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**EQUIPPING THE SAINTS: 1. NEW EYES FOR OLD**  
Acts 9:1-22 (The Conversion of Saul)  
Psalm 30  

How did you come to know Jesus Christ? Who shared the gospel with you and helped lead you to faith in Jesus Christ as your personal Lord and Savior?

Some of you have had conversion experiences as dramatic as Saul’s conversion on the road to Damascus. Your conversion to Christ was sudden and dramatic and emotional. You can still tell us how bad you were before you met God; how you experienced God’s salvation; where and when you accepted Christ into your hearts. Others of you did not have a sudden conversion, but rather, experienced a gradual coming to faith, a confirmation of what you had known and felt for years. Your life changing faith experience was more a confident reassurance. Such commitments are just as real, just as valid, as are dramatic conversions.

I walked forward at a Billy Graham crusade and committed my life to Christ when I was a boy, but it was not a conversion from a heathen lifestyle to a brand new Christian life I’d not known before. Rather, it was a confirmation of what my Presbyterian parents, Sunday School teachers, and preacher had long since shared with me — that God loved me and had saved me and had a plan for my life. I felt the tug of God inviting me to accept what God offered me in Jesus my Lord. I decided it was time to claim that for myself and I walked forward and committed my life to Christ. I soon joined our Presbyterian church by confirmation class.

I have had many spiritual renewal experiences — I sensed God’s call to ministry when I was in High School and active in Young Life; in Montreat at a youth conference, I knelt on the floor of Anderson Auditorium with some of my friends and rededicated my life to God. At several men’s evangelistic conferences I attended with members of the church I served in Tennessee, at every conference I accompanied men who needed courage to walk down on the field and kneel for prayer as they dedicated themselves to God. Some of those guys accepted Christ as their Lord for the first time in their lives and I watched them come alive in Christ — something previously unknown to them! It’s wonderful!

Both conversion and rededication experiences are real, and valid, and marvelous! How wonderful when ANYONE responds to God’s movement in their lives. Our experiences vary. No single conversion experience is the one pattern for all others. But every authentic conversion produces change and affirms the power of God to alter human lives no matter their situation or circumstances.

**LET’S LOOK AT THE STORY OF SAUL**

Saved by God, Saul no longer persecuted the church, he prospered the church! As Paul, he became the great missionary for Christ; he traveled the Mediterranean world proclaiming his
Christian faith. He bridged the gap between Gentile and Jew; he established and strengthened Christian churches; he wrote 14 of the 27 books in our New Testament, he outlined Christian theology, and gave Christianity standing in the Roman world.

God struck Saul blind on the Damascus Road, drove him to his knees. Why? To punish Saul? To destroy him? No! No, God comes to this self-righteous, murderous, man to give him a new start, a new life. God blinds Saul in order to help him see like he’s never seen before. Saul came to see who Jesus really is, came to see God as he never saw God before; came to see God’s will; came to see Saul’s part in God’s master plan.

All of us have a part in God’s plan, a place in God’s kingdom. All of us have a part in Trinity Presbyterian Church’s life and service.

My sermons the next few weeks are galvanized to the core belief in the priesthood of all believers; the Protestant doctrine that all believers are gifted for the work of God’s kingdom. We have different gifts and different talents, different personalities, different experiences, different approaches, but we all have something to share with the church and God’s people. As ministers, Anghaarad and I have special callings and training, leadership roles and skills, but you, the members, have enormous talents and ideas, impressions and circles of influence, through which God is already at work! What is God calling you to be and to do? Please join us August 14-16, 2015 for Equipping the Saints, our weekend of spiritual renewal and discernment and training!

ANANIAS’ STORY

As much as Acts 9 is the story of Paul, it’s also a story about Ananias. As much as the church owes its success to Paul, we also owe Paul to the ministry of Ananias, a layman!

Imagine Ananias’ wonder when God told him that he must go and help Saul! Folks knew about Saul, this monstrous man who has come to arrest and kill Christians. Just hearing on the streets, “Saul is in town,” made people shudder. Ananias may have approached Saul with trepidation, but then realizing Saul’s blindness, he might have seized the advantage, berating Saul, tormenting him like a defenseless caged animal. But no; his first words were, “Brother Saul.”

What a welcome into Christian fellowship! It was a sublime example of Christian love. Ananias affirmed that it was indeed Jesus Christ who confronted Paul on the road, that God had heard Paul’s prayers and now had brought Ananias to him to help him regain his sight. When the scales fell from Paul’s eyes, Paul did not see a bitter enemy, but a new brother in Christ. In the words of Psalm 30, “My God, I cried to Thee for help and Thou didst heal me; Weeping may last for the night, but a shout of Joy comes in the morning!”

OUR STORY

Who did God use in your life to bring you to Christ? Who might God bring to Christ through
YOU? God can change your life, do you believe it? God radically changed Paul’s life, for the better, and God can do that for you! How? By encountering Jesus and allowing him to give us a new nature. Saul met Jesus and found a freedom he had never before known. God can change your human nature. Many of you can testify to the changes God has made in your life. He’s changed your attitudes, your motivations, your habits, your outlook, He restored your hope, healed old hurts, brought renewal, gave you a new start. It is like getting new eyes for old.

