

“On the Road (to Damascus)”

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Scriptures: [Acts 26:9–21](#); [Psalm 67](#); [Galatians 1:11–24](#); [Matthew 10:16–25](#)

It seems that we don't always truly appreciate something we have until we no longer have it. This past November, you may have caught me hobbling around for a couple of weeks, because I had some minor dermatological surgery on my leg. This procedure affected the speed and nimbleness of my walking, and boy, could I tell. I had to tell my PA at my annual physical earlier this month that while I had a better year with regards to exercise in 2025, that my November and December were almost completely shot, stemming from that surgery followed by some sickness. My experience has made me more grateful for what I had assumed was the status quo.

I imagine St. Paul felt something similar when what seemed like scales fell from his eyes in Damascus and he could see again. A world that had been dark, was now light once more. It was a pivotal moment in Paul's life. You don't go into a day with one name and come out with a new one very often. I am sure his sight was something he cherished just a little bit more for the rest of his life.

But I find it interesting that when Paul himself tells the story of his conversion, as he does in our reading from Acts 26 today, he doesn't mention physical blindness. We get those details from Luke's retelling of the story, earlier in Acts chapter 9. That is where Paul goes to Ananias, is prayed for, and those things like scales fall from his eyes. But at the end of Paul's story, as he is making a defense of himself to King

Agrippa, it is spiritual blindness and sight that Paul remembers his conversion moment. Paul gives an account of what Jesus says to him on the road to Damascus:

Jesus speaking to Paul (listen for words about sight or light and darkness in this response): “But rise and stand upon your feet, for I have appeared to you for this purpose, to appoint you as a servant and witness to the things in which you have seen me and to those in which I will appear to you, delivering you from your people and from the Gentiles—to whom I am sending you to open their eyes, so that they may turn from darkness to light and from the power of Satan to God, that they may receive forgiveness of sins and a place among those who are sanctified by faith in me.”¹

In context of the literal blindness he was experiencing in that moment, this word from Jesus must have hit especially close to home. “You have seen me do great things, Saul and you will see more still. But just as you are blind right now, there is a whole world of people out there whom I love who are blind to that love. I want you to go and tell them!”

In a sense it is not surprising that Paul leaves off his own physical blindness in his retelling of this story. It wasn't the most serious blindness that was in play. What was of most consequence was that he had been blind to Jesus, and now he could see. It was his job now to take that sight to the world.

How sweet it is when our faculties return to us. When our eyes adjust to the changing light and we can navigate again, when the windshield fog clears and we can drive

¹ Acts 26:17-8

safely, when the ringing in our ears stops and we can hear the voice of one whom we love. How sweeter still is the sight we receive when we hear the gospel, whether for the first time or for the thousandth!

As people who are the beneficiaries of St. Paul's conversion - I think most of us fall into the Gentile camp and should thank God that Paul had the mission that he did - I want us to reflect on his conversion today and ask ourselves this question: what does it mean to have our eyes truly opened by the light of the gospel?

In Paul's own reflection on his conversion, we can draw out three threads in answer to this question. First, eyes opened by the Gospel see clearly our sin and need for salvation, opened eyes have come from an encounter with Jesus, and opened eyes are validated by obedience.

The Gospel opens our eyes to our own sinfulness and shortcomings and calls us to repent.

Paul was right when he called himself the chief of sinners.² We see Saul (as he was called before his conversion) for the first time in the New Testament at the end of Acts chapter 7 and the beginning of Acts chapter 8, where Saul watches the coats of the mob who stones the first Christian martyr, Stephen. This event seems to have emboldened Saul, who goes on from there to do house to house style searches, dragging off men, women, and children to prison for following Jesus.³ That is the sort

² 1 Tim 1:15

³ Acts 7:58-8:3

of work he is on the road to do when Jesus himself interrupts him on the road to Damascus.

And so, when Paul is making a defense of himself and his ministry to a civilian king, hear him in his own words; he doesn't go easy on himself:

"I myself was convinced that I ought to do many things in opposing the name of Jesus of Nazareth. And I did so in Jerusalem. I not only locked up many of the saints in prison after receiving authority from the chief priests, but when they were put to death I cast my vote against them. And I punished them often in all the synagogues and tried to make them blaspheme, and in raging fury against them I persecuted them even to foreign cities."⁴

Or more briefly in his correspondence with the Galatians: "I persecuted the church of God violently and tried to destroy it."⁵

I am astounded at two things about the way in which Paul talks about his past. First, by his frankness. There is no minimizing the harm he did, there is no shifting of blame. He did what he did and there is no getting around it. But also, I marvel at the lack of self-condemnation or despair. He laments his sins, certainly, but I do not hear the weight of debilitating shame in his words. This is a man who is fully convinced of not only God's holiness and how that holiness highlights his own sin, but the overflowing mercy of God as well.

It takes a secure trust in God's grace to turn from persecuting the faith to being its main proponent. Paul had to do a lot of convincing of others that he was the right man for the job, not least of all himself I am sure. But his honest assessment of the

⁴ Acts 26:9-11

⁵ Gal 1:13b

wrong that he had done taken with his trust in God's mercy and forgiveness set a fire in him that could not be quenched.

