

Paul: Murderer Turned Missionary

Imagine one day as you're checking your phone, and you notice an attention grabbing headline— Top Terrorist Turns to Jesus. You click on the story and read about how a key Al Qaeda chief or one of the leading Mullahs in Iran has publicly renounced terror and has placed his faith in Jesus. He tells the story of his baptism and how he hopes to travel to the United States to study the bible at Ozark Christian College.

Islamic leaders are quoted denouncing him. Government officials release boilerplate statements about respecting religious freedom. Unnamed sources within the CIA express their suspicion and doubt about his motives. Church leaders express their surprise but also their joy at the turn of events. They speak of other startling conversions in the past. Matt Proctor, the president of Ozark Christian College, says they would welcome him as a student, and would love the opportunity to help deepen his faith.

How astonishing would such news be? Imagine how reluctant you might be to believe and accept such news. Yet, it would not be the first time such a dramatic conversion took place. In fact, you and I are here this morning because of just such a conversion.

This morning we come in our study of the Apostles to the life of the Apostle Paul. When looking at Paul's conversion we have the benefit of seeing things through 20/20 hindsight. We look at his life knowing how everything turned out.

We've naturally adopted a Christianized, even idealized image of the Apostle Paul. He is the apostle we know more about than any other. He is the apostle who wrote 13 letters, fully 1/4th of the New Testament. His life and ministry consumed 2/3rds of Luke's history of the early church in the book of Acts. We know of his missionary journeys in which he covered more than 5,000 miles taking the Gospel to more than twenty cities in ten countries on three continents. We know about the shipwrecks, the stonings, the intense trials, the narrow escapes, and the dramatic conversion on the road to Damascus. Paul's writings have made him arguably the most important and influential theologian ever. But we need to put ourselves in the sandals of someone in the 1st Century and see through their eyes.

As Chuck Swindoll observes, "The first...portrait of Paul is both brutal and bloody," as he oversaw the execution style murder of the bold Christian evangelist, Stephen. Eugene Peterson paraphrases the biblical account this way,

Yelling and hissing, the mob drowned him out. Now in full stampede, they dragged Stephen out of town, pelted him with rocks. The ringleaders took off their coats and asked a young man named Saul (as Paul was known at the time) to watch them.

As the rocks rained down, Stephen prayed, "Master Jesus, take my life." Then he knelt down praying loud enough for everyone to hear, "Master don't blame them for this sin" – his last words. Then he died. Saul was right there congratulating the killers.

Paul hated the name of Jesus. Paul did everything in his power to persecute the church. He led an aggressive, violent campaign to wipe out this fledgling faith. Under his leadership Christians were hunted down, imprisoned and killed. Here is how Paul described himself before becoming a Christian in 1 Tim 1:12-16:

12 I thank Christ Jesus our Lord, who has given me strength, that he considered me trustworthy, appointing me to his service. 13 Even though I was once a blasphemer and a persecutor and a violent man, I was shown mercy because I acted in ignorance and unbelief. 14 The grace of our Lord was poured out on me abundantly, along with the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus.

15 Here is a trustworthy saying that deserves full acceptance: Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners—of whom I am the worst. 16 But for that very reason I was shown mercy so that in me, the worst of sinners, Christ Jesus might display his immense patience as an example for those who would believe in him and receive eternal life.

His was the conversion no one wanted to accept. No one believed that someone so bad as Paul could be saved, let alone used by God to do great things. God had to tell a believer named Ananias in a vision just to go meet with Paul. Even three years after his conversion, Christians in Jerusalem were reluctant to believe his faith was authentic. Acts 9:26 says,

And when he had come to Jerusalem, he attempted to join the disciples. And they were all afraid of him, for they did not believe that he was a disciple.

Only the gracious, encouraging heart of Barnabas was able to bridge the gap.

A life of the influence and scope of Paul's deserves a whole series of sermons, but what things can we take home with us this morning from this quick glance at Paul's life. There are four principles that you should take with you this morning. These are four truths we can see in Paul's life that I believe can bring encouragement and hope to you, and maybe even change your life.

