

## “Walking by Faith: The Conversion of Paul”

2017: The Reflection Year Series

### **Scripture:** Acts 9:1-9 (NIV)

*Meanwhile, Saul was still breathing out murderous threats against the Lord’s disciples. He went to the high priest<sup>2</sup> and asked him for letters to the synagogues in Damascus, so that if he found any there who belonged to the Way, whether men or women, he might take them as prisoners to Jerusalem.<sup>3</sup> As he neared Damascus on his journey, suddenly a light from heaven flashed around him.<sup>4</sup> He fell to the ground and heard a voice say to him, “Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?”*

*<sup>5</sup>“Who are you, Lord?” Saul asked. “I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting,” he replied.*

*<sup>6</sup>“Now get up and go into the city, and you will be told what you must do.”<sup>7</sup> The men traveling with Saul stood there speechless; they heard the sound but did not see anyone.<sup>8</sup> Saul got up from the ground, but when he opened his eyes he could see nothing. So they led him by the hand into Damascus.<sup>9</sup> For three days he was blind, and did not eat or drink anything.*

**Subject Question:** What three elements of Paul’s initial encounter with Christ, does Luke clarify for anyone who is curious about the process involved in making the decision to follow Jesus?

**Compliment answer:** An encounter with Christ is Timely (Vs.1-4), An encounter with Christ is Trustworthy (Vs.5), and An Encounter with Christ is Transitional (Vs.6-9).

**Big Idea:** The three elements of Paul’s initial encounter with Christ that Luke clarifies for anyone who is curious about the process involved in making the decision to follow Christ are: An encounter with Christ is Timely (Vs.1-4), An encounter with Christ is Trustworthy (Vs.5), and An Encounter with Christ is Transitional (Vs.6-9).

**Homiletical Idea:** “It’s about Time!”

**Purpose:** I want the congregation to have some clarity of what it means to have a life changing encounter with Jesus.

**Introduction:** Lots of people live on the brink of making a life changing decision to truly turn their life over to and make Christ the lord of, their lives. But fear of the unknown causes many to balk, to step back, to somehow be content with waiting for a more opportune time. Yet... and here is the rub, they

still seemingly can't get away from that nagging feeling that they should give Christ a chance. For those who may be struggling with that decision, let me first assure you that your thoughts and fears are understandably normal. Know as well, that Christ is patient and Christ does indeed know you and love you and desire the very best for you! At the same time, consider deeply, the fact that He always has had and always will have a plan, a good plan, for your life. His greatest desire is for you to come to the place where you can finally have some peace and assurance that God, the God that you secretly want in your life, is finally in control of well, you and everything in your life. Today the Apostle Luke, the writer of the book of Acts, takes time to clarify, using Paul's example, what an encounter with Christ is like and what that encounter means. The sermon today is all about timing. Perhaps it really is your time?

(It is about time)

**Groundwork:**                    **MacLaren's Expositions**

This chapter begins with 'but,' which contrasts Saul's persistent hatred, which led him to Gentile lands to persecute, with Philip's expansive evangelistic work. Both men were in profound earnest, both went abroad to carry on their work, but the one sought to plant what the other was eager to destroy. If the 'but' in Acts 9:1 contrasts, the 'yet' connects the verse with Acts 8:3. Saul's fury was no passing outburst, but enduring. Like other indulged passions, it grew with exercise, and had come to be as his very life-breath, and now planned not only imprisonment, but death, for the heretics.

Not content with carrying his hateful inquisition into the homes of the Christians in Jerusalem, he will follow the fugitives to Damascus. The extension of the persecution was his own thought. He was not the tool of the Sanhedrin, but their mover. They would probably have been content to cleanse Jerusalem, but the young zealot would not rest till he had followed the dispersed poison into every corner where it might have trickled. The high priest would not discourage such useful zeal, however he might smile at its excess.

So Saul got the letters he asked, and some attendants, apparently, to help him in his hunt, and set off for Damascus. Painters have imagined him as riding thither, but more probably he and his people went on foot. It was a journey of

some five or six days. The noon of the last day had come, and the groves of Damascus were, perhaps, in sight. No doubt, the young Pharisee's head was busy settling what he was to begin with when he entered the city, and was exulting in the thought of how he would harry the meek Christians, when the sudden light shone.

