

Conversion

Rev, John Allen

This is the story of how arguably the most influential Christian in history became a Christian.

Paul would come to write nearly half of the books that we now know as part of the New Testament, his letters to the Romans, Corinthians, Galatians, Ephesians, and others gave language to the core of Christian identity and faith.

It is easy to forget, that Paul did not come to Christianity as an indifferent seeker, or a curious commoner.

He was the world's foremost persecutor of Jesus' followers.

Saul, as he was known then, traveled the known world under orders to find followers of Jesus, arrest them, and bring them back to

Jerusalem to stand trial, and in many cases meet the same fate as their Lord.

Paul's conversion is about as dramatic a change as one could imagine.

Struck from his horse by a blinding flash of light, he hears Christ's voice calling him to a new beginning.

And when he stands up, he has been blinded.

This blindness lingers for three days. Imagine. He wasn't just out running an errand around the corner, he was on a rural road in the wilderness miles from the city.

His companions had to lead him by the hand, over rough ground.

Picking him up when he tripped.

Undoubtedly slowed by his newly uncertain steps.

I imagine a man, so unsure of what is in front of him, so unaccustomed to living without his sense of sight, that he walks the rest of the way to Damascus, with his hands out, in fear.

—

Have you ever had a moment in your life that felt like that? Where everything that you had counted on, everything you had taken for granted, fell away? Where each next step felt newly perilous?

Or have you ever had a moment in your life where you were met with a realization, where you awoke to something that you could not believe you had missed before.

It may have happened in an instant. But sometimes it also comes upon us over time. Not a flash of light, so much as a dawning.

These are moments of conversion. Moments where something old passes away and someone new comes into being.

The word conversion gets used, in my mind, in too narrow a way. We tend to associate it just with a change of religions. We speak of someone converting to Catholicism or Judaism.

But conversion really is any time in your life of transformation and great change. One where your priorities reorder in a dramatic way that changes the way you live.

Some of us have been converted into parents.

Others have converted into care-takers of our parents.

Some of us have converted into activists.

Some of us have converted into recovery.

Our lives are full of conversions. Moments where things... change.

—

There was a man in Damascus named Ananias.

Saul had never heard of him, but Ananias had sure heard of Saul.

So imagine Ananias' surprise with Christ came calling to say, go and lay your hands on Saul, he is the instrument I have chosen to build my church.

Ananias was right to be wary, he had likely lost friends to this man's violence. But, he mustered the faith and courage to receive him as a new brother into the circle of Christ's followers.

When Ananias laid his hands on Paul, something that looked like scales fell from his eyes, and he opened his eyes for the first time upon his new life.

—

So here is a question: what changed Saul into Paul? What is the source of his conversion from a perpetrator of violence into a co-conspirator with the prince of peace?

There is the obvious answer. The flash of light. The voice from heaven. I don't discount that. It obviously made an impression. But any one of us can explain away what happens in a few seconds, no matter how strange they were.

I actually think that most of his conversion took place over the next three days.

When this man who was used to being the master of his, and other's, fates, instead had to rely wholly on others just to keep him alive.

I think that Paul was converted as he stumbled down that dusty road and maybe for the first time felt the truth of how fragile he truly was.

And I think that for certain, he was converted, when a man *knew* the danger, believed in this Jesus so strongly, trusted God so completely, that he came to place his hands upon Saul's weary head and heal him.

—

Paul was converted when he encountered Christ.

But he did not only see Christ in a flash of light.

He felt Christ in the steady hand of a traveling companion, who wouldn't leave him behind.

And he surely met Christ when one of these Christians, who he had hunted across the empire, came to him in his most vulnerable

moment, with a gentle healing touch, and the refreshment of baptismal waters welcoming him to new life.

—

Our society is undergoing a conversation right now.

As we carefully and slowly emerge from a lockdown that disrupted every one of our lives, we cannot help but be transformed.

I notice that we seem more able to find our common humanity. That we seem more able to hear the voices of those who have been crying out for justice for generations, and we are learning to add our voices to the call, and our lives to the struggle.

Most of us found out that there were plenty of extraneous things in our lives that we actually didn't miss. We are all getting this chance to step out into this new normal and really move toward those things that are truly the most important in life.

I have found for myself a clarity of purpose that feels like a new beginning.

Maybe you once thought that the world would be saved in something like a flash of light. That it would take something almost miraculous and out of the blue to heal this hurting world.

Or maybe you had given up hope of anything like that happening.

What if what we really needed was to stumble nearly helplessly through a crisis that robbed us of all our bearings.

What if what we really needed was a moment that laid bare the truth of how connected we are, and how very little any of us really can control.

What if, what we really needed, was this stretch of disorientation, to shake off what has been, and prepare to take on something new?

What if we have needed something like a blinded walk down the Damascus Road?

And even still....

What if we have needed to encounter Ananias.

What if this moment is bidding us to look across familiar battle lines and see siblings where once we saw strangers or even foes?

What if this moment is demanding that we penitently put our very lives into the hands of those we have hurt?

What if this time, repentance will be honest enough, conversion complete enough, that we truly can greet each other as siblings.

The realization is the easy part. The rest is the true work of conversion. It is growing familiar with disorientation. It is surrender. It is repentance. It is a willingness to open our eyes, as if for the first time, and believe what we are shown.

I know we would all be a lot more comfortable if conversion skipped these parts. If it was just a flash of light, and a new life.

But that's never how it has worked.

The good news is that we are now being given a chance.

If we are willing to do the hard part... A genuine opportunity for transformation.

I hope we will take it. I think we will.