I. The Power of Jesus to Reach Anyone

The first transforming truth we see in Paul's life is the power of Jesus to reach anyone. The love of Jesus Christ is so powerful, so real, so intense, that there is no one who lies outside of its view. There are those, who because of their own willful hardness of heart will never respond to the love of God, but there is no one whose sin is so bad that Jesus, in his love, is unwilling or unable to reach. There is no past, no mistake, no failure so great, so far, so long, so deep, so wide, or so frequent that the love of Jesus Christ cannot take it and transform it into something no one but God himself could have ever imagined. Jesus has the power to reach anyone.

No one shows this truth more than Paul. Paul called himself the worst of sinners. In Romans 7 he says that he was a wretched man. He persecuted the church. He murdered those who followed Jesus. Yet God's grace even reached him. He saw himself as living proof that the grace of God could reach anyone. ANYONE.

Chuck Colson, the former assistant to Richard Nixon, quickly became known as a hatchet man- one who did the president's dirty work. In fact, a Wall Street Journal article once said, "Colson would walk over his own grandmother if he had to." Someone else accused him of being "tough, wily, nasty, and tenaciously loyal to Richard Nixon."

But then came another headline two years later in the aftermath of the Watergate Scandal: "Colson makes decision for Christ." Most everyone in Washington was startled- and suspicious. Christians were skeptical. Many were convinced it was some sort of gimmick, a contrived ploy to seek leniency for his involvement in Watergate.

But more than 3 decades of ministry devoted to prisoners and the forgotten of society, standing up for truth, and defending the faith proved Colson's conversion genuine and his faith authentic. His transformed life has led to a global prison ministry that has touched millions of lives and reached many thousands with the good news of Jesus Christ.

Many people find it offensive to think that God would ever save the likes of a drug running dictator like General Manuel Noriega or serial Killer Jeffery Dahmer. How many of us raised our eyebrows and snickered when Kanye West announced his conversion. "Some sort of publicity stunt," we speculated. "He's obviously losing it. He needs help," the media intoned.

But Jesus is the Savior of an amazing grace that does the shocking, the surprising, the startling. It is a grace that does the impossible and transforms the unchangeable.

It is only a grace that can reach the likes of them, that gives us the promise that it can reach the likes of us. For all have sinned and have fallen short of the glory of God. Every single one of us. No one here deserves salvation. Not one of us is worthy, but God's grace reaches us.

"Amazing grace, how sweet the sound that saved a ???? wretch like...????me." God's grace and Jesus' love has the power to reach anyone.

II. God's Grace In Our Lives Becomes God's Grace for Others

This leads right into the second powerful principle. God's grace in our lives becomes God's grace for others. When we experience the life changing grace of God through the love of Jesus, it moves us to demonstrate that same grace to others. If you have truly experienced the grace of God and know the love of Jesus in your heart, you can no longer look down on others.

Now when we talk about grace, what do we mean? The most basic dictionary definition of grace is that grace is a gift. It is something freely given, given generously and lovingly, not out of duty or compulsion. Grace is not something purchased, earned or deserved. Grace is God giving us what we could never get on our own. When Jesus died on the cross for our sins he made available to us something that we had no hope or right to have. GRACE is God's Riches At Christ's Expense.

Paul was the apostle of grace. God saved him though he deserved it less than anyone and it was his life purpose to show as many people as possible that same grace. He wanted them to know the love he knew. Paul uses the word “grace” 86 times in his writing.

We tend to look at people and put them in categories. “Oh, those are good people. Those are the kind of people we want at church. Those are the kind of people we can reach. Then there are those we look at and think, “Eeeew, they’re beyond hope. They’re beyond help. There’s no way. Just look at how they live their lives. Look at the things they do and say. They could never change. They don’t deserve it.” How quickly we forget that we didn’t deserve it either.