At all events, the narrative does not warrant the view, often taken now, that there had been any preparatory process in Saul's mind, which had begun to sap his confidence that Jesus was a blasphemer, and himself a warrior for God. That view is largely adopted in order to get rid of the supernatural, and to bolster up the assumption that there are no sudden conversions; but the narrative of Luke, and Paul's own references, are dead against it. At one moment he is 'yet breathing threatening and slaughter against the disciples of the Lord,' and in almost the next he is prone on his face, asking, 'Lord, what wilt Thou have me to do?' It was not a case of a landslide suddenly sweeping down, but long prepared for by the gradual percolation of water to the slippery understrata, but the solid earth was shaken, and the mountain crashed down in sudden ruin.

The causes of Saul's conversion are plain in the narrative, even though the shortened form is adopted, which is found in the Revised Version. The received text has probably been filled out by additions from Paul's own account in [Acts 26:1 - Acts 26:32](#) First came the blaze of light outshining the midday sun, even in that land where its beams are like swords. That blinding light 'shone round about him,' enveloping him in its glory. [Acts 26:13](#) tells that his companions also were wrapped in the luster, and that all fell to the earth, no doubt in terror.

Saul is not said, either in this or in his own accounts, to have seen Jesus, but [1 Corinthians 15:8](#) establishes that he did so, and Ananias {[Acts 9:17](#)} refers to Jesus as having 'appeared.' That appearance, whatever may have been the psychological account of it, was by Paul regarded as being equal in evidential value to the flesh-and-blood vision of the risen Lord which the other Apostles witnessed to, and as placing him in the same line as a witness.

It is to be noted also, that, while the attendants saw the light, they were not blinded, as Saul was; from which it may be inferred that he saw with his bodily eyes the glorified manhood of Jesus, as we are told that one day, when He

returns as Judge, 'every eye shall see Him.' Be that as it may,-and we have not material for constructing a theory of the manner of Christ's appearance to Saul,- the overwhelming conviction was flooded into his soul, that the Jesus whom he had thought of as a blasphemer, falsely alleged to have risen from the dead, lived in heavenly glory, amid celestial brightness too dazzling for human eyes.

The words of gentle remonstrance issuing from the flashing glory went still further to shake the foundations of the young Pharisee's life; for they, as with one lightning gleam, laid bare the whole madness and sin of the crusade which he had thought acceptable to God. 'Why persecutest thou Me?' Then the odious heretics were knit by some mysterious bond to this glorious One, so that He bled in their wounds and felt their pains! Then Saul had been, as his old teacher dreaded they of the Sanhedrin might be, fighting against God! How the reasons for Saul's persecution had crumbled away, till there were none left with which to answer Jesus' question! Jesus lived, and was exalted to glory. He was identified with His servants. He had appeared to Saul, and deigned to plead with him.

No wonder that the man who had been planning fresh assaults on the disciples ten minutes before, was crushed and abject as he lay there on the road, and these tremendous new convictions rushed like a cataract over and into his soul! No wonder that the lessons burned in on him in that hour of destiny became the center-point of all his future teaching! That vision revolutionized his thinking and his life. None can affirm that it was incompetent to do so.

Luke's account here, like Paul's in [Acts 22:1 - Acts 22:30](#), represents further instructions from Jesus as postponed till Saul's meeting with Ananias, while Paul's other account in [Acts 26:1 - Acts 26:32](#) omits mention of the latter, and gives the substance of what he said in Damascus as said on the road by Jesus. The one account is more detailed than the other, that is all. The gradual unfolding of the heavenly purpose which our narrative gives is in accord with the divine manner. For the moment enough had been done to convert the persecutor into the servant, to level with the ground his self-righteousness, to reveal to him the glorified Jesus, to bend his will and make it submissive. The rest would be told him in due time.

The attendants had fallen to the ground like him, but seem to have struggled to their feet again, while he lay prostrate. They saw the brightness, but not the Person: they heard the voice, but not the words. Saul staggered by their help to his feet, and then found that with open eyes he was blind. Imagination or hallucination does not play tricks of that sort with the organs of sense.

