



# SERMON OF THE WEEK

## First Presbyterian Church of Honolulu at Ko'olau

### January 12, 2014

#### "An Amazing Conversion" (Book of Acts Series)

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**W**e continue to walk through the book of Acts to find lessons we can apply to our lives. This morning we are going to talk about the amazing conversion of the Apostle Paul, and by doing so we are going to look at what does it mean to even be converted.

Before I read the scripture for you for today's sermon, let me give you some background. The main character of this story is the Apostle Paul. How important is the Apostle Paul to Christianity? Big time! Paul was the chief church planter of the early church. As you know he took three missionary journeys around the Mediterranean area planting churches all over the place.

Second, he was the writer of most letters in the New Testament—12 of the 20 letters! He wrote letters, or what we know today as books in the New Testament: the books of Romans, 1 and 2 Corinthians, Galatians, Ephesians, Philippians, 1 and 2 Thessalonians, Titus, Philemon, 1 and 2 Timothy.

And because Paul thought through what faith means in practice and theory, he is also the chief theologian of the New Testament. He is the main man of Scripture. He is the Big Cheese. He is the Einstein, the brains of the faith. He is the architect of what to believe and how to live an authentic Christian life. In short, he is really, really, really important!

But at this point in his life in our text for today, Paul's name was Saul, not Paul, so don't get confused when I begin to read the Scripture passage. Let me tell you about this man named Saul, as Pastor Tim began to introduce us to him last week. And you will be amazed that God chose this guy, yes, this guy to be the chief church planter, writer of the New Testament, and chief theologian. And when you hear about this guy you might hear God saying, "Ha! This is brilliant! I bet they never expected that!"

Saul was the Apostle Paul's Hebrew name. He was a Hebrew but also a Roman citizen so he probably had two names in his youth. But during the Diaspora, the time when the entire Jewish population was exiled and dispersed from their homeland Judah, they often used their Greek names. Perhaps it was to blend in society and not wanting to be persecuted more and the names stuck when they came back to the homeland.

Saul was a religious man. He was trained by a man named Gamaliel, reportedly the finest scholar in the Jewish world at that time. Saul was also a Pharisee, an intellectual, and an interpreter of the Old Testament and Jewish law, and that is why his writings in the Bible are so good. He knew the Jewish laws and how Jesus Christ had transcended them.

Saul was an intense, driven man. He saw nothing wrong in killing Christians and destroying their churches. Isn't that the irony of Jesus' choice of the future chief church planter? How do we know that he

wasn't disguised as a church planter, and that underneath he was really a terrorist and conspirator to destroy faith fellowships and Christians?

Remember two months ago when we were studying Acts 7 and 8, we learned how the first Deacon Stephen was captured and stoned to death.

*Acts 7:58 Then they dragged him out of the city and began to stone him; and the witnesses laid their coats at the feet of a young man named Saul.*

*Acts 7:59 While they were stoning Stephen, he prayed, "Lord Jesus, receive my spirit."*

*Acts 7:60 Then he knelt down and cried out in a loud voice, "Lord, do not hold this sin against them." When he had said this, he died.*

*Acts 8:1 And Saul approved of their killing him. That day a severe persecution began against the church in Jerusalem, and all except the apostles were scattered throughout the countryside of Judea and Samaria.*

The fact that witnesses laid their coats at Saul's feet indicates that Saul was in a leadership position in killing Christians. The Bible even said he approved of killing Stephen. He might even have authorized it. But what is stunning is that before Stephen dies, the Bible says, "... he knelt down and cried out in a loud voice, 'Lord, do not hold this sin against them.' When he had said this, he died." (Acts 7:60)

**G**od answered that prayer, and from that prayer we see that God not only forgave Saul because of his repentance but also chose him to build God's church for thousands of years to come. It was a decade-long process before Saul was used by God as the church planter and theologian that he became.

After Saul converted and later began to use the name Paul to reach Gentiles, he stayed first in Arabia for several years and then moved back to Tarsus until Barnabas suggested him to the Antioch church, and then probably used those years to prayerfully study the Old Testament and to slowly sense that what he previously accepted as truth was not completely right without Christ in the picture.

And it all began with this incredible episode when Saul was converted. It's a story of not so much Saul choosing Jesus, but Jesus seeking him out and choosing him. Saul thought he was following God through rules and laws, but he did not know Jesus.

That's our challenge today, isn't it? We may think we know God by trying to follow rules or principles, but our faith doesn't really take off until we know Jesus, and have a personal relationship with Him.

Now we are ready to hear today's scripture.