Christians today talk a lot about the grace of God and the love of Jesus, but many times it’s like something we know in our heads, but not in our hearts. We say one thing but do another. We don’t love others like we have been loved. We don’t show the same grace that God has shown us.

When you look at people in the world do you view them with hope, love, comfort, compassion, and forgiveness, or do we view them with scorn, judgment, derision, condemnation.

In the movie Titanic there is a heart-wrenching scene that dramatically portrays something that really happened. As the Titanic was sinking beneath the icy waters of the North Atlantic, those lucky enough to get in lifeboats rowed out to a safe distance. Afterwards, thousands in the water swam desperately for survival. Many of the lifeboats were only partially filled. They had room to save hundreds, but instead of rowing back to rescue the drowning. They held back in fear. They were afraid the desperate drowning people would rock the boat. They were afraid they would be capsized and also drown. They viewed those drowning with fear and suspicion, instead of sympathy and compassion.

Sometimes I think the church is like that. We are in the lifeboat of God’s grace, and we see lost and drowning people in the world and instead of looking at them with compassion and sympathy, we see them with fear and suspicion. What if they upset things? What if they mess up what we have here? Sometimes we even judge them. How dare they be drowning in sin? What a horrible person to be sinking like that?

How quickly we forget that we were rescued from the same sinking ship. The only difference between those of us safely in the boat, and those drowning in the water is timing. We just happened to be rescued before them. We’re not in the boat because we’re such good swimmers. We’re in the boat because God is such a great rescuer. There is always more room in the boat. We need to row in the midst of drowning sinners and rescue as many as we can.

The church has to be a lifeboat that rescues sinners. We can’t row out to a safe distance. We can’t worry about them rocking the boat. No, we want to row right in the midst of those drowning in sin, get as close as we can get, and then pull in as many as we can. We don’t just

welcome those with a past, we welcome those with a present, because we believe you have a future.

Church isn't about keeping the people in the boat happy. It's about getting more people in the boat. Because we've been saved, we want to save others. God's grace in our lives becomes God's grace for others.

III. It's All About A Relationship, Not A Religion

When you've experienced God's grace in such a personal way as Paul did, you realize, number three, that it's all about a relationship, not a religion. You see religion is all about the rules, knowing them, following them, and keeping them. Throughout Paul's early life, knowing God was all about following all the rules. It was knowing all of the do's and don'ts, and if you kept all of them good enough, you might just get in good with God.

The Jews prided themselves on knowing and following all of the right rules. Paul had even become a Pharisee, someone who dedicated their lives to studying the rules and following them strictly. This is a bit of Paul's autobiography from Philippians 3:4-6:

If someone else thinks they have reasons to put confidence in the flesh, I have more: 5 circumcised on the eighth day, of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews; in regard to the law, a Pharisee; 6 as for zeal, persecuting the church; as for righteousness based on the law, faultless.

The problem is that no one could follow all of the rules, all of the time perfectly. There is always a stray word, a stray action, even a stray thought of which we have lost control. In trying to get in good with a perfect God, its hard to be perfect all of the time, for Paul or for you. In religion there is lots of fear. What if I mess up? How much can I mess up before I'm out?

But Paul realized that it wasn't about knowing all the rules. It was about knowing Jesus, and having a relationship with him. More than anything else, God wants us to know him. Listen to the very next words Paul writes in Philippians 3:7-8:

7 But whatever were gains to me I now consider loss for the sake of Christ. 8 What is more, I consider everything a loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whose sake I have lost all things. I consider them garbage, that I may gain Christ.

Before, what mattered most to Paul was that everybody knew the rules, but after he experienced the grace of God through the love of Jesus, what mattered the most was that people knew the ruler. It's not about knowing the rules; it's about knowing the one who rules. Being a Christian isn't about what you know. It's about who you know. Being a Christian isn't about how good you are, it's about how close to Him you get. Being a Christian isn't about fear. It's about love. Christianity is about a relationship, not a religion.

