

"Amazing Conversion"

Although it doesn't seem to be getting much media coverage, this year is the 500th anniversary from the year when Martin Luther posted his Ninety-five Theses on the door of the Wittenberg Church. Martin Luther; does the name sound familiar? You may remember hearing his name in history class.

In the beginning of the 16th century, the church at the time sold what is known as indulgences, and the people were taught that their sins will be forgiven if they purchase these indulgences. Unfortunately the church had become corrupted and it was a very dark period. But it was during such times when Luther read a certain letter which filled his heart with a burning passion. In a period of spiritual darkness, this letter shined a light on Luther's heart and gave him an unwavering conviction. At a time when the church was being corrupted by its abusive use of indulgences, Luther made it clear that salvation does not come through the purchase of indulgences, but through faith in God. It was with this renewed conviction that Luther posted his Ninety-five Theses on the door of the Wittenberg Church on October of 1517, and this event greatly advanced what is known today as the Protestant Reformation. And this letter which led Luther to the truth that salvation is "by faith alone", was a letter written by Paul which is found in our Bible, the Letter to the Romans.

On May 24, 1738, around 200 years from the time of Luther, a certain preacher was in London. That night, though he was feeling depressed, he "went very unwillingly" to a service at a local church. It was about a quarter before nine, and someone was reading Luther's Preface to the Epistle to the Romans. And as they read from the portion where Luther describes what true faith is and that justification comes through faith alone, this preacher, John Wesley, felt a strange feeling in his heart. Wesley recounted this experience and wrote:

"I felt my heart strangely warmed. I felt I did trust in Christ, Christ alone for salvation, and an assurance was given me that he had taken away my sins, even mine, and saved me from the law of sin and death." This event was a great turning point for Wesley, and in 18th century England where they had become spiritually stagnated, he brought about a great revival. Wesley began what is know today as the Methodist movement, and our church is one of many churches that have its roots in the Methodist movement. Remember that even when you attend a service unwillingly and with a heavy heart, the Holy Spirit is still at work.

Both of these leaders were greatly inspired by a letter, and because of this letter they were able to be great inspirations themselves and changed the course of human history. This letter was none other than the Letter to the Romans. During the past couple of months, we learned from the mistakes of several Biblical figures through our sermon series titled "Life's Crisis Management", but starting today I would like to begin a series of messages on the Letter to the Romans. Today we will begin our journey into this mountain made up of 16 chapters. I am confident that we will make amazing discoveries along the way. Today, we will start by examining the beginning verses of the first chapter of Romans.

Here we first find a sentence where Paul, the author of Romans, gives us a description of himself. This letter was written by Paul in 59 AD in the city of Corinth and was addressed to the Christians living in Rome. In those days Rome was considered the capital of the world, and there were already people there who lived by the teachings of Christ. Paul begins by introducing himself to the recipients of his letter:

"1 Paul, a servant of Christ Jesus, called to be an apostle and set apart for the gospel of God— 2 the gospel he promised beforehand through his prophets in the Holy Scriptures 3 regarding his Son, who as to his earthly life was a descendant of David, 4 and who through the Spirit of holiness was appointed the Son of God in power by his resurrection from the dead: Jesus Christ our Lord" (Romans 1:1-4).

Paul is an essential figure within Christianity. Although he was not one of the Twelve Disciples, when we look at his life and work, there is no question that he was indeed set apart for the gospel of God. In the Book of Acts, an account is written about Paul when he was still known by the name Saul:

"1 Meanwhile, Saul was still breathing out murderous threats against the Lord's disciples. He went to the high priest 2 and asked him for letters to the synagogues in Damascus, so that if he found any there who belonged to the Way, whether men or women, he might take them as prisoners to Jerusalem. 3 As he neared Damascus on his journey, suddenly a light from heaven flashed around him. 4 He fell to the ground and heard a voice say to him, "Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?"

5 "Who are you, Lord?" Saul asked.

"I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting," he replied. 6 "Now get up and go into the city,

and you will be told what you must do."

7 The men traveling with Saul stood there speechless; they heard the sound but did not see anyone. 8 Saul got up from the ground, but when he opened his eyes he could see nothing. So they led him by the hand into Damascus. 9 For three days he was blind, and did not eat or drink anything" (Acts 9:1-9).

Today, we cannot take our eyes off of the Arab States. Here it is written that Paul was breathing out murderous threats against Christians as he headed to Damascus to take the Christians there as prisoners to Jerusalem, and the Damascus written here is the same Damascus in Syria today, and Paul's conversion took place as he was heading to this city that is drawing the world's attention right now. And it is written that this man Paul, without whom what we know today as Christianity would have not existed, was known for persecuting and breathing murderous threats against Christians.

