

**Acts 26: 1-18; “What Happens in Conversion?”, Sermon # 87 in the Series –
“Laying the Foundations”, Delivered by Pastor Paul Rendall
on November 6th, 2022, in the Morning Worship Service.**

Are you happy to answer for yourself, as the apostle Paul was before king Agrippa? Paul says that he was happy to speak to king Agrippa and the governor Festus about what Christ had done for him. Are you happy to be able to witness to people and tell them what it means to be converted to Christ? How can people be saved without their understanding that conversion to Christ is absolutely necessary to becoming a true Christian and in order to live the Christian life?

And so, at this hour, I want you to think with me of what happens when you are converted to Christ. 1st of all – When you are converted to Christ, your manner of life changes. (verses 1-11) 2nd – When you are converted to Christ your understanding of Christ and the Church changes immediately. (verses 12-15) And 3rd – When you are converted to Christ you understand more of what your mission is. (verses 16-18)

In presenting these things to you, I hope that you will see that your witnessing to people around you is not all that different from the apostle Paul’s, and I pray that you will be happy to be his witness to people around you; to explain to them what it means to be converted.

1st of all – When you are converted to Christ, your manner of life changes.

In verse 1 it says – “Then Agrippa said to Paul, ‘You are permitted to speak for yourself.’” “So Paul stretched out his hand and answered for himself: I think myself happy King Agrippa, because today I shall answer for myself before you concerning all the things of which I accused by the Jews.” And then in verse 4 he tells Agrippa his manner of life from his youth. Paul’s manner of life before he was converted to Christ was that he was raised according to the strictest sect of the Jewish religion of that day. He lived a Pharisee. He had been born in Cilicia as he relates in Acts 22: 3, and he sat at the feet of the great teacher Gamaliel to receive instruction in the Jewish religion.

From his youth he was in Jerusalem, and he says in verse 4, that all the Jews knew of him. In Galatians 1: 14 he says that he advanced in Judaism beyond many of his contemporaries in his own nation, being more exceedingly zealous for the traditions of the fathers. You see, his parents had raised him strictly. They had taught him to obey all the commandments of God’s holy law. But it was not a heart religion that Paul had. You must be converted to Christ in order to have a heart religion and a personal relationship with Christ. Paul was outwardly righteous according to the law, but inwardly, but he had no love for anyone who said that salvation was not by the works of the law.

And this what Christians were continually saying. Therefore, he hated all Christians. He himself studiously observed all the ceremonies of the law. As he grew up he was zealous for everything concerning the law. He thought himself to be blameless. He did read the Scriptures, but unfortunately he also grew up being told continually by his Pharisaic friends that Christ was not his people’s promised Messiah. He believed what they said; that Jesus was a deceiver and a false prophet. And he thought like they did, that Jesus was a blasphemer because He said that He had said that He was the Son of God. But none of this was true.

Paul had to be converted. And the Lord had mercy upon him. Now that he was converted, he wanted others to be converted. He wanted to find as much common ground as he could here, with the Jews who were persecuting him, and also with those whom he was preaching to, King Agrippa and Festus. And so, he says here in verse 6 – “Now I stand and am judged for the hope of the promise made to the fathers.” The promise made to the fathers was the promise of Christ. Paul being a Pharisee believed in the resurrection of the dead. He had believed like all good Pharisees that it was good to serve the Lord night and day believing that someday the Christ would come. And yet he had rejected Jesus who was his promised Messiah and who was the fulfillment of the Law. How terribly blind were

the Jews of that day. Paul was no exception. Without conversion to Christ, his blindness could not be lifted. A veil lay over his heart.

Did you know that you can be a very religious person and still be blind and not know God? You can even be a person who reads the Bible and says your prayers every day. And yet, you do not have a personal relationship with God because you have not been converted to Christ. You think that knowing God is your doing things which supposedly please Him, like being baptized, or going to a church where the worship pleases you. You believe that you know God but you have very strong views against being converted to Christ.