*Acts 9:1 Meanwhile Saul, still breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord, went to the high priest*

*Acts 9:2 and asked him for letters to the synagogues at Damascus, so that if he found any who belonged to the Way, men or women, he might bring them bound to Jerusalem.*

*Acts 9:3 Now as he was going along and approaching Damascus, suddenly a light from heaven flashed around him.*

*Acts 9:4 He fell to the ground and heard a voice saying to him, "Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?"*

*Acts 9:5 He asked, "Who are you, Lord?" The reply came, "I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting.*

*Acts 9:6 But get up and enter the city, and you will be told what you are to do."*

*Acts 9:7 The men who were traveling with him stood speechless because they heard the voice but saw no one.*

*Acts 9:8 Saul got up from the ground, and though his eyes were open, he could see nothing; so they led him by the hand and brought him into Damascus.*

*Acts 9:9 For three days he was without sight, and neither ate nor drank.*

This is the Word of God. This is clearly one of the most dramatic conversions ever. It's stunning, surprising, cinematic, brilliant, and unexpected! One thing that is so amazing here is that Jesus Himself talks to Saul!

Two questions jump out at us from these verses I just read. First is the question that Saul asked: "Who are you, Lord?"

If we hear a voice coming out of nowhere talking to us, wouldn't it be natural for us to want to know who's talking? Saul adds the word *Lord* to his question "Who are you, Lord" because he quickly and instinctively realized this was a voice he needed to respect and that it was probably divine.

Some of the biggest decisions we will ever make in life involve asking who is our Master, who is our mate, and what is our mission.

First, who is our master? Is it Jesus? Can we say that it is for Jesus that I live and die? That it is for Jesus that everything—meaning my social life, my employment, my volunteer time, my raising a family, my spending of money—is all about Jesus?

Who is our mate? Meaning, if we are to get married, then choosing a mate is a tremendously important decision. And if not married, who are our mates, as the British would say. Who are our best friends? Very important decisions of whom we hang out with and trust.

And then third, what is our mission? Or what is our purpose in life?

There's a new movie out on Navy Seals, called *Lone Survivor*. Haven't seen it. But I have always admired Navy Seals and those special forces of other services – Green Berets, Rangers, Delta Force. But it's the highly trained Navy Seals who have been getting a lot of headlines because of the killing of Osama Bin Laden and the rescue of Captain Phillips from Somali pirates.

According to page 8 of the book *Lone Survivor*, the Navy Seals' central core of philosophy is this:

"I will never quit. I persevere and thrive on adversity. My Nation expects me to be physically harder and mentally stronger than my enemies. If knocked down, I will get back up, every time. I will draw on every remaining ounce of strength to protect my teammates and to accomplish our mission. I am never out of the fight." (*Luttrell, Marcus, Lone Survivor, Little, Brown and Co. 2009, p 8*)

Sounds like they are invincible. They vigorously train to be that way. Interestingly, years ago, we had a Navy Seal who led our middle school program.

**A**s tough as he was, he realized ultimately he needed a power greater than he, and for him it was Jesus Christ. His mission was to lead kids to Christ, who would be the ultimate wingman, the ultimate guide and leader. (And there are other Navy Seals in our church who have chosen to follow Christ.)

As tough or as self-made we think WE are, there is a bigger power in the universe. Can we submit ourselves to Jesus who is even tougher, wiser than us?

But how do we treat this Jesus, who is the God of the universe?

Now back to our passage. Jesus asks Saul, "Why do you persecute me?" Is it possible, feasible, conceivable that we might be also be persecuting Jesus? We might say no way! But is it possible that we have a blind spot?

We do know that Jesus once said in Matthew 25 that if you are UNKIND to the hungry, thirsty, the poor, the prison convict or the stranger, then you are not kind to Him. It's a form of persecuting Jesus.

To take it to another level, if we are not kind to our spouse, friends, employer, employee, then maybe we are persecuting Jesus. I mentioned this to elder Patti Marshall two days ago, and she said, "Maybe our prayers tonight would be simply that God would heighten our own awareness of where we have purposefully or inadvertently wounded another's spirit of heart. And then do something about it."

She said, "We just need to keep a short sheet and use these powerful words to call or write someone to say, 'I'm sorry, I was wrong, will you forgive me, I love you' as often as needed."

Jesus felt persecuted not because Saul was physically hurting him but because he was hurting His people, thereby, hurting Him. So Jesus appeared to Saul and said, "Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?"

The repetition of Saul's name indicates that this was really important to Jesus. It's like Jesus was saying, "Listen! This is important! Saul, Saul, you listening? You hurt my people, you hurt Me."

Now you might say, "Well, Jesus doesn't talk to me that way. That was just for Saul who became the Apostle Paul. He was special."

Do you remember in our Christmas Eve services when Peter Selvey got up and shared that during a time of when his marriage was not going well he said, "One day in a moment of great despair I cried out to God and said, 'Why me?'"

He said he heard God respond and say, "Peter, you are not living for me and your family is suffering because of this."

He said, "What changed in that moment was the darkness that was beginning to over take us. All of a sudden it was the light of Christ that lit a path toward joy and peace that has been the center of the Selvey family ever since."

And we see that time and time again in amazing conversions. I was just talking to someone the other day who said he was really into drugs, smoking, and drinking, but when Christ came into his life everything changed. He doesn't do those things any more. Yes, there are still temptations today, but his mission is so different now. He lives to serve Jesus in all that he does.