The writer Philip Yancey gives us a modern day description of how Paul was before his conversion:

"I get mailings from Amnesty International, and as I look at their photos of men and women who have been beaten and cattle-prodded and jabbed and spit on and electrocuted, I ask myself, "What kind of human being could do that to another human being?" Then, I read the book of Acts and meet the kind of person who could do such a thing, now an apostle of grace, a servant of Jesus Christ, the greatest missionary history has ever known".

It was after Jesus was crucified, buried, and showed His resurrected self to the disciples, when Paul appeared on the scene and began relentlessly persecuting and threatening anybody that belonged to the Way, rounding up men and women alike, and he was heading to Damascus to capture the believers and bring them back to Jerusalem as prisoners. As Philip Yancey wrote, the things Paul was doing at the time would be condemned by human rights organizations today.

So what kind of person was Paul anyway? In Philippians 3, Paul wrote the following description of himself, saying that he was "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" (Philippians 3:5-6).

Here he gives us his track record and states that he is a pure Hebrew and that as a Pharisee, he studied the Scriptures more than anyone else and have followed its decrees faultlessly. The Pharisees were known during those days for their strict obedience to every word of the law. The word Pharisee means "set apart", and the main concern of these Pharisees was on how they can remain pure and keep themselves from coming in contact with anything unclean.

The Pharisees were fervent in their obedience to the law. Paul says that in this he was faultless. I believe he was not lying when he said this. We can assume that he really was perfect in his discipline as a Pharisee. And he considered everybody who didn't follow or had no knowledge of the law as a sinner and looked down on them with scorn.

It also says in Acts 22:3 that as a Pharisee, Paul studied under Gamaliel. Gamaliel was a leading authority among the Pharisees at the time. Paul must have been at the top of his class, as we see in his expert knowledge of the law and his passion in obeying it. And this passion led him to become a fervent persecutor of the followers of Jesus Christ. In this way his passion was misguided.

Paul must have heard from his fellow Jews and from the Christians about the character and teachings of Jesus. But hearing their testimony about Jesus must have only fueled his animosity towards Christ and deepened his suspicion toward Jesus' followers who he viewed as a bunch of con men.

He heard how a teacher named Jesus had been crucified recently. He heard that the disciples are claiming that this Jesus has risen from the dead. But according to the law he lived by, "anyone who is hung on a pole is under God's curse" (Deuteronomy 21:23). He must have thought that these people who believe in this Messiah that rose from the dead after being hung on a tree must be a group of maniacs and a threat that must be eradicated. Because of this, Paul was determined to get rid of these believers.

One day Paul visited Jerusalem and he had an unforgettable experience near a place that is known today as St. Stephen's Gate in Jerusalem's Old City. There he witnessed the death of Stephen. Stephen was a Christian. In chapter 6 of Acts, we read how Stephen was put on trial for his faith by the Sanhedrin: "9 Opposition arose, however, from members of the Synagogue of the Freedmen (as it was called)—Jews of Cyrene and Alexandria as well as the provinces of Cilicia and Asia—who began to argue with Stephen. 10 But they could not stand up against the wisdom the Spirit gave him as he spoke" (Acts 6:9-10).

Stephen was filled by the Holy Spirit and delivered an extraordinary speech before the Sanhedrin. He spoke of how God had always guided the Jewish people throughout their history, and how they had continued to be disobedient and stubborn toward God. When they heard this, they became furious, gnashed their teeth and rushed at him, and they dragged him out of the city and began stoning him. While the stones struck his head and body, as he bled and began losing consciousness, Stephen kept praying. Then he fell to his knees and cried out "Lord, do not hold this sin against them" (Acts 7:60).

At that moment, the people took off their coats as they got ready to stone Stephen. And it is recorded here that they "laid their coats at the feet of a young man named Saul" (Acts 7:58). In other words, Paul willingly volunteered to watch over their coats so they could stone Stephen without interruption.

As a result of this, Stephen became a martyr. Paul was watching the whole time as Stephen was being stoned to death. Stephen's unwavering testimony as a follower of Christ must have irritated Paul. He too must have desired that Stephen will be stoned to death. But there was something about Stephen that he could not comprehend. He couldn't understand why Stephen's face "was like the face of an angel" (Acts 6:15) and why Stephen cried out "Lord, do hold this sin against them" (Acts 7:60) as he was being stoned.

Stephen's words and attitude was something Paul didn't find within himself. As a Pharisee, he had gained knowledge and respect. He has diligently obeyed the law. But he didn't have the light that illuminated Stephen as he was being stoned, and did he have the heart to pray for the forgiveness of those who persecuted him. He had heard somewhere that Stephen's prayer was modeled after the prayer of Jesus, who prayed as He was on the cross, "Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing". After witnessing the death of Stephen, Paul must have replayed that scene in his head over and over.

Even as the memory of that event still lingered in his mind, he continued to breathe murderous threats and was determined to capture the Christians. But as he hurried along his way and came near Damascus, suddenly a light from heaven flashed around him and he fell to the ground. And he heard a voice say to him, "Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?"