You will say things like: I have always known God. And – I don't think that I need to change at all, or repent of my sins, or know God through Jesus Christ. I am just fine like I am. I will go to church and be religious but do not tell me that I need to be converted. Paul was greatly opposed to conversion before he was converted. He did not really investigate the things of the gospel for himself, with an open mind. He had definite prejudices against Christ and all Christians because he thought that their object was to get rid of the Jewish religion.

And so when he became old enough to really do something to hinder the whole movement of Christianity, he actually thought that he already knew God. But he had sinful anger, hatred, and murder in his heart towards all Christians. Let me ask you whether you think that you can be a true Christian with those attitudes in your heart? You are very dissatisfied with the pastor or other Christians telling you that you need to change, that you need a better attitude, that you need to love the brethren.

Paul thought that if Christians were out to do away with his Judaism, that he would do away with them. In verse 9 of our text he relates that he thought that he had to do many things contrary to the name of the Lord Jesus. According to his great zeal he became a persecutor. He says in Acts 22: 4 that he persecuted this Way to the death. He was binding and delivering Christians over to be imprisoned, both men and women. The high priest and all the council of the elders had given him letters to give to the Jews in Damascus, that would allow him to bring the Christians bound in chains to Jerusalem to be punished.

Now, at this point I want to pause and ask a question now, by way of application. When you are witnessing to people about how the Lord saved you, do you tell them about your manner of life before you were converted? Paul was always doing this with the people that he spoke to, because he knew that they needed to hear about what his life was like before he found Christ, or in this case, before Christ found him. He would plainly tell them that he was a persecutor of Christians. He would tell them the worst about himself, what he was like. And this would make way for his being able to share about Christ with them.

In verse 10 he said to Agrippa and Festus that he actually shut up many of the saints in prison, and that when they were put to death, that he was casting his vote against them. He says in verse 11 that he punished them often in every synagogue and compelled them to blaspheme. He told them that he was exceedingly enraged against them, and that he persecuted them even to foreign cities. All of these things that he was relating about himself, were of course, terrible sins against God, and Christ, and against those dear Christian people who suffered at his hands. But Paul did not cover up his past. Rather, he shared openly with people his manner of life.

I would like to ask you now, if this is true of you? In witnessing to people, do you tell them about your former manner of life, how you really were before you were converted to Christ? It is important because in relation to the gospel and Christ Himself, people need to know that you were a sinner, and something about what kind of a sinner you were. It is very helpful for them to understand that you were not always a good person, a kind person, a loving person, but that you resisted gospel truth. And specifically the truth that you yourself needed to be saved.

Now, in doing this, you need to be aware that it is not either good or necessary for you to go into all the gory details of your past sins. That would not be a good thing for you to do. The person that you are witnessing to may draw the wrong conclusion; that you are trying to impress them with the depth of your sinfulness, or how dramatic your conversion was. It may even cause them to stumble and think that they can continue on their sin until they are worse people yet.

It is never good to meditate on the details of sin if it excites the thoughts of sin in your heart or other people's hearts. Or that they become so impressed with your dramatic conversion that they think you some great person. It will not be good thing for you to relate all of the details of your sins to persons who do not know the Lord, or even to those who do. But what is good for people to hear about is the manner in which you lived your life before you were converted to Christ.

Were you an angry person like Paul? Were you a sensual sinner who loved the sins of the flesh, like St. Augustine, and others, even myself? Were you a proud person who thought that you knew better than Christians what the meaning of life was, and you sought to bring them down in your mind, and disqualify their witness to you. Were you a selfish person who always wanted your own way in things? Were you a compliant child who always tried to do what your parents told you to do, and so outwardly you looked like a Christian, even though you were not.

But actually, in your heart you were a very self-righteous person, and you thought yourself to be a better person, a smarter person, a wiser person than your parents or your Christian teachers. Kind of like the older brother in the Parable of the Prodigal Son. Father I have always kept your commandments and you did not sacrifice the fatted calf for me? No, when you are converted to Christ, you are ashamed of yourself and your sins. You do not boast in what you once were, but you are humbled by the fact that God has had mercy upon you, to save you from yourself and from your sins.

