

A brilliant light flashes and it strikes like lightning. This lightning flash from heaven knocks Saul from his horse, blinding him in the process. As Saul crawls about the ground a voice speaks to him, holding his attention and Saul is converted. Saul becomes Paul and the persecutor becomes the preacher. The surprising element of this story is that the conversion of Paul, was the conversion of a radically religious person. Paul was a Pharisee and among the most devout of Jewish believers. He lived out every letter of the law, and he was master student of the Hebrew Scriptures. He was a dedicated defender of the demands of the law. Yet; he was converted!

This is challenging, because most of us associate conversion with rogues, reprobates and law breakers. *From a missionary point of view, we think of conversion coming upon heathens and unbelievers. We think that religious conversion is for the ungodly; the sinners. Paul the Pharisee doesn't fit any of these categories.* Paul's conversion was the conversion of a devout believer, someone already committed to God. Paul's ambition in life was to be an obedient servant of God's holy Law. *And yet; Paul was converted!*

The explanation to this is that Paul's conversion was not a moral or ethical conversion; it was a theological conversion. It was a conversion from death under the Law, to a birth of life in the Gospel. In order to more completely understand the theological dimensions of Paul's conversion, let us review the story of our text. A man whose name was Saul, had dedicated his life to the persecution and the killing of Christians in an effort to destroy the church. Saul was travelling to Damascus on a mission; a commission from God to destroy the followers of Jesus. This Jesus who nothing more than a peasant, but who'd made blasphemous claims that he was the Christ, the Son of the Living God.

Saul was just outside the gates of Damascus when he was suddenly struck by a blinding lightning flash from heaven. It surrounded him with a glowing circle of light. This light was brighter and more brilliant than the sun and it knocked Saul to the ground. As he lay there he heard a voice saying: *Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?* It wasn't an angry voice; it was a deep and resonant voice of passionate concern. When the voice was silent, Saul asked his guilt-induced question: *Who are you, Lord?* An amazing answer came back: *I am Jesus whom you are persecuting.*

It's significant that God identified himself to Saul with his human name *Jesus*. God was making it clear to Saul that the one who spoke to him, was this peasant son of the carpenter from Nazareth. This was the same man who'd been rejected and crucified in Jerusalem. It was Jesus of Galilee who had been raised and exalted by Saul's God, who was speaking to him now! The tremendous truth and reality of this experience engulfed Saul like a tidal wave. This was a conversion event that swept away all the malice that had marked and motivated his life. Jesus reprimanded and charged Saul with persecuting Him, and Saul was judged found guilty and executed. For all intents and purposes, ***Saul experienced a spiritual death and then a rebirth, he was resurrected. Saul the persecutor became Paul the evangelist!***

However, what happened to Paul on the Damascus road isn't the whole story. The conversion of Paul like most conversions, came in the form of two acts. The first act was his experience of being struck dead to his *old self*. The second act was his being raised up to a *new life* by the Gospel. Paul had experienced a metaphoric death through God's law, and then he experienced new life: He would later proclaim in his preaching: *The law kills; the Spirit alone gives life.*

The first sign of Paul's experience of death was his blindness. Acts 9 tells us: *When his eyes were opened, he could see nothing.* It's ironic that this proud Pharisee whose mission was to kill Christians, should be led into the city as a poor and blind beggar.

The second sign of Paul's conversion occurred in Damascus. Having found himself made blind by God, he was then prepared to receive the life giving blessing of the Gospel. Ananias directed by God; placed his hands upon Paul's head and absolved him of all sins. Ananias commissioned Paul to preach the living Christ, and the Holy Spirit entered into Paul. The scales fell from his eyes and his sight was restored. He was baptized and he ate with the disciples. And then being nourished food and by the Holy Spirit; Paul immediately went to the nearest synagogue, where he began to preach the crucified and risen Christ; the Son of the Holy God.

Paul was converted by the Law and by the Gospel. But one more act needs to be included in the drama of Paul's conversion: It's this final act that points out what Paul's conversion means to us today. ***The third and final step of Paul's conversion was the conversion of the Word that he had heard, into the energetic life of faith, that he lived.***

Before his conversion, Paul had been a student of the Hebrew scriptures which were the Old Testament. Strict adherence to these scriptures were the driving force of Paul's life, and he was an enthusiastic and dedicated *doer* of the Word. His conversion redirected his energies and transformed Paul's enthusiasm from persecution to proclamation. It's this third act of Paul's conversion; the conversion of the Word that transformed his energies, and this is the conversion that we all desperately need. We all need the conversion of our convictions into actions and our dedication into deeds.

We need to let the power of the Gospel transform our energies into living lives of faith. God's power is available to each of us and it only needs to be transformed to give us power. It needs to be converted from one form of power to another!

The tragedy of our lives is that somehow the energy of the Word gets short-circuited, and the conversion of energy never takes place. As transformers of the Word we fail most likely because of our pride. We're afraid of what others will think about us if we become too enthusiastic about our faith. Nobody wants to be labelled a fanatic or a religious nut or a bible puncher, we don't want to be laughed at so we play it cool. We adopt an air of sophistication and we become blasé. We don't want to be seen getting too excited and far too often we go through life anxiously looking in the rear-view mirror to see what others are thinking about us. And so we stay in second gear and never shift into high for God and there's no danger for us in second gear, only dullness!

The power of God's Word never converts into enthusiastic actions in our lives because we short circuit it into careful conservative expressions of our faith. We never risk radical involvement or commitment and we play it safe. Without powerful enthusiasm, God's will becomes a series of tasks that we must do and we actually exhaust ourselves trying to do them. In reality, they are things that we can do joyfully because we are plugged into a potential powerhouse of energy which constantly flows from God.

As I close this sermon; don't jump to conclusions that this sermon is a *you should or you must* kind of sermon which makes an appeal, or a demand for you to do something. The intention of this sermon is to make no demands of you whatsoever! The intention is to confront you with a ***you will*** message. The theme of this sermon is not a demand; it's a declaration.

This message is a promise from God that He will not rest until the power is restored to our lives, and until his Word flows through us, and moves us to expressive actions of faith.

In Acts 9, Paul didn't go to Damascus to be converted and this scripture isn't primarily about what Paul did; it's more about what God did to Paul. God is the aggressive actor in this drama of salvation. God writes, directs, produces and stars in the drama of conversion. It was God who knocked Paul from his horse to the ground. It was God who blinded Paul with the judgmental word of the Law.

It was God who restored Paul's sight with the gift of the Gospel. It was God who forgave, blessed and commissioned Paul. And God is determined to do the same thing with us. God will strike us again and again with his Word, until that Word makes contact and becomes active in our lives. The Word of God is like lightning, and lightning strikes when the conditions are right. So it is with the Word of God. In God's good time we will experience the striking surge of the power of his Word in our lives; and then we'll express our faith in action.

Dark clouds are gathering and the wind is changing. The heavens are charged with power. Any moment now there will be a bolt of lightning and our lives will be radically changed. The Word of God we hear will be electrified into new energies for the lives that we live. Unlike Paul, we are given a warning! So let us be prepared for God is about to strike! **Amen**

(1618 words)