

Conversion of St. Paul (2026)

Bad news Saul becomes good news Paul. A persecutor becomes a proclinator of the Gospel. That is our focus this morning on the Conversion of St. Paul.

“Conversion” means doing an about turn, and we like stories of people who have had this experience.

Think of John Newton, who by his own admission, was a vile blasphemer and slave boat captain.

He went from this life to being a clergyman in the Church of England and a hymn writer. “Amazing grace (how sweet the sound) that saved a wretch like me,” is his testimony.

C.S. Lewis likewise has a story to tell. He was an atheist turned apologist.

His conversion took place on 22 September 1931 in the side car of his brother Warnie's motorcycle on the way to a zoo. He writes:
“When we set out, I did not believe that Jesus is the Son of God, when we arrived at the zoo I did.”

Of course, Lewis' epiphany had been preceded by a number of conversations with Christian friends and much internal wrestling with the facts of Christianity, but when it came, it came very suddenly.

This past Thursday, just before attending Mere Anglicanism in Charleston I visited Beauford, a beautiful and historic town. It was there in 1831 at St. Helenas' Church that Stephen Elliot, the first Bishop of Georgia, was gloriously converted. He too has a story to tell.

He and some friends went to church one evening to hear an itinerant preacher by the name of Daniel Baker. They went not for a

religious experience but out of curiosity and perhaps even to ridicule.

In spite of Elliot's motive for going, scales of unbelief fell from his eyes that night. He went from being a careless young man on the way to becoming a lawyer to being ordained in the Episcopal ministry.

A number of his contemporaries in Beauford had a like experience. These too went on to become priests, bishops and missionaries.

What happened in 1831 in the Low Country of South Carolina became known as the Beauford Revival.

Again, we love stories of 'lightning bolt' conversions, including the one detailed in this morning's reading from Acts . . . the dramatic turnaround of Saul of Tarsus.

Saul, better as Paul, went to Damascus to stamp out what was known at the time as “The Way”, but, after a face-to-face encounter with the risen Christ, he became the chief exponent of the faith he once sought to destroy.

Scales of unbelief fell from his eyes, and the whole direction of his life was changed.

The dramatic transformations of people like Newton, Lewis, Elliot and Paul are exciting and deserve our attention. Nevertheless, they should not be viewed as normative. This is my first point.

Not all have dramatic road-to-Damascus experiences.

If you haven’t had one, don’t be alarmed . . . don’t think you are a second-class Christian or not a Christian at all.

Paul's younger colleague Timothy is worth considering. His coming to Christian faith seems to have been much less spectacular than his mentor's.

Addressing him in 2 Timothy 3:15, Paul says: **“From a child thou hast known the Holy Scriptures, which are able to make thee wise unto salvation which is through faith in Jesus Christ.”**

Reflecting on Paul's words, Bishop Hadley Moule said that Timothy “sucked in godliness along with his mother's milk.”

Because of his upbringing and disposition, when Paul came through Lystra, Timothy's hometown, announcing Jesus as Messiah, Timothy receive the message readily and gladly without great fanfare.

Mrs. Billy Graham had a similar experience. Brought up in a Christian home, the daughter of

medical missionaries to China, she could recall no dramatic, decisive conversion experience. Yet about her, Mr. Graham said, **“Ruth, to this day, is the strongest Christian I know.”**

So, the most important question for anyone to ask is not, **“Have I had an experience like Paul or anyone else, but am I trusting wholly in Jesus Christ? Have I ratified the promises made to me in baptism?”**

That is my initial point. A second concerns God’s strange choices.

If you or I had been charged with finding someone to bring the Christian message to the far reaches of the Roman Empire, I doubt that Saul of Tarsus would have been on our lists of candidates.

Putting his name forward would be like considering Kim Jong Un of North Korea to

head the United Nations Commission on Human Rights.

Saul definitely would not have been our pick, but he was the pick of the sovereign Lord of Heaven and earth.

God, you see, looks beyond what a man is to what by grace he may become.

We know this to be so in Paul's case from words spoken by Jesus to Ananias.

Ananias, you will remember, was the Christian believer in Damascus commissioned to take charge of Saul after he had been struck blind.

When Jesus appeared to Ananias in a vision telling him of his assignment, Ananias responded in amazement (as we may well have). Paraphrasing, he said:

“Lord, you must be kidding! Are you not aware that this man Saul whom you are asking me to befriend is a notorious persecutor of Christians and has come to Damascus on a mission of mischief?”

Of course, Jesus knew, but doesn't berate Ananias for stating the obvious. Rather, He says:

“He is a chosen vessel unto me, to bear my name before the Gentiles (nations), and kings, and the children of Israel.”

God is sovereign. Again, He sees beyond what a person is to what by grace he may become.

Put yourself in that paradigm. God sees more in you than you see in yourself. He sees more in you than others see in you.

Why not ask the question, **Who am I?**

Then, give this answer: **One loved and imagined into being before I was born, one for whom God has purpose.**

Even so, God's call on a person's life calls for a response. Paul had to say yes to God's call, and that is true with each one of us.

Paul's response came when he said: **“Lord, what wilt thou have me to do?”**

That is the question each one of us should ask.

Upon asking it, we must be willing to put away what we want to accomplish to what Christ wants to accomplish in us.

And this is what happened in Saul's life, and we know that it made all the difference.

Saul, at great cost, brought the light of the Gospel, to people throughout the ancient world.

God is still in the business of converting people, of turning their lives right-side up.

Our task, this church's task, is to join in this work and become workers together with God in this operation.

We do this by not only announcing Jesus by our words, but by living out our faith in such a way that others will be moved to ask questions and perhaps even moved to come in.

All around us are people who are not only separated from God but isolated from other people. They may have thousands of friends on Facebook but no one to whom they can empty their soul or lean on in a time of crisis.

Loneliness may well be the chief psychological disease of our age.

Let's scratch where people are itching.

In terms of our own lives, by living attractive lives . . . lives marked by service to others, real friendship and a buoyant, contagious spirit.

By not putting on social media some of the things people put on today . . . things that mark them as perennially miserable and angry.

When faced with opposition, as Saul would go on to be, by living fearlessly. Remember what happened when he and Silas were locked up in the Philippi jail. What did they do? /// Moan and groan and say, It's not fair? Rail against the authorities? /// No, they sang hymns.

Be very sure that when 21st century Christians do likewise, people on the outside will take note.

But what about the local church?

Well, it too has a part to play. The redeemed community is to be the venue where true friendship is modeled and celebrated

. . . a place where people are helped and supported in time of need

. . . a place where those wearied with the lies, false values and self-deceptions of the world of media and celebrities are shown a better way and invited in.

Allow me to close by saying: Conversions should be contagious. Those whose lives have been turned around should be agents for bringing the same thing to bear in the lives of others.

Let's look for ways to make this happen in our own community in this coming week.