

## INTRODUCTION

In the 1970s, Michael Hart wrote a book: *100 Most Influential People in History*. #1 was not Jesus Christ, but Muhammad (his reasoning was that Muhammad not only had spiritual influence, but political also). #2 was Isaac Newton. #3 was Jesus Christ. Not far behind at # 6 is the apostle Paul!

Of course, Jesus is Lord. He's the centerpiece of history. But there are also certain people God uses in special ways. Paul is one of those guys. In the book, Hart says that Paul's impact on Christianity was arguably greater than Jesus! That's debatable, but this much is true: Paul single-handedly changed the course of history, and we have to know who he is.

Bringing it closer to home: many people want to grow, want to understand God and faith more. If you want to understand God more, then you have to understand Paul.

[Paul's bio]

- Contemporary of Jesus (born few years after in 6 AD)
- Jewish – he was a “hardcore Jew” – what that means:
  - Jews are ancestors of OT Israelites (the nation God chose to bring the Messiah through)
  - Because of this, some Jews were really nationalistic and super passionate about all things Jewish (history, customs, religion). Not all Jews were like this, but when Luke mentions the “Jews” in Acts, he's mainly talking about these types.
  - The elite of the Jews were the Pharisees – religious leaders of the Jewish people. Paul was a part of them.
  - Not only that, his mentor was the top guy of Pharisees. So Paul is up there. He calls himself “Hebrew of Hebrews.”
- At the same time, Paul was born in Tarsus (not Israel)
  - So he is a Roman citizen (we'll see that come into play later)
  - And has a Roman education
- So he's hardcore Jew, but very Roman/Greek in his worldview. That's why he goes by both the name Saul and Paul. Not a name change. It's the same name (Saul is Hebrew name, Paul is the Greek version).

Where we'll start is his testimony – the day he came to know Jesus as his Lord and Savior. What does the conversion of a guy 2000 years ago have to do with us today?

## I. WHAT PAUL'S CONVERSION MEANS FOR US

### A. We have received the same mercy

The Pharisees as a whole, had this hatred for Jesus because he was a threat to them. They had this nice little niche carved out for themselves where they had power over their people...but also benefits from the Roman government. So they were playing this in-between game which made them really wealthy and powerful.

Jesus threatened all of that. That's why they got him arrested and crucified. They thought they were done with him, but then all of a sudden these followers of his are popping up, giving the same message. So now they gotta get rid of them, too!

Paul was the guy in charge of this. During the Holocaust, the Gestapo (secret police) were in charge of finding and arresting Jews. Paul was that.

And he enjoyed it. He was "breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord" – he was *passionate* about killing Jesus' followers. Filled with hatred and evil.

1. So when Jesus meets him on the road. What would be the natural thing to expect? How would you feel towards someone who killed one of your family members? When families of victims in school shootings see the shooter in court, what kind of reaction would you expect?

**Jesus' response to his enemy is MERCY.**

2. We can never forget that we were enemies of Christ once. It's not that *he* was against *us*, but *we* were against *him*. We rejected his authority. We refused to submit. Some of us did even outright hate him.

We are not small-time offenders being let go of a few misdemeanors. R.C. Sproul quote: "*Sin is cosmic treason...because it's against the one to whom we owe everything.*" Do you know what the penalty for treason against the United States is? The death penalty. How much more severe of a penalty should be expected when we oppose the God of the universe??

3. That's why Romans 5 is so amazing: "*while we were ENEMIES we were reconciled to God by the death of his Son*" (Romans 5:10). While we were rejecting him, while we hated him, He sent His Son to the cross for us.

Never stop being in awe of His mercy. Are you in awe today? If not, we've forgotten who we were.

When does true praise happen? True praise happens when we're shocked. "*How is it possible?? How can it be??*"

4. To those who have not put your trust in Christ for salvation: you are living as enemies of God.

BUT, Paul says in Philippians 3:18: "*I have tears when I think about people who are enemies of the cross.*" That's God's heart for you. He has tears over you. He does not want you to remain an enemy. He wants to call you child.

What happened to Paul has to happen to you. Lord has to reveal himself, reveal your need. You have to see that Jesus is alive and put your trust in Him.

**B. We have eternal security**

Look at what Jesus says to Paul: *“Why are you persecuting me?”* Paul was persecuting Christians, but Jesus says: *“you’re persecuting ME.”* **He is ONE with his people.** We are in him. We are his own. He feels what happens to us. He knows the discouragement, the loneliness, the injustice.

