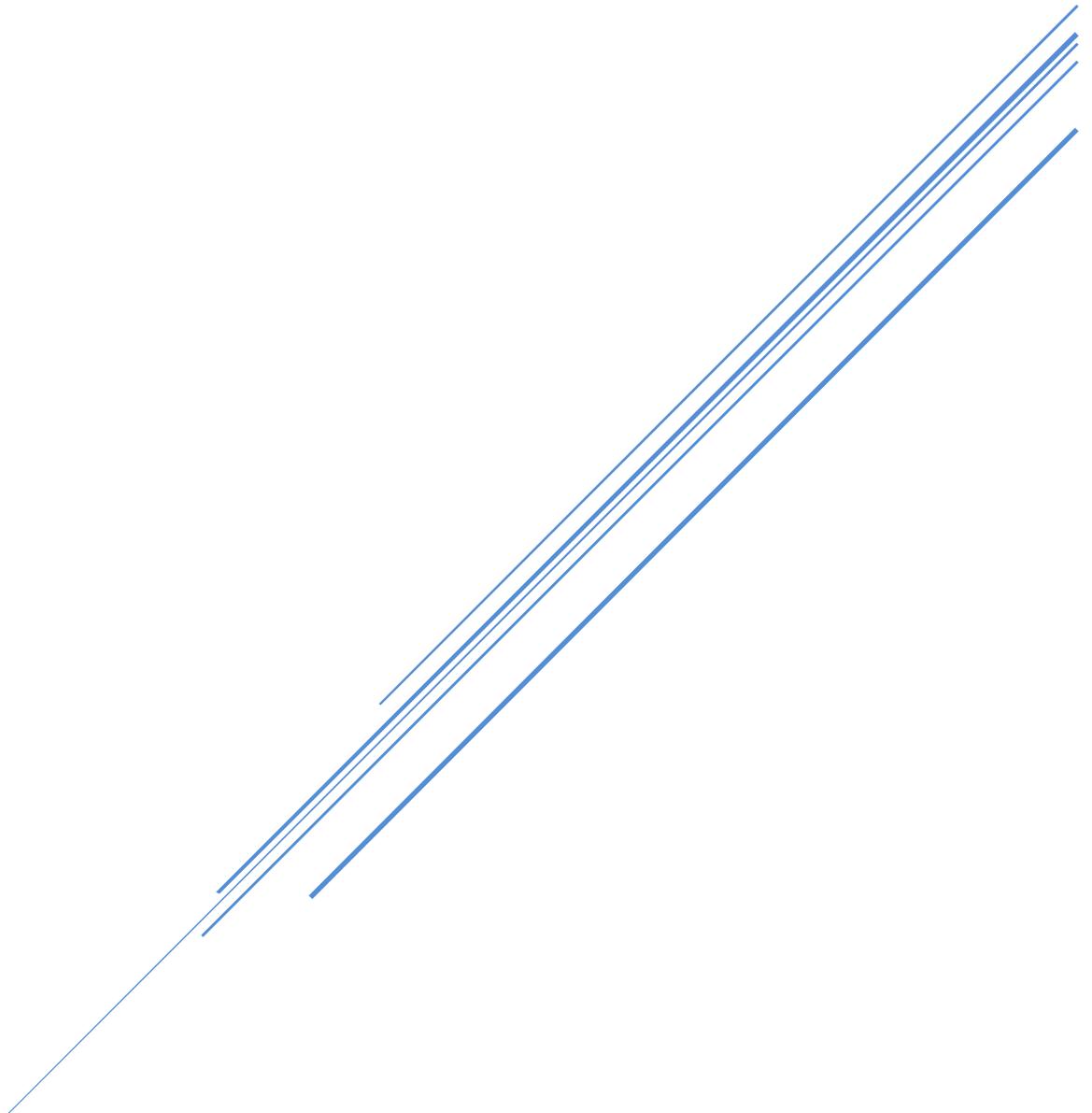


“A CHANGED MAN”

Acts 9:1-20



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Paul... probably one of the most influential people of early Christianity, next to Jesus himself. Even though he never walked or talked or ate with Jesus, nearly half of all the books of the New Testament are letters attributed to Paul. You can read all about Paul and the rise of the new Christian church in the book of Acts – which was not written by Paul, but by the same author that wrote the Gospel of Luke

The first few chapters of Acts tell us how the disciples, the chosen 12, quickly became a movement after the death and resurrection of their radical rabbi, Jesus of Nazareth.

