

# The Conversion of Paul

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[ 0 : 00 ] Willie Barclay was a professor of New Testament at Glasgow University in the mid-20th century.

! I will not ask you to give your age away if you remember him, but I do. He was a brilliant communicator of the Bible to people in and beyond the church. His televised lectures attracted huge audiences across Scotland, despite his gravelly voice, his prominent hearing aid, and the blackboard and chalk that were his only visual aids.

Professor Barclay was a proud native of Motherwell. When he was made a freeman of the borough, a friend asked him what benefits that brought him.

Well, said Professor Barclay, I have the right to graze my horse on the town green, but as Motherwell doesn't have a green and I don't have a horse.

The other person who didn't have a horse was the Apostle Paul, formerly known as Saul.

[ 1 : 16 ] When we read of Saul's conversion on the Damascus Road, there is no mention of a horse. Our reading from the New Testament book of Acts, that Sandra read so beautifully for us, simply says, He fell to the ground.

And yet, through the centuries, this scene has caught the imagination of great artists, who have exercised artistic license, and had Paul fall from a horse, to add to the dramatic effect.

Here we see Saul struck to the ground, but in the account but in the account we read in Acts, the drama came not from the horse, but from a voice in heaven.

Michelangelo still has the horse in his painting of Saul's conversion, but at least he tries to convey the voice that knocked Saul to the ground in the trail of light from heaven to earth.

And this is what the voice from heaven said, Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?

[ 2 : 35 ] To which Saul replies, who are you, Lord? And receives the response, I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting.

Let us pray. Let us pray. Let us pray. Lord Jesus, you stopped Saul in his tracks on the Damascus road and turned a persecutor of your church into a proclaimer of your gospel.

Stop us in our tracks now that we may hear your voice and heed your call to follow in your way. Amen.

Over the last five Sundays, we have been thinking about who we are as the church we read about in the letter to the Ephesians and in the book of Acts on the day of Pentecost.

We learn that we are witnesses to God's power, God's wisdom and God's calling through the life and death and resurrection of Jesus who reconciles us to God and to one another in a new humanity.

[ 3 : 52 ] We discovered that we are called to go public with this good news as on the day of Pentecost so that everyone may hear about this Jesus in their own language. And as Jill was mentioning in her remarks, we were reminded that the church endures because we have a compelling story, a caring community, a common meal, a compassionate God and a communal purse that we share.

It sounds then that we're all set to be the church. Like the church on the day of Pentecost, we have a sense of purpose and a sense of direction.

We have a plan. But as Mike Tyson said when told his opponent had a plan to beat him in the boxing ring, everyone has plans until they get hit for the first time.

That is exactly what happened to the church after the great day of Pentecost. The risen Christ had kept his promise and sent his spirit upon them.

They received the Holy Spirit to empower them for their mission to take the good news of Jesus, the Messiah, to all nations. Christians. They were all set.

[ 5 : 12 ] They had a plan. And then they got hit for the first time. First, the apostles were imprisoned and flogged by the temple authorities for preaching about this Jesus and healing the sick in his name.

Then we read of the arrest of Stephen, one of the disciples who had been empowered by the Spirit to perform signs and wonders. Stephen was cruelly stoned to death for what the authorities saw as blasphemy.

His claim that this Jesus who had died at the authorities' instigation was now at the right hand of God. It is here, just at the point when the church's plan was taking its biggest hit with the death of Stephen, that the future apostle Paul makes his first appearance in our story.

He's not yet on the Damascus Road. He is Saul standing at the ringside watching the fight. In chapter 7 of Acts we read, Then they dragged Stephen out of the city and began to stone him. And the witnesses laid their coats at the feet of a young man named Saul. And Saul approved of their killing him.

[ 6 : 41 ] We next meet this young man at the start of today's reading in Acts chapter 9. He is no longer the bystander watching the fight. He is now in the ring looking for a fight.

Saul, the persecutor, first seen holding the jackets for those who stoned Stephen to death, is now found breathing his own murderous threats against the disciples of the Lord.

Why? Saul was a devout Pharisee whose religious zeal motivated his campaign of persecution. He believed Jesus was a false Messiah. His followers were committing blasphemy. That's why he was on the Damascus Road to hunt down these heretics.

And then it happened. Now as he was going along and approaching Damascus, suddenly a light from heaven flashed around him.

[ 7 : 44 ] Saul fell to the ground. He heard that voice from heaven. Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me? To which Saul replied, who are you, Lord?

and received the response, I am Jesus whom you are persecuting. To a devout Jew like Saul, this was the same heavenly voice that had once cried, Abraham, Abraham, Jacob, Jacob, and Moses, Moses.

and now it was his turn. Saul, Saul. Imagine, in that moment of recognition when he knows this is truly a voice from heaven, Saul also realizes that it is none other than Jesus speaking.

In persecuting Jesus' followers, Saul is told that he has been persecuting Jesus himself, such as the intimate bond between the church and its Lord, Christ and the body of Christ after the resurrection.

In this moment of encounter with the risen and ascended Christ at God's right hand, Saul's life is turned around. He's still heading for Damascus, but now under the authority of Jesus in heaven, not the high priest in Jerusalem.

[ 9 : 20 ] As for thoughts of persecution, not in God's name. Now normally we stop there in telling the story of Saul's conversion, an incident better known as Paul's conversion on the Damascus road using the Latin version of his Jewish name.