The supernatural is too closely intertwined with the story to be taken out of it without reducing it to tatters. The greatest of Christian teachers, who has probably exercised more influence than any man who ever lived, was made a Christian by a miracle. That fact is not to be got rid of. But we must remember that once when He speaks of it He points to God's revelation of His Son 'in Him' as its essential character. The external appearance was the vehicle of the inward revelation. It is to be remembered; too, that the miracle did not take away Saul's power of accepting or rejecting the Christ; for he tells Agrippa that he was 'not disobedient to the heavenly vision.'

What a different entry he made into Damascus from what he expected, and what a different man it was that crawled up to the door of Judas, in the street that is called Straight, from the self-confident young fanatic who had left Jerusalem with the high priest's letters in his bosom and fierce hate in his heart!

### **What Is the Gospel?**

There is no greater message to be heard than that which we call the gospel. But as important as that is, it is often given to massive distortions or over simplifications. People think they're preaching the gospel to you when they tell you, 'you can have a purpose to your life', or that 'you can have meaning to your life', or that 'you can have a personal relationship with Jesus.' All of those things are true, and they're all important, but they don't get to the heart of the gospel.

The gospel is called the 'good news' because it addresses the most serious problem that you and I have as human beings, and that problem is simply this: God is holy and He is just, and I'm not. And at the end of my life, I'm going to stand before a just and holy God, and I'll be judged. And I'll be judged either on the basis of my own righteousness—or lack of it—or the righteousness of another.

The good news of the gospel is that Jesus lived a life of perfect righteousness, of perfect obedience to God, not for His own well-being but for His people. He has done for me what I couldn't possibly do for myself. But not only has He lived that life of perfect obedience, He offered Himself as a perfect sacrifice to satisfy the justice and the righteousness of God.

The great misconception in our day is this: that God isn't concerned to protect His own integrity. He's a kind of wishy-washy deity, who just waves a wand of forgiveness over everybody. No. For God to forgive you is a very costly matter. It cost the sacrifice of His own Son. So valuable was that sacrifice that God pronounced it valuable by raising Him from the dead—so that Christ died for us, He was raised for our justification. So the gospel is something objective. It is the message of who Jesus is and what He did. And it also has a subjective dimension. How the benefits of Jesus are subjectively appropriated to us? How do I get it? The Bible makes it clear that we are justified not by our works, not by our efforts, not by our deeds, but by faith—and by faith alone. The only way you can receive the benefit of Christ's life and death is by putting your trust in Him—and in Him alone. You do that, you're declared just by God, you're adopted into His family, you're forgiven of all of your sins, and you have begun your pilgrimage for eternity. ---From R.C. SPROUL OCT 26, 2015 CATEGORY: ARTICLES

## Bill Bright's Four Spiritual Laws



In the mid-1960s, Bill Bright -- then president of the Campus Crusade for Christ -- formulated the Four Spiritual Laws. They have since become the standard model for conversion for the branches of Christianity that maintain that Jesus Christ "stands at the door and knocks," but the individual must open the door and invite him into his or her life.

1. God loves you and offers a wonderful plan for your life (John 3:16; 10:10).
2. Man is sinful and separated from God. Therefore, he cannot know and experience God's love and plan for his life (Rom. 3:23; 6:23).

3. Jesus Christ is God's only provision for man's sin. Through him you can know and experience God's love and plan for your life (Rom. 5:8; 1 Cor. 15:3 - 6; John 14:6).
4. We must individually receive Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord; then we can know and experience God's love and plan for our lives (John 1:12; 3:1 - 8; Eph. 2:8 - 9; Rev. 3:20).