When you are converted to Christ, your manner of life completely changes. You are happy to be around other Christians. You are happy to relate your testimony of how you have changed. You now can say that you are satisfied to walk with Christ and have fellowship with Him and other Christians. You are not critical of other Christians, you love them and you want to spend time with them. You joyfully relate how it was that Christ turned your heart to love Him more than anybody or anything. And now you are happy to relate these things to as many people as will hear you.

2nd – When you are converted to Christ your understanding of Christ and the Church changes immediately. (verses 12-16)

Conversion is a personal encounter, spiritually, with the risen, living Christ. In Paul's case his experience went far beyond what we would consider "normal" in being converted to Christ. He says in verse 11 – "While I was thus occupied (in persecuting Christians), 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 had all fallen to the ground, I heard a voice speaking to me and saying in the Hebrew language, 'Saul, Saul, why are 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.'"

Let's think for a few minutes about what happened here. Paul's conversion to Christ was sudden. A light brighter than the sun, suddenly shone around him and his companions. The strength and the brightness of this light caused them all to fall to the ground. Let us understand that God is light, and He dwells in unapproachable light. He is a Being whom no man has seen or can see, as it says in 1st Timothy 6: 15. The reason that Paul says that no man has seen God is because God is Spirit. He is infinite and unchangeable in His Being. He is all-powerful, all knowing, and all wise, in the greatest possible sense that we can conceive.

Even though God fills all things, and He is in all things and through all things, His special dwelling place is in heaven, in the realms of pure and perfect light. There in that most Holy Place, ever since He

was raised from the dead, the Incarnate Son, the God-Man, our Lord Jesus Christ, resides at the Father's right hand. It is this One whom the Father has exalted to the highest place. He has given Him a name which is above every name; that at the name of Jesus, every knee should bow, and every tongue confess that He is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.

He is the One who is the Brightness of the Father's glory, the Sunshine of His Father's face. He is the One who has been given all power in heaven and earth. It is He who appeared personally to Paul here on the road to Damascus, and He spoke to him. At that very time, in the this most profound way, Christ spoke to Paul gently and He asked him – Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting Me? Immediately, everything changed in Saul's heart. Immediately, because of the spiritual light coming to his mind and his heart by the Holy Spirit, along with that powerful physical light which was brighter than the sun, it convinced Saul immediately that this One was his Lord.

There was no hesitation on his part. He said immediately – Who are You, Lord? And the answer came back – I am Jesus whom you are persecuting. It is hard for you to kick against the goads. He knew immediately that this Christ, whom he had been opposing, was risen from the dead, and He was speaking to him. He was not going to kill him or judge him eternally. He was saving him and telling him what he needed to do. He needed to repent of his opposing Him. He needed to see that Christ was everything that all the Christians had ever said that He was; the Savior and Lord of sinners, the One who can change the heart of the vilest of sinners, or in his case, the Chief of sinners.

His understanding of Christ changed immediately and forever. And his understanding of the Church; that is, of Christ's saints, changed forever. When Christ said to him – Why are you persecuting Me, Saul, He was saying – Why are persecuting My Church, my people? Christ and His people are spiritually one, and so what His people are feeling and suffering in their persecutions, Christ in His humanity and indeed in His glorified Person, feels and suffers with them. Let me ask you now, whether you acknowledge and sense this oneness of Christ with His people? Do you see them this way? That they are loved and interceded for by their Lord? Do you love Christ's Church?

3rd – When you are converted to Christ you understand more of what your mission is.
(verses 16-18)

Our Lord said to Paul – “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.” We see here the greatness of Paul's mission in this commission that he was given. And yet, we ought to see as well, what our personal mission is.

It is to open people's eyes through sharing the gospel with them. It is turning them from darkness to light by our believing that Christ Himself has called us to be the light of this dark world to them. It is our turning them from the power of Satan to God, by unmasking their spiritual deceptions where we can; showing them what is false religion and false doctrine, and the terrible bondage that that brings. Our mission is to so live and to so speak the truth of the gospel concerning Christ, that people around us will see their need to receive Christ, and thus come to be forgiven of all of their sins. It is to teach people around us by our own devotion to Christ that they can be sanctified by faith in Him. This what Christ call all Christians to; to preach the need of conversion to every person that they know. Now you must ask yourself – Is this what I will do?