God may not talk to you that way, BUT he is still certainly talking that way today. I believe that God does talk

to us directly today – through friends, through the Bible, through a sermon, through a letter, thought a song or a thought. If we ask, listen, and watch, we'll find out that God is always talking to us. It's just that we may not have tuned our minds and souls to His frequency because either we're too busy, too rushed, too hurried or we're just not paying attention. With Saul, God cut through the busyness.

When Saul's conversion was complete, it turned out that Jesus' appearance to him was too much because it left him temporarily blind for three days after that.

Let me continue our Bible passage for this morning as it brings in a person named Ananias who is really important to Saul's story.

*Acts 9:10 Now there was a disciple in Damascus named Ananias. The Lord said to him in a vision, "Ananias." He answered, "Here I am, Lord."*

*Acts 9:11 The Lord said to him, "Get up and go to the street called Straight, and at the house of Judas look for a man of Tarsus named Saul. At this moment he is praying,*

*Acts 9:12 and he has seen in a vision a man named Ananias come in and lay his hands on him so that he might regain his sight."*

*Acts 9:13 But Ananias answered, "Lord, I have heard from many about this man, how much evil he has done to your saints in Jerusalem;*

*Acts 9:14 and here he has authority from the chief priests to bind all who invoke your name."*

*Acts 9:15 But the Lord said to him, "Go, for he is an instrument whom I have chosen to bring my name before Gentiles and kings and before the people of Israel;*

**A**cts 9:16 *I myself will show him how much he must suffer for the sake of my name."*

*Acts 9:17 So Ananias went and entered the house. He laid his hands on Saul and said, "Brother Saul, the Lord Jesus, who appeared to you on your way here, has sent me so that you may regain your sight and be filled with the Holy Spirit."*

*Acts 9:18 And immediately something like scales fell from his eyes, and his sight was restored. Then he got up and was baptized,*

*Acts 9:19 and after taking some food, he regained his strength. ¶ For several days he was with the disciples in Damascus,*

*Acts 9:20 and immediately he began to proclaim Jesus in the synagogues, saying, "He is the Son of God."*

Paul had found his Master and mission!

To back track a bit, when Jesus first appeared to Saul, the men Saul was with were left speechless, according to verse 7. Wasn't it like that for some of us? Some of us had friends who were left speechless when we converted to Christ. Your friends weren't much help if they were not followers of Christ. They saw nothing. Heard something but were mystified as you.

For three days Saul neither ate nor drank. He was stunned. Something was happening to him. His friends didn't know what was happening. And so he needed a godly person like Ananias to step into his life and help him sort things out. I am going to talk about Ananias and a man named Barnabas next Sunday. These encouragers are really important. I'm going to talk about the importance of encouragement next week.

But going back to Saul's conversion, it was after Ananias prayed for Saul that Saul got healed of his blindness and got filled with the Holy Spirit. The Bible says it was like scales falling off of Saul's eyes, and then he could see again. Then he was baptized and ate some food to regain his strength.

It's interesting that Jesus didn't zap Saul so he could become an instant follower. God used another believer, another follower to lead Saul to complete his conversion.

So, what's the take-away for us? First, is there someone we are persecuting? Do we need to stop persecuting, criticizing, judging that person and repent from it? For by hurting these people so we are hurting Jesus.

Second, Is this a time when we really need to think about our own lives in terms of who our Master is.

Third, do we believe Jesus is God? Or do we think we are God, and we are so Navy-Seal tough we don't need anyone else? Do we really know Jesus or are we just following empty rules? Believing He only exists is not enough. Is he our Lord?

Satan believes Jesus exists, but he hasn't chosen to follow Him as Lord. As the saying goes, believing that Jesus exists and going to church doesn't make us Christians any more than going into a garage makes us a car.

As we begin 2014, this is our time to really work on who our master is. Who are we really following? Who is really giving us the purpose and passion for our lives?

Forty-seven years ago on January 5th, almost to the day, I formally asked Christ to be my Lord and Master and I would dedicate my life to him. When I was a journalist on TV, I

wanted Him to be my focus in my job and my volunteer time. It continued when I was a filmmaker, and then as a leader of a non-profit, and then as a pastor.

For you, God may not be calling you to be a pastor, but He is asking if you would seek to allow Jesus to be your master and Lord in your family, job, or school.

We learn from Saul that he thought he knew God because he was religious, but he still needed Jesus. He had the education, but he still needed Jesus. He had a good position in society as a Pharisee, but he still needed Jesus.

You see, it's not going to church or doing charitable acts or being a good person that will save us. It's saying yes to Jesus who invites us to know Him, to believe in Him, to accept His forgiveness, to love Him, and to follow Him. The good works will automatically follow as a result of having that relationship with Jesus.

Some of you might say, I am not good enough to be a follower of Christ. Remember, Saul killed Christians! He terrorized the church. God loved him and forgave him nonetheless. There is nothing you could do that would be worse than what Saul did. God wants us all in His family. God wants us all to follow Him. God wants us all to stop persecuting Him by not following Him.

So let's take a moment of silence and really think through what we want to do in 2014 with Jesus. Let's pray.