

Serving God for a Lifetime:

True Conversion

1. Coming Face to Face with Our True Selves

- A. Saul's perception of himself as a rising Jewish star: raised under tutelage of Gamaliel (Ac 22:3); excelled his peers (Gal 1:14); strict constructionist (Pharisee – Ac 26:5; Ph 3:5); zealous in persecuting Christians (Ac 26:9-11; ripping apart families, imprisoning, voting for death, etc). In all this, Saul was conscientious (Ac 23:1; 24:16).
- B. *“Still breathing threats and murder”* (Ac 9:1), Paul goes to Damascus:
 - 1. Conversion account told three times in Acts (chs 9, 22, 26). A light, a voice, a question: *“Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting Me?”* (Ac 9:4).
 - 2. Saul asks, *“Who are You, Lord?”* (9:5). What an answer! *“I am Jesus ...”*.
 - 3. What Paul learned in that very hour changed his life and history of world.
- C. He was blind, but Paul “saw” for the first time:
 - 1. **What sin truly was.** He realized its vileness like no Jewish sacrifice or temple service could have ever shown him.
 - 2. **What he truly was.** He was no longer a hero and defender of Judaism but “the chief of sinners” (1 Tim 1:15). He became not merely an apostle but *“the least of the apostles, who am not worthy to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God”* (1Cor 15:9).
 - 3. **Who Jesus truly was.** The Jesus whom he despised God had made both Lord and Christ. And while Paul may have been *somebody* before man, he was insignificant and fragile before God.

2. Paul: An Example of True Conversion

- A. When Paul came to see himself as he truly was before God, this was the beginning of his *true conversion*.
 - 1. Conversion involves a change of heart, thinking: Ac 28:27 (Jesus quoted in Mt 13:14-15).
 - 2. The word *epistrepho* means to turn around, turn towards. **Negative illustration:** John Walker turns *from* Judeo-Christian principles *to* radical Islam.

3. Relative to spiritual turning, cf. Lk 17:4. A sinning brother can genuinely turn seven times in a day (i.e., indefinitely). Such turning is not merely a *ritual* but a genuine submission of the *will*.
- B. Conversion involves a change of *relationship*. When Paul's relationship with God changed, so did his relationship to the Gentiles: (Ac 26:18 – he was commissioned “to turn them from darkness to light ...”).
- C. True conversion is more than sorrow; it is a new orientation that leads to changed behavior. Ac 9:20-22 – “Immediately he preached the Christ ...”.

3. Paul: An Example of God's Forgiveness

- A. The power of guilt and the pain of an offended conscience can be overwhelming. Some never become Christians because they feel too sinful to be forgiven.
- B. But the forgiveness of Paul is a lesson for all time: 1 Tim 1:12-17.
 1. Paul was a blasphemer, persecutor and insolent (*hubristes*, arrogant unto retaliation or retribution). He was “in your face”; you didn't want to mess with him.
 2. But God's grace was “*exceedingly abundant*.” There is no sin that God cannot or will not forgive (“*He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness*” - 1 Jn 1:9). People worry about committing the “unpardonable sin,” but such anxiety indicates that they haven't done so.
 3. Jesus came into the world to *save sinners*! If God wanted to destroy sinners, He could have done that long ago. Paul demonstrates God's longsuffering; he is a “*pattern to those who are going to believe*.”
- C. God had a purpose for Christianity's greatest enemy, for within Paul lay qualities and characteristics that God could use. Anybody can grieve themselves into hell, but Paul worked to save himself and others. **God can use you!** All He is waiting for is for us to turn to Him (see short story “Remember the Duck?” at the end of the outline).

Observations:

1. Somewhere in between the charismatic enthronement of emotionalism and the stoic and lifeless worship of many churches of Christ lies genuine, deep happiness in salvation and fellowship with God.
 - a. The first Christians “*at their food with gladness and simplicity of heart*” (Ac 2:46).
 - b. The treasurer continued his arduous journey back to Ethiopia and a changed life rejoicing as he went (Ac 8:39).

c. Rom 5:1-3, 11; 15:13 – Paul emphasizes joy in believing even in the midst of heart of Roman decadence and political treachery.

2. When we truly understand the vileness and ugliness of sin, and when we realize that God raises us from such a life to fellowship with Him, **then** we will find the strength of will to live for God. ***Every Christian life starts here!***

Remember the Duck?

Little Johnny was visiting his grandparents on their farm. His grandfather gave him a slingshot to play with in the woods, but no matter how much he practiced, Johnny never could hit his target. Discouraged at his poor marksmanship, the boy headed back to dinner. Nearing the house, he saw his grandmother's pet duck waddling across the yard. On impulse, he pulled on his slingshot, let the missile fly and hit the duck square in the head. In grief and panic, the boy hid the dead duck in the woodpile. As Johnny covered his tracks, he noticed his sister Sally who had witnessed the whole horrible event. Sally said nothing.

After lunch that day, Grandma said, "Sally, let's wash the dishes." But Sally replied, "Grandma, Johnny told me he wanted to help in the kitchen." Then she whispered to Johnny, "Remember the duck?" So Johnny did the dishes.

Later that day, Grandpa asked if the children wanted to go fishing. Grandma said, "I'm sorry, but I need Sally to help make supper." But Sally just smiled and said, "Oh, Johnny offered to help with supper." She smiled, winked at Johnny and whispered, "Remember the duck?" So Sally went fishing and Johnny stayed to help Grandma.

After several days of Johnny doing both his chores and Sally's, he finally couldn't stand it any longer. Weeping, he came to his grandmother and told her that he had accidentally killed the duck. Grandma knelt down, embraced him and said, "Sweetheart, I know what happened. You see, I was standing at the window and I saw the whole thing. I forgive you. But I was just wondering how long you would let Sally make a slave of you." (From Central Church of Christ bulletin, New Smyrna Beach, FL, and edited by Jim Jonas)

Moral: Don't let Satan keep throwing up the past in your face. Whatever you have done in your life, God has already seen it. All He wants is for you to take responsibility for it, acknowledge it and turn from it. So often we unnecessarily let Satan dominate us through our guilt while God is just anxiously hoping that we will return to Him.