peter a rather stumbling, bumbling fisherman ... the list goes on and on. And then ... there's you and me.

So is God knocking at your door for anything? Has he been doing so for some time? Have you been resisting and ask because it just doesn't seem to fit your skill set? Or your timing? In all this, is there any chance God is trying to repurpose another tool? He's good at doing so, you know. I suppose if there's just one takeaway for you in this sermon – one thing which I would challenge you to reflect upon – it would be this question: Is there any chance God is seeking to repurpose you as his tool for a particular task that you have been resisting? Mull that over, and perhaps talk about it with a trusted friend or one of us as pastors.

Well, Paul did eventually hew to the course, in spite of the need for several restarts and readjustments in direction. He focused on the Gentiles and we Gentiles are here today because of it. Finally, after Saul the Misguided Disciple became Paul the Repurposed Tool, we find him, later in life, as **Paul the Grateful Sinner**. Saints and sinners – saints because Christ has covered us with his righteousness, but sinners because we continue to stumble and fail. Saints and sinners; we, like Paul, are both. Always will be – until we reach the end of our run and step into the next life.

Remember ... the conversion of Saul was not really from Saul to Paul – he remained both all his life. His conversion was not from bad to good, not from misdirected to focused. It wasn't a simple flip of the page like that ... from villain of unbelief to hero of faith. Remember: the Bible has no real unblemished heroes of faith – except for God himself. Rather, just as Paul always remained Saul, so Paul the Christian always remained Paul a sinner in need of forgiveness ... covered by a righteous not his own but given him in Christ.

And so, Paul never forgot who he was or what he'd been rescued from. Later in life, in his first letter to Timothy, Paul looks back and says:

I thank him who has given me strength for this, Christ Jesus our Lord, because he judged me faithful by appointing me to his service, though I formerly blasphemed and persecuted and insulted him; but I received mercy because I had acted ignorantly in unbelief, and the grace of our Lord overflowed for me with the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus. The saying is sure and worthy of full acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners. And I am the foremost of sinners; but I received mercy for this reason, that in me, as the foremost, Jesus Christ might display his perfect patience for an example to those who were to believe in him for

eternal life. To the King of ages, immortal, invisible, the only God, be honor and glory for ever and ever. Amen. (1 Tim 1:12-17)

Or, as the old King James Version puts it, “Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners; of whom I am chief.” Yet God had plans in store for Saul from the beginning, and transformed this “chief of sinners” from a Misguided Disciple to a Repurposed Tool – so that today, we Gentiles, too, have now heard the call into God’s family. So ... how might God be seeking to repurpose you today?

Let us pray

Heavenly father, we give you thanks for calling a young Pharisee named Saul to bear the news of Christ and the Cross and Resurrection beyond Jerusalem and Judea and Samaria to the ends of the earth ... so that it eventually came even to us. Help us now, as Gentiles, yet also children of Abraham in Christ, to continue “passing it on,” that all might come to know you and worship you through your Son Jesus – and that we might be a part of your bringing hope and justice to all. For we pray in Jesus’ name. Amen.