We sometimes feel He’s not doing anything. How could he do nothing? How many of us feel pain and do *nothing*?

If He loved you as an enemy, how much more will He care for you now that you’re his? Never, ever doubt his love. Never, ever think that he’s not with you.

Many of our members are going through difficulties and family hardships lately. In those times it’s easy to question if God is really with us. If I can lovingly rebuke you: If you think that, you don’t know God. You don’t know how united you are with Him. He sees you as He sees Christ. How many times do we have to repeat that here? I’ll repeat it until we believe it! We are forever secure.

### C. We have a calling

*Acts 9:15 But the Lord said to him, “Go, for he is a chosen instrument of mine to carry my name before the Gentiles and kings and the children of Israel.”*

This was Paul’s specific calling: to take the gospel to people who haven’t heard it. But the greater point here is that when God saves, He also calls.

1. We miss that sometimes. We seek healing and deliverance, but we don’t realize that God does that for a purpose: **so we can then carry His name to people.** This is our one job. It is the reason God heals and restores and provides.

Has God blessed you in any way? What kind of grace have you received? Now what are you doing with those blessings?

There’s a call on your life! Let’s think about that question from last week: *“what’s your mission statement?”* Not what do you want it to be, but what is it right now? What was it this past week?

**If your mission hasn’t changed, then your master hasn’t changed. Because when Christ encounters someone, he changes their purpose.**

2. The call is to carry his name. It’s independent of where we are. Paul still ended up going to Damascus. Except instead of killing Christians there...he made them!

Our circumstances do not have to change for us to obey this calling. We may stay in the same places, it's just we have a new purpose as we go to those places.

3. And it's not just delivering a message. Carrying His name means *bearing* His name. The call isn't just to speak of Christ but to *look* like Christ.

That's why Jesus says: *"I will show him how much he must suffer."* If the message is Christ, then *losing* will have to be part of it. But the Christian can live with that, because suffering for his name means we bear his name. We get to know him in suffering.

The closer to Christ one gets, there is a greater willingness to lose self. And in the process, greater joy.

## II. WHAT PAUL'S CONVERSION MEANS FOR OTHERS

### A. Anyone can be saved

No one could have seen this coming. Ananias questions God! *"Lord, this guy?? You know what he's done? He's dangerous!!"*

He thought God was crazy. But God is very intentional. He purposely picked the most unlikely person, to be the most influential person ever, to tell us that **anyone can be saved.**

I was hanging out with two old friends recently. One of them had a rocky relationship with his abusive dad. But he had been praying for his dad's salvation, and thought his dad was starting to come around. But one day his dad raged at him and all he could think was: "He's never going to change."

My other friend then started to tell his testimony of his own dad, who had abandoned him at a young age, but then came back into his life decades later. It seemed like he was a new person, until one day when he asked his son for some money. And my friend found himself wondering the same thing: "will he ever change??" But he continued to forgive and to pray, and many years later, his dad received Christ.

We wonder sometimes, as we see how people are hardened in their hearts, resistant to faith/religion, angry at God. And in the back of our minds we wonder: "can they really change?" Let the testimony of Paul, and many others, remind you that **GOD CAN.**

### B. At any time

And He can do it at any time. I love this little detail here: *"suddenly a light."* This happened while Paul was on his way to murder! He was the most unlikely person, at the most unlikely time.

1. No matter which way a person is trending in their life, God can reach them at any moment.
2. But this raises a question: If he can change in a moment, why doesn't he?? **Because** there are a thousand pieces to the puzzle God is putting together.

Always remember that. We tend to be myopic – we just see what's happening *now*, and we just see how it affects *us*. But God is not just thinking now, He's thinking eternity. And He's not just thinking about us, but about all the people we touch.

Think about Paul:

- Why didn't God change Paul before he killed all those Christians?? Why did He let that happen?
- Paul was the one overseeing the killing of Stephen. Why didn't God do anything?

Because Stephen's death led to all of this.

3. The one unmistakable theme of Paul's testimony: **God had every detail covered:**
  - Allowing the stoning of Stephen
  - Which led to the scattering
  - Which led to Paul going to Damascus
  - Which led to this encounter
  - Then at the same time, there's this whole other work God is doing on the side with Ananias – giving him a vision, dealing with his doubt

**God is more at work than we will ever know. Don't let your limited view determine your theology.**

Ecclesiastes 3:11 *"He makes all things beautiful in His time."* That's our strength in our own inconsistent walk with the Lord. And that's our hope for others.

Keep praying; keep loving. You never know if that one prayer will be the prayer, that one act will be the act that God uses to bring salvation.