So iconic is the story in the popular imagination that it has passed into the English language. Even in our secular age we describe any big life changing change of heart as a Damascus road experience.

But that's not the end of Saul's conversion. Unless we go on reading in the book of Acts chapter 9, we miss the point.

you see it's not on the Damascus road that the true story of Paul's conversion happens. When he hears the voice from heaven, it is when he obeys that voice and enters the city of Damascus that the real work of the Holy Spirit in Paul's conversion takes place.

In receiving forgiveness for his violent ways, Saul also receives his calling from Jesus. I am Jesus whom you are persecuting, but get up and enter the city and you will be told what to do.

[ 10 : 53 ] And so Saul is led into the city, no longer the proud persecutor, but a helpless, broken man being led by the hand like a child.

At this point, we leave Saul behind in the city he has reached, blinded and fasting for three days. The focus of the story now turns to another character.

We are introduced to the person who is actually at the centre of Paul's conversion. Not Saul himself, but this man, Ananias.

Ananias was one of the disciples of Jesus in Damascus, that Saul had been murderously intent on arresting and dragging back to Jerusalem in chains for trial and punishment.

You can imagine then Ananias' reaction when the Lord tells him in a vision, get up and go to the street called Straight, and at the house of Judas, look for a man of Tarsus named Saul.

[12:02] Let me paraphrase Ananias' response. Lord, surely not. This is the man who persecuted your followers in Jerusalem and now has come to arrest those of us who call on your name in Damascus.

You're asking me to go and meet that man? Surely not. Then the voice of the Lord drops his bombshell on Ananias.

not only does the Lord want Saul to regain his sight, which for Ananias makes him dangerous again as a threat to the disciples hiding in Damascus in fear of their lives.

The Lord tells Ananias that he has also chosen Saul to be his instrument in bringing the name of Jesus to the Gentiles and kings as well as to his people Israel.

the persecutor of Jesus is to become the preacher of Jesus. But in this calling, says the Lord, Saul will also suffer for Jesus.

[13:11] With this word from God, Ananias sees Saul in a new light. He sees not a violent persecutor, but someone God has forgiven and chosen to do God's will in the world.

And so, in one of the most moving and beautiful scenes in the whole Bible, Ananias goes to Saul and greets him by his new name, Brother Saul.

The same Lord who appeared to Saul on the Damascus road has called on Ananias to lay hands on him to receive healing and the Holy Spirit. And then we read that it was as if scales fell from Saul's sightless eyes.

And he is baptized and breaks bread with his fellow disciples and regains his strength. This is the real conversion of Saul.

It happens when he is welcomed into the fellowship of the church in Damascus by this man, Ananias. Ananias is like you and me.

[14:24] He is an ordinary rank and file disciple who we have never heard of before in the New Testament and will never hear of again. But it turns out he is the central character in this iconic story of conversion, not on the Damascus road, but on Straight Street.

It turns out the story of the Apostle Paul's conversion on the Damascus road is really the story of the conversion of Ananias and the Damascus church to the way of Jesus.

Yes, they had a plan after Pentecost to preach the gospel first in Jerusalem and then in Samaria. The plan was going well. Thousands were being added to the church. And then the church's plan took its first big hit, violent persecution.

Their plan fell apart and they were back to being a persecuted few hiding behind locked doors in Damascus, terrified because Saul was on his way to round them up as he had done in Jerusalem. But God had God's own plan, both for Saul and for Ananias. God was going to convert both of them to the way of Jesus Christ, teaching Saul and Ananias to love their enemies as Jesus taught and reconciling them to one another through the cross of the same Jesus.

[15:59] It turns out we get the story of Paul's conversion on the road to Damascus almost entirely wrong. not only is there no horse in the story of Saul's dramatic fall to the ground, more importantly this iconic conversion does not take place on the Damascus road.

It starts there for sure when the persecutor Saul encounters the risen Christ. But it finishes on Straight Street when the persecutor Saul is welcomed into Christ's church as a brother.

We too need to be continually converted to the way of Jesus Christ. Whether you've had a Damascus road experience or not, and if you have, I thank God for it, but whether you've had one or not, we all need a Straight Street experience.

We all need to be welcomed into the fellowship of the church like Saul, completing our conversion to the way of Jesus Christ. Not on the Damascus road, but on Straight Street in the fellowship of the church.

We all need to be converted anew to the surprising ways of God like Ananias, welcome into our midst as brothers and sisters in Christ, those we might once have feared or avoided.

[17:32] The true story of Paul's conversion teaches us that every turning to the way of Jesus is always a double conversion. True conversion by the Holy Spirit is both a personal encounter with Christ to turn our individual lives around and a challenge to the church to welcome into our midst

those we may find unsettling, but who are our brothers and sisters?

Our own plans for the church usually don't survive their first hit from hostility or indifference. But God's plan for the church is unstoppable.

Why? Because the world is not rejecting us. Our society is rejecting the one who stopped Saul in his tracks on the Damascus road.

I am Jesus whom you are persecuting or ignoring or mocking or despising. But it is this same Jesus, brothers and sisters in Christ, it is this same Jesus who is at work in the world today by his word and spirit.

It is this same Jesus who stops people in their tracks, turns their lives around, and welcomes them into his church. Are we ready, like Ananias, to welcome them too?

[ 19 : 04 ] Amen. Amen. Love divine. Thank you.