In those early days, belief in Jesus as the Messiah was spreading like wildfire, but since nobody had thought up the name ‘Christian’ yet, they simply called themselves “The Way.” More and more people were coming to the Way, coming to believe that Jesus really was who he said he was – hindsight 20/20, right?

But something strange was happening. There were some unlikely, unexpected converts among these new followers of the Way, including, just to name a few:

- Samaritans – a religious minority hated by the Jews
- Hellenistic Gentiles – non-Jews who didn’t know all the rules, who weren’t raised Jewish
- A businesswoman and householder named Lydia, another Gentile, and all her servants and employees – making Lydia the first European convert to Christianity.

Weirder still, the new followers also included,

- An Ethiopian eunuch – sexual minority and transgendered court official for a foreign Queen
- A Roman centurion – the perfect example and a symbol of military and imperial oppression
- And of course, ex-Pharisee and arch-nemesis of any one who admitted to following the Way, the artist formerly known as Saul, Paul.

And they were all joining this movement with the belief that Jesus was the Messiah, the Son of God. Their stories, and many other stories just like theirs, circulated through the house churches, celebrated as evidence of the power of the Gospel.

They came from everywhere – from all kinds of cultural, religious, and racial backgrounds. They came from every level of society: rich, poor, slave, free, educated, and illiterate. Not only that, they even included religiously unclean minorities, sexual outsiders, soldiers of the feared and hated Roman army – people who, according to Jewish law, were banned from worshipping the God of Israel in the temple. “Scandalous!”

For Saul, this was just wrong –so wrong. Before his ‘Road to Damascus’ conversion, he just knew that this was what was wrong with the new generation of the first century. It was the total breakdown of a carefully constructed, almost 2,000 year old, religious identity.

Jews were supposed to be Jews, Samaritans were supposed to be Samaritans – over there! – and Romans were supposed to be Romans. It’s simple! Now, suddenly anyone and everyone gets to worship the God of the Jews? Are there no rules? Worshipping God this way was supposed to be a members only kind of thing, but this new Way seemed to just let anyone join in. It’s no wonder Saul was so against it.

But then comes the road to Damascus, where Jesus cries out, “Saul, Saul, Why are you persecuting me?” And did you notice Jesus said, “Why are you persecuting me?” Not why are you persecuting them, but me. In other words, when you hurt my people, Saul, you’re hurting me. He said it before, “They are in me, and I am in them.”

Suddenly, Saul gets it. This Jesus – this Christ -- has brought everyone into the kingdom of God. In a flash – literally! – Saul goes from a life lived out in the narrow exclusivity of Judaism, based on manmade standards, ethnicity and culture, to insisting on the radical inclusivity and openness of God’s family, all brought near in Christ. This, in fact, becomes Paul’s core message

Paul’s change of heart was so profound that he would later write to the Galatians, “There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there

is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus.” It’s amazing to me that the same guy who was rounding up Christians over his obsession with Jewish law would later come to write one of the most inclusive statements in the entire Bible.

It couldn’t have been easy for Paul, or for many of the traditional Jewish Christians. On the road to Damascus Paul learned the hard way that the community of God is for everyone, not just for insiders – that in Jesus the inside and the outside are now one. That when the UMC advertises “open hearts, open minds, open doors,” that it’s in Christ that those doors have been flung wide open. No one who wants to come in should be kept out.

The early church made slow going in their efforts to learn to love each other with the love of Christ. That’s why Paul had to write so many letters. Again and again he had to remind the new communities of the heart of the gospel: All have been made one in Christ Jesus. And when they forgot he reminded them: “Yes, you are called to love each other – not just put up with each other, and tolerance is not enough. Jesus calls us to love each other the way he loved us, because it’s only by our love that others will know we are Christians.