(It is about time)

- A. An encounter with Christ is Timely (Vs.1-4) *Meanwhile, Saul was still breathing out murderous threats against the Lord's disciples. He went to the high priest<sup>2</sup> and asked him for letters to the synagogues in Damascus, so that if he found any there who belonged to the Way, whether men or women, he might take them as prisoners to Jerusalem.<sup>3</sup> As he neared Damascus on his journey, suddenly a light from heaven flashed around him.<sup>4</sup> He fell to the ground and heard a voice say to him, "Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?"*
- B. What about (Saul) Paul... Saul was a Pharisee of the strictest sect, not indeed of the hypocritical type, so witheringly rebuked by our Saviour, but of the honest, truth-loving and truth-seeking sort, like that of Nicodemus and Gamaliel. His very fanaticism in persecution arose from the intensity of his conviction and his zeal for the religion of his fathers. He persecuted in ignorance, and that diminished, though it did not abolish, his guilt. He probably never saw or heard Jesus until he appeared to him at Damascus. He may have been at Tarsus at the time of the crucifixion and resurrection. But with his Pharisaic education he regarded Jesus of Nazareth, like his teachers, as a false Messiah, a rebel, a blasphemer, who was justly condemned to death. And he acted according to his conviction. He took the most prominent part in the persecution of Stephen and delighted in his death. Not satisfied with this, he procured from the Sanhedrin, which had the oversight of all the synagogues and disciplinary punishments for offences against the law, full power to persecute and arrest the scattered disciples. Thus armed, he set out for Damascus, the capital of Syria, which numbered many synagogues. He was determined to exterminate the dangerous sect from the face of the earth, for the glory of God. But the height of his opposition was the beginning of his devotion to Christianity. ---www. Bible Hub
- C. Paul had His own opinion of what made sense religiously... he believed with all his heart that he was on God's side. He did all the right things, lived in all the right ways; he had grown to be more "godly" than really anyone he knew. He was a better than "good" person; devoted his life to being honest and just and good and faithful, and was sure that when His time came to shed his earthly garb, God would certainly welcome Him into heaven with open arms... he had been a good boy... he was a good man.  Paul could not imagine that God was any other way than

what he had learned and was taught and what He knew in His own heart was true and right... Until...

- D. So many people are like Paul: Good, decent, honest, intelligent, sticker up for the underdogs, concerned with honesty and justice and just know, that God must be the way that they picture him. They have been boys and girls. Now, being a better than good man or woman is their life posture... just do enough good, be a better than average person of integrity and honesty and God, hopefully will also welcome them into heaven someday... After all, If I were God I'd let me in... Until. Until what? Until, like Paul, Jesus in some way, in some situation seemingly shows up, and smacks us in the face with the reality and the unnerving possibility that our view of who God is and how God thinks and what God expects could be wrong... Maybe have been wrong... all along. Paul did not mind dealing with a dead Savior but he was quite unprepared for dealing with a risen Savior. And so are we. And so do us. If this Jesus was alive then He (Paul) had to go back, revisit, and consider not so much how Paul himself had lived; but rather who and what He (Jesus) claimed to be and to do... *Paul must have thought...* He had said that he was the Son of God... Had freely admitted it! That is quite troubling... but it takes care of the Who He said he was. He said He came as the Lamb of God who would die, who would be led to the slaughter, to take away peoples sins—to offer forgiveness. He said came to **be** judged not **to** judge. Which of course, rocks my little boat more than just a little bit. For, If **that** is what He came to do... Then maybe the question is not so much what I have done or become in my life in my efforts to somehow please God, as much as it is what I have done in response to what God somehow has through His Son done, to somehow please me... or better yet, appease me... the optimal thought there is, “He has--for me.” This God-Man rocked Paul's world... The God-Man rocks my and your world! What is really mind boggling, but ever so encouraging, is that Paul didn't realize was that he had a Divine appointment, a certain Holy place at a certain Holy time, to meet with and to encounter the Risen Christ. And there on the Damascus road Jesus opened the conversation by simply saying... Saul, Saul. Every encounter with Christ is a personal encounter—Jesus doesn't make appointments with strangers... And let me assure you that Jesus is still making and showing up at Divine appointments. (There is enough people in the room that can testify to

that reality.) He still in the quietness, at the right holy time and in the right holy place gets our attention by whispering our name... An encounter with Christ is timely. The real possibility for some of you today and thus the real question is, is today the day of your appointment with Him!