Imagine if we had that pairing of radical repentance and assurance of God's mercy today. When we hear of scandals, both in and out of the church, it seems to me we want to skip too quickly to the grace part, that the primary task is a PR style of forgiveness that is not from God, but from the public eye.

I was listening to an interview with Donald Miller, the writer and business man recently,⁶ and he expressed his desire that everyone who was running for president of the US had to answer the question "What is something you did wrong and what did you learn from it?" as part of our Presidential debates. We seem to be a long way from that sort of honest reflection in our politics these days across the board.

But those of us whose eyes have been opened to the Gospel know the power of naming our mistakes, to God and to others, because we know that in acknowledging the wrong we have done, committing to do better, and embracing the amazing grace of God, we can watch him turn what would be our shame into his glory. If Paul would have shoved his past life under the rug, no one in the young church would have ever truly trusted him. If he would have let his own shame paralyze him, his ministry would have never gotten off the ground. The light of the Gospel illuminates our failures and also reminds us that we are not our failures and that there can be more to our story.

When our eyes are opened by the Gospel, this opening is marked by the person of Jesus. The Light of the Gospel isn't some vague sense of enlightenment, or an awakening to a broad sense of ethics, it is a particular encounter with Jesus the

⁶<https://podcasts.apple.com/us/podcast/donald-miller-why-the-villains-journey-shapes-who-you/id1845887200?i=1000745165828>

Christ, the Son of the living God. The Christian makes particular claims about the nature of the universe and who sits on its throne. Paul was not visited by vague personalities like the ghosts of Christmases past, present, and future, who encouraged him to lead a more open and ethical life, no the encounter was more specific than that. He was confronted by the second person of the Trinity, the Lord Jesus Christ.

May our sense of our salvation never lose the potency of its specificity. Paul is convinced that what he received is not simply a way of wisdom, though it is wise, nor is it a system of ethics in the effort to be a better person, though that is part of it's fruit. Paul makes the claim that he has encountered a revealing of reality, that he has seen something new about the nature of the universe and that this understanding changes how he sees everything. He tells the Galatians, "[T]he gospel that was preached by me is not man's gospel. For I did not receive it from any man, nor was I taught it, but I received it through a revelation of Jesus Christ."⁷

We believe that the God who created everything sent his Son to die so that we and all who believe in him could have the overflowing eternal life of those who are in his name. We don't just desire to be more enlightened and engaged citizens. The gospel has more to say than that! Paul doesn't meet the Spirit of Goodwill Towards All Humanity on the road to Damascus, he meets Jesus, and that is so much better.

We show that our eyes have been truly opened by the light of the Gospel when our lives are marked by obedience. It is an inspiring thing to see the passion of a new believer in the faith. It can help us remember the pride and commitment we had in

⁷ Gal 1:11b-12

our own early days of following Jesus. But true obedience has staying power and outlasts passion. Listen again as Paul makes his case before King Agrippa:

“Therefore, O King Agrippa, I was not disobedient to the heavenly vision, but declared first to those in Damascus, then in Jerusalem and throughout all the region of Judea, and also to the Gentiles, that they should repent and turn to God, performing deeds in keeping with their repentance. For this reason the Jews seized me in the temple and tried to kill me.”⁸

Paul pretty quickly ran the whole gamut of persecutor of the Way to the one who is persecuted for preaching the Gospel. It is one thing to do what God says, it is yet another to do so under the threat of great personal harm.

I am inspired by how Paul was pressured from many different directions and yet remained faithful. He was under pressure from the Jewish authorities, those who were just before sending him to persecute Christians, to forget this Jesus nonsense and come back into the fold. He was under pressure from Roman authorities to keep the peace, which meant keeping the Jewish leaders happy. There were pressures from inside the Church. He had to stand against those Jewish Christians who demanded Gentiles become Jews in order to follow Jesus, an argument that had even caused St. Peter to waver. These leaders wanted Paul to tighten the reins on the Church. He faced pressure from his unruly Gentile churches, who had not fully left behind their pagan ways. They wanted Paul to loosen up. But in the midst of all these pressures, one thing was important - to be obedient to the one who had called his name on the road to Damascus.

⁸ Acts 26:19-21

We too face pressure from all sides. It may look like political pressure from the Right or the Left, the new religious zealots of our day. It may look like the family pressure to succeed or conform. We face the pressure of our own temptations and inclinations. But in those moments, let us remember the light that has shown upon us and the Lord that has called our name.

Conversion is a funny thing. There are days that I rejoice in the years that have followed my coming to faith and there are times when I feel I need to be converted every day. There are days when I wish that I had some flashy conversion story like Paul, a story I could think back on in hard times and remember the miraculous nature of my conversion. But a sustained faith nurtured in the home and grown into maturity is just as much of a miracle as a bright light on a road. So let us all rejoice in the manner in which we have been brought into the family of God. His way for us to come in, was the best way for us. We are his and that is what matters.

Paul's conversion gives us the ingredients: Repentance, and encounter with Jesus, and obedience. Let us seek them all each and every day.