IV. God's Grace and Jesus' Love Change How We Live Our Lives

Now this doesn't mean how we live doesn't matter. No! In fact, God's Grace and Jesus' love changes everything about our lives. It redefines why we live. In religion you change how you live so that you can know God. When you have a relationship with Jesus, Knowing God changes how you live. Christians live differently, not because we fear God if we break the rules. We live differently because God loves us and we love him. Impacting insight number four from the life of Paul is that God's grace and Jesus' love change how we live our lives.

Throughout his letters Paul wrote passionately about how knowing Jesus could transform your life. Instead of conforming to some outside list of rules, Paul wrote about being transformed by the renewing of our minds. He spoke of our lives blossoming with the fruit of the Spirit. He spoke of becoming a new creation in Christ Jesus.

Relationships change how you live. If you don't believe me just look at someone who falls in love and see how they act differently. When I first met and fell in love with Teresa, it changed all kinds of things in my life. It changed my thought life. I spent much of my waking hours thinking about her, how I could spend time with her. How I could make her happy. It changed my schedule. I got up earlier so I could see her at breakfast. I made sure to eat lunch at the same time. I learned her schedule, so I could be at the same places at the same time as her. It changed my behavior. It changed how I talked. It changed what I did. I began writing poems and buying little gifts, and began planning dates to spend time with her.

Now let me ask you this. Was I doing this, because I was following a list of rules? Did I have a manual that told me what to do and when to do it? Then why all of these changes in my life? Because I was in love.

It's that way with people. It's no different with God. When we love Jesus, it changes how we live.

Do you know Jesus that way? Do you love so that it just sort of bubbles over into your life? Or are you struggling to follow the rules? Do you struggle to do all of the do's and avoid all the don'ts, but fail in frustration again and again? Come meet the Jesus Paul knew. Come meet the Jesus that loves you right where you are.

(Begin the sermon with this skit)

Newscaster-

Good evening. I'm Ann Jyna, and this is the evening news. We have received breaking news just as we were about to come on air this evening. Several sources in the Middle East are reporting that terrorist and 9-11 mastermind Osama Bin Laden has renounced terrorism, rejected his Islamic faith and has converted to Christianity. For the latest word we go to our network correspondent Wolf Hickey. Wolf, what are the latest reports you are hearing.

Correspondent-

Thank you, Ann. The first reports appeared on Arab network Al Jazeera about one hour ago. Since then we have been receiving similar reports from reliable sources here in the middle East.

Apparently, this is the result of a sudden and unexplainable event, what one release calls a "conversion experience" that Osama had while traveling to a secret planning session of Al Qaeda. The purpose of this meeting was to plan further terrorist attacks against the United States and allies. However, Osama never showed for the meeting. Instead, several hostages have been released. In a taped message allegedly from Osama Bin Laden, He has renounced all terrorist activities, He has rejected Mohammed as a prophet of God, and has embraced Jesus Christ as the one true Son of God. He says that he will devote the rest of his life to trying to reach his former Muslim brothers with the love of Jesus Christ.

CIA analysts are trying to confirm the authenticity of this message. Osama's whereabouts are unknown, but word is that he has taken refuge with a group of underground Christians in central Pakistan. Several militant organizations including Al Qaeda, PLO and the Al-Aksa Martyr's Brigade have issued Fatwah's calling for Bin Laden's death. Also a Christian missions organization that smuggles missionaries and Christian material into the Middle East claims that Osama Bin Laden has indeed converted to Christianity as a result of a dramatic conversion experience, and that he has received Christian baptism and has begun training for Christian ministry. If all true this is indeed stunning news. Ann, back to you.

Newscaster-

Stunning indeed, Wolf. And there is this in a statement just released by Secretary of Defense, Donald Rumsfeld, "While the United States recognized the freedom of religion and conscience for all people, this does not change the objectives of the United States military in its continued search to bring Osama Bin Laden to justice. More on this story as it becomes available.

In other news, a group of monkeys have escaped from the local zoo and have broken into a local paint store. They are now wreaking havoc on the 800 block of East Wood street...