Paul asked "Who are you, Lord?" and the voice replied, "I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting". It is written that those who were with him stood speechless and heard the voice but did not see anyone. And for three days Paul was blind and did not eat or drink.

This miraculous event became the great turning point of Paul's life. In religious jargon this was his "conversion". When he wrote in the beginning of Romans that he is "a servant of Christ Jesus, called to be an apostle and set apart for the gospel of God", Paul must have remembered that day when he was called to be an apostle of Christ, that moment when he was set apart for the gospel of God.

The Bible tells us that Paul spent the next three years in the desert of Arabia. We find no record in the Bible of what went on during those years, but it is said that he spent time relearning the Scriptures which he had studied his entire life and discovered how it all related to Jesus Christ. We see him confirm this truth in beginning of Romans where he wrote of the gospel as "2 the gospel he promised beforehand through his prophets in the Holy Scriptures 3 regarding his Son, who as to his earthly life was a descendant of David, 4 and who through the Spirit of holiness was appointed the Son of God in power by his resurrection from the dead: Jesus Christ our Lord" (Roman 1:2-4). In the desert, he spent days and nights thoroughly examining the Bible and became fully convinced that this gospel had been promised beforehand in the Scriptures, and that it was all pointing to Jesus Christ.

Through his conversion and the days he spent in the desert, he was given the conviction that the Jesus whom he once persecuted is indeed the Son of God. As the law stated "anyone who is hung on a pole is under God's curse" (Deuteronomy 21:23), Paul once viewed the cross of Jesus as something unclean, cursed, and a thing to be despised. But he discovered that the cross is not a "symbol of God's curse" but a "symbol of God's love", of the love of Christ who gave His life for the forgiveness of sins.

There may be some of you here today who are studying very hard about Christianity. You may be reading different books to find out if Jesus is the real deal. But I believe none of us have examined the person of Jesus Christ more thoroughly than Paul. He was a hard-core Pharisee, a Hebrew of Hebrews, and had a perfect knowledge of the law and the history of Israel. And as Paul examined all the evidence of how God worked throughout the history of Israel, from the creation of the heavens and earth up until his time, he reached the conclusion that Jesus Christ is indeed the Son of God and the Messiah.

When Paul came to know the meaning of Jesus' cross, he was also given a new perspective of himself. He once believed that the righteous are those who live by the teachings of the Pharisees, but his understanding changed and he later wrote in Romans 3:10 that "There is no one righteous, not even one". He used to consider himself righteous, but later he referred to himself as the worst of sinners (1 Timothy 1:15). His self-awareness had been completely changed. As we see in Paul, only when we draw closer to God and are illuminated by His light can we see our true selves. We cannot see our true selves under the artificial lights that we humans create. The only thing we would see through those lights would be the imperfections of others.

Paul realized how inadequate, petty, and unholy he was, and that while he claimed to serve God, he was only placing himself on God's throne. No matter how intelligent he was, no matter how many debates he could win or how eloquently he could pray, he realized that these things were worthless compared to the worth of knowing Jesus Christ.

When Paul saw how arrogant he had been before God, he finally understood that Jesus died on the cross to save a sinner like him, and as he saw his own sinfulness, he came to know the depth of Christ's love and forgiveness. This man who was once a leading persecutor of Christians made a 180 degree turn and became a leading evangelist for Christ.

I presume that there is no one here this morning who came here to round us up and take us as prisoners. It is also very unlikely that as you head home after this service, you will be stopped on the freeway by a sudden flash of light from heaven. This kind of miraculous conversion rarely happens.

But as we reflect upon Paul's conversion, we are reminded that there is really only one type of sin. That is the sin of placing your own righteousness above God. Before his conversion, Paul lived believing that he was blameless before God. But after the light of Christ flashed around him and he was blinded and could not go anywhere without someone's help, he must have thought to himself, "how powerless and yet arrogant I had been before God". The things he had been doing with conviction was actually against the will of God. He realized this, and this realization led to his conversion.

Earlier we read the list of things Paul once put his confidence in. In that list he tells us that he was "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" (Philippians 3:5-6). These were the things Paul were proud of before his conversion.

But after he met Christ, a big change happened in his heart and he wrote about this in the verses that follow: "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 9 and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which is through faith in Christ—the righteousness that comes from God on the basis of faith" (Philippians 3:7-9).

Paul used to put his confidence in his own knowledge and strength. But from the moment Christ spoke to him on the way to Damascus, his heart had been changed. He realized the surpassing worth of knowing Jesus, and that it was worth losing everything in order to gain Christ and be found in Him.

We have a phrase in Japanese called "ichi-go ichi-e" which teaches us that each encounter we have with a person is a once-in-a-lifetime encounter. Our lives are greatly influenced by the people we meet. But there is no greater encounter than an encounter with Jesus Christ. The love of God that turned a persecutor of the church into an evangelist who dedicated his life to telling people about Jesus, that same love is being offered to us today. My hope and prayer is that today will be the day you meet