## C. God will use us

### 1. Ananias's

Ananias, if you think about it, is so unnecessary. Jesus appearing to you in a vision should be enough, right? At that point, he could have easily said: "Paul, you need to repent and receive me as Lord" and Paul would have done it in a second. But instead he tells him to go to Damascus and just wait there.

It's because He wanted to involve Ananias. **That's His way: He wants to give His people the privilege of being involved in this.**

And what does he ask Ananias to do? *“Go to this address...ask for a guy named Paul...and pray for him.”* In a way, that’s all God asks of us: pray for people and go to people.

It’s not complicated. He isn’t looking for the best and the brightest. He’s looking for Ananias’s who will simply OBEY.

What ways is he calling you to obedience? Many times, I hear people who sense a conviction to take a step or surrender something. More times than not, they end up not doing it. Maybe that’s why we don’t see the power of God at work in our lives. It’s the Ananias’s who leave the house, that get to see Paul’s converted.

To the Costa Rica: all you need to do is go and simply be faithful. Love the children. Sing, act to the best of your ability. Simple obedience, in the hands of God, is powerful.

## 2. Barnabas’s

There’s also this guy named Barnabas.

- After his conversion, Paul goes to Jerusalem (that was the hub of Christianity at the time; the flagship church was there)
- But he’s not accepted there. Which is understandable – the last time they saw him, he was arresting Christians! So they hear: *“Paul wants to visit our church.”* They’re skeptical.
- That’s when Barnabas stands up for Paul. He vouches for him with the church leaders and they welcome him in.
- It couldn’t have been easy for Barnabas. It was risky to be associated with Paul. He was the most hated man in Jerusalem.

But after this, Paul’s ministry takes off. In this great work of salvation God is doing, He is looking for Barnabas’...who will take a chance on someone. Who will see past someone’s issues and see what they can be when God gets a hold of them.

Do you have messy people in your life?

- Sometimes we see people, who can’t seem to get their act together.
- It’s difficult discipling people. They’re not always hungry and growing. Sometimes we feel like: are they ever going to get it?

But if we have the eyes of God – the eyes that looked at murderer Paul and saw missionary Paul; the eyes that looked at deserter Simon and saw Peter the rock. Then we will stand by people, instead of giving up on people. Sometimes we’re called to be Paul. Sometimes we’re called to be a Barnabas who *makes* Paul.

There were a few people in our church who stepped forward to pay for those who couldn’t afford the retreat. That’s a worthwhile investment that can make Paul’s.

Those who serve in Sunday school have my deepest respect. I have a hard time with 3 kids, let alone 20. Yesterday, I stopped by the water day. It looked like a war zone there, a gigantic mess. Kids are hard. But some of those kids will serve the Lord in their life. They will become Paul's. They will become Peter's. It's a worthwhile investment.

But Paul's conversion meant more than even Barnabas could have seen...

### III. WHAT PAUL'S CONVERSION MEANT FOR HISTORY

#### 1. Missionary efforts

From here on, through Paul's efforts (which we will study in the rest of Acts) Christianity goes from local religion, to the ends of the earth (according to Jesus' promise). All of us are here, because of the missionary movement God started through Paul.

#### 2. Authorship of NT

He wrote half of the NT. Majority of verses you probably memorize and hold on to for comfort and strength are written through him.

#### 3. Theology

It was through his mind and education that God gives us some of the most precious theological doctrines. Justification, sanctification, union with Christ.

God knew He'd do all that. Paul didn't completely, but he had an idea of what God was up to. He writes at the end of his life: *"The saying is trustworthy and deserving of full acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, of whom I am the foremost. But I received mercy for this reason, that in me, as the foremost, Jesus Christ might display his perfect patience as an example to those who were to believe in him for eternal life. To the King of the ages, immortal, invisible, the only God, be honor and glory forever and ever. Amen."* (1 Timothy 1:15-17)

He knew he was nothing, but he also knew God could do everything, and that God was up to something big through his life.

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## CONCLUSION

The world is different today because of one man, amazed by the mercy of God. I've been thinking about other godly men and women I've known, and how the world is different because of them, too. I'm reminded of what DL Moody said: *"The world has yet to see what God can do...with a man fully consecrated to him."*

It challenged me and made me wonder: Will AZ be different because I lived and served the Lord here? Will your office be different, because you served God there? Will your family be different? Will your campus be different? Will your church be different?

To those who are in awe of His grace; and who have open hands and a willing heart, He will use us to save many.