As I said, this couldn’t have been easy for Paul. What strikes me is Paul’s willingness to change. And not just by his encounter with Christ in a blinding flash of light -- sure – but afterwards he had to be led by the hand to eat and sleep and learn from the Christians in Damascus – the very people he was on his way to arrest and persecute.

In reading his letters we can tell that Paul was headstrong and opinionated. I have no doubt that he was just as stubborn before his conversion. Passionate, a fierce debater and ruthless opponent, he was always sure he had all the right answers; always ready to impose his ideas on everybody else. He was persuasive to the point of violence towards his new enemies, the followers of the Way. He didn’t like their ideas. He was ready to exclude, and even persecute his fellow Jews simply because of their beliefs.

I think it would take a lot for a stubborn and zealous man like Paul to admit the error of his ways, allowing his opinions and ideas to be influenced and even changed. In fact, it took a real Come to Jesus moment!

But the man who left Jerusalem is not the same man who arrives in Damascus. Paul has let God happen to him. And he completely changed over his three-day experience, both inside and out.

So when the scales fall from Paul's eyes, not only does he see again, but he sees differently. His perspective has changed. His ideas, his theology, his heart, life and mind – nothing about Paul is the same since his encounter with Christ. That's why he gets a new name: new man -- new name! He says it himself in 2 Corinthians, "So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new!"

Can we say the same about our encounters with God – and with each other? Will we be changed?

Can we let go of our need to be right in order to have our vision transformed by God? Will we be changed?

Are we willing to let our hearts be opened by the Holy Spirit so that we can be changed to be more like Christ?

I want that, don't you? Don't you want to be changed?

There's a lot of hope in this passage. I mean if someone like Paul could be transformed by the power of Christ, maybe I can too! Bit by bit the scales are falling from our eyes. Day by day we're walking into the light of God, allowing ourselves to be transformed. Paul writes it to the Romans: "...just as Christ was raised from the dead...so we too might walk in newness of life." As the body of Jesus Christ, as a community, we too are walking in newness of life.

Which brings me to the last aspect of the story that still speaks to us today. It's easy to mistake Paul's experience on the road to Damascus as an individual, personal spiritual experience – just between Jesus and Paul, right?

But the whole conversion could never have happened without the community of new believers. If it hadn't been for Jesus preparing the community in Damascus to take care of Paul, this could've been a pretty mean thing to do. Jesus basically just pulled an "Anti-Good Samaritan" on Paul; leaving him on the side of the road – alone, blind, vulnerable and afraid. "But get up and enter the

city,” Jesus tells him, “and you will be told what you are to do.” That’s all he gets from Jesus.

It’s like, “This concludes your direct experience with Christ, any further Christ experiences will be through the love and forgiveness of your brothers and sisters in Damascus.”

Jesus had interrupted Paul’s life dramatically, but only for that one brief moment. The lightning struck, now the thunder will continue to reverberate for the rest of Paul’s life. It’s up to the community to do the rest – to heal Paul’s sight, to feed him, and to teach him the ways of the Way. It’s the community that prepares and anoints Paul for his mission to preach the Gospel to all the nations – not just the Jewish one. The Damascus community is the very model of forgiveness and reconciliation as they risked welcoming and blessing this enemy they’d heard so much about.

God may have kick-started Paul’s conversion and his call to ministry, but it’s the community who nurtured it, affirmed it, and made it real. It takes a village to raise a child, and it took the community to make Paul the greatest evangelist of the early church and missionary to the gentiles.

I don’t think many people have had Paul’s kind of dramatic mountaintop -- or roadside -- vision of Jesus on our Way, but I have had the experience of scales falling from my eyes as I’ve learned to see a new truth made known in Jesus Christ. As I hear a new interpretation of a passage that I thought I knew, the scales fall. When I moved to Florida, I saw just how wide the welcoming arms of God really are. And when I came here, I had the experience of being drawn into community, of learning in humility from each of you, and being deeply changed by God and by God’s people.

Amen