(It is about time)

- A. An encounter with Christ is Trustworthy (Vs.5) <sup>5</sup> *“Who are you, Lord?” Saul asked. “I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting,” he replied.*
- B. Most of us, in this encounter would have probably not asked the question that Paul asked of Who are you, but of what—**what** do you want? What’s happening here? What is happening to me? What in the world is going on? But for Paul, he had the right perspective; and the scriptures lay out for us, what the perspective is. If Paul could determine who, then whatever the “what” would simply be a knee jerk, heart felt, act in response to the who. The next question we must address is the answer Paul received. No one probably was more surprised than Paul to hear, “I am Jesus, who you are persecuting.” Paul was obviously scared and anxious, but Paul also could have dealt with a voice saying, “Saul, Saul, I am the God of Abraham, Jacob and Israel. I am the God of the 10 Commandments, or I am who I am.” How shocking to hear the voice of One whom you have held contempt in your heart for, for so long.
- C. Paul got His answer. Not the answer he was expecting. Not the answer that He thought. But a life changing answer nevertheless. One that would not only change Paul’s view of Himself but Paul’s view of God and others. And for the time being that answer, Jesus, was enough.  As an aside here: So many people are so overwhelmed by the question of what do you want... let’s face it that is all they hear every time they come to church. God wants me to do this or that. God expects me to behave like this or treat others like that. And yet, we lose our perspective, the right perspective, the greatest perspective, we get the cart before the horse—when we start off by asking focusing more on the what rather than the who...”Who” one meets here is far more important than “what” a person is to do...
- D. But let’s be clear about this: It’s the “who” answer that settled the issue for Paul. And it will be that same who answer that will literally be enough for you and me for the time being. I mention this because Christ does not want us to be lost in the quagmire of theological opinions or Christ-

less religions. It's **not** the voice of Mohammad that whispers to you. It not Buddha, or your Spirit guide that is beckoning you. It's not the Great Spirit of the Navahos summoning you. It's not the voice of Vishnu, or Morani, or Gabriel, or any the angel. It not the utterances of some long lost relative. It is not even the God of Abraham, Jacob, and Israel... Specifically—it is the voice of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, born of the Virgin. Do not diminish or put this God-Man of the same plateau of any other. He is not one of many; He is but One of a Kind. He is not interested in your opinion of trying to make everyone happy by claiming that He is one of many ways to heaven. He is it. And if you don't believe that, then please don't call yourself a Christian. Period. . Settle the who question and I guarantee you'll have a greater insight into all the other religions of the world. Settle the "who" question and statements like all roads lead to God, every any religion is the same... will be seen for the fallacies that they are. Settle the who question... by asking that still small voice that seems to be pulling at your heart... that Paul uttered--who are you Lord? And carefully listen for the I am Jesus....

(It is about time)

- A. An encounter with Christ is Timely, Trustworthy, and Transitionally (Vs. 6-9). *<sup>6</sup>“Now get up and go into the city, and you will be told what you must do.”<sup>7</sup> The men traveling with Saul stood there speechless; they heard the sound but did not see anyone. <sup>8</sup> Saul got up from the ground, but when he opened his eyes he could see nothing. So they led him by the hand into Damascus. <sup>9</sup> For three days he was blind, and did not eat or drink anything.*
- B. As MacLellan points out: *What a different entry he made into Damascus from what he expected, and what a different man it was that crawled up to the door of Judas, in the street that is called Straight, from the self-confident young fanatic who had left Jerusalem with the high priest's letters in his bosom and fierce hate in his heart!*
- C. Paul's initial lesson in a life that would produce more than half of the New Testament was simply a lesson about dependence. Like us, He had been so self-dependent, so overtly self-righteous, so full of what he could do and accomplish in His own strength, that God had to bring him to the point of brokenness, having to rely on others, confident no longer in himself, but learning to lean and being confident of what God can do through Him and with Him. Its call a slow but steady transition from a life devoid of God's influence, purpose, and plan, to a fulfillment of God's

great plan as His own, His treasure, His delight. Paul compared it to putting off the old self and putting on the new. In a word, honing.

- D. God is still in the honing business, still chipping away, now at our pride and self-reliance. Being a child of God, Being a soldier of the cross, being an ambassador for Christ, calls for you and I to be, ever aware of God's honing us, ever more comfortable with a life devoted to Him, contented in the background, pointing people not to us, but to Him, delighting not in what we have done, but glorying in His magnanimous acting on others behalf. Like Paul our message truly is, I once was blind, but now I see, I once was lost, but now I am found.

(It is about time)