THE CHANGE IN SAUL WAS A MIRACLE OF GRACE. Saul had tried to please God through rigid obedience to the law -- and he remained frustrated and depressed; the demands of the law were too much. He couldn’t prove himself good enough to earn God’s acceptance. I wonder if Saul didn’t envy the very Christians he persecuted! They courageously accepted the suffering and death his persecution caused them! Saul remembered Stephen’s death. Saul had voted to kill Stephen for his blasphemy and heresy, preaching God’s forgiveness and new life shown in the resurrection of Jesus Christ and then Paul held the coats of the men who pummeled Stephen to death with rocks and bricks. Even as the bricks hit Stephen, Saul heard Stephen pray "Lord Jesus receive my spirit ...Do not hold this sin against them." (Acts 7:59-60). How could a bad man die such a good death? Who could pray like that? What was it these Christians had that Saul did not have? They had the love of Christ in their hearts. They did not have a religion, they had a relationship… with God…through Jesus Christ!

Now it was Saul who lay in the dirt, scared, bruised by the rocks of the Damascus highway. A voice asked, "Saul, why are you persecuting me?" In that moment Saul encountered Jesus, and his life was changed. Saul did not enter Damascus as the raging lion, but as a helpless kitten, blind, led by the hand, humble before the risen Lord Jesus.

William Barclay says the essence of all Christianity is in what Christ said to Paul, "Go into the city, and you will be told what to do." Up to this moment Paul had been doing what HE liked, what HE wanted, what HE thought best, what HIS will dictated. From this time forward he would follow the One who told him what to do. A Christian is a person who has stopped doing what he/she wants to do and who has begun to do what Christ wants him/her to do (Barclay, 71). Paul received new eyes for old.

Likewise, we, with the cataracts of sin removed from our eyes, we now see things clearly.

NEW EYES SEE JESUS ARIGHT. Paul no longer saw Jesus as an imposter; now he knew Jesus as Savior. Paul no longer saw Jesus as a despised Nazarene, a hick teacher of heretical doctrine. Paul knew Jesus as the Lord of truth who spoke with authority. If you know Jesus as your personal Lord and Savior, no one can take that away from you! The smartest skeptic who tries to ridicule Christianity is no match for the simplest person with a personal relationship with Jesus Christ!

NEW EYES SEE SIN IN A DIFFERENT LIGHT. No longer is sin simply breaking the rules. Sin is an ugly, repulsive disease. Under sin’s control, we repudiate love, we ignore God, we live
as we darn well please. The Bible warns us that sin distorts our conscience, clouds our judgment, weakens our will until we self-destruct. The last few Sundays we explored King David’s sinful downfall and the terrible consequences of his sin with Bathsheba and how God then used David’s repentance for the good of his people, restoring David and his nation. Paul hated his past sins; he battled temptation and the thorn in his side everyday and rejoiced endlessly because of God's strong hand upon his life. Our closeness to Christ Jesus sensitizes us to sin and enables us to resist its power over us.

NEW EYES SEE PEOPLE IN A DIFFERENT LIGHT. Paul wrote to the Corinthians "From now on we recognize no one according to the flesh; if anyone is in Christ, he/she is anew creation." (2 Cor. 5:16,17). Every person around you in this room is a brother or a sister for whom Jesus died. God forbids we abuse or misuse people. Though we ignore people or belittle them, make fun of them, or hate them; even still God loves them. We who have been saved by God's love must reflect that love. We who are converted by Jesus can now look at people through His eyes and see their worth. Christ requires that we accept and treat with respect every person we meet. Ephesians 2:14-16 states, “He who tore down the dividing walls wills one humanity."

NEW EYES SEE THE CHURCH IN A DIFFERENT LIGHT. If you love Jesus, you want to be a part of the church, his body. You may not like all parts of church life and you may disagree with church stances and actions, but you need church fellowship. It’s hard to be a Lone Ranger Christian. You need other people and others need you. You need mentors.

The Church is a fellowship of redeemed sinners and you can find nurture and strength here. You can also find here your ministry for the Lord. Commitment to Christ leads to service to others in and out of the church. We seek to be a church that can help you to become increasingly useful for Christ. At Equipping the Saints and throughout this Fall we will explore together what God calls us to be and to do, and how you may discover how and where you may minister to others to the glory of Jesus Christ your Lord. You will hear more about that in the next few Sundays.

WHEN JESUS GIVES YOU NEW EYES AND A NEW HEART YOU WILL DISCOVER JOY IN YOUR LIFE! When my older sister, Sheree, got reading glasses and put them on for the first time, she was amazed that she could see mortar joints between bricks in the buildings around us. She had just seen solid color walls before. With new glasses she could distinguish leaves on the trees, not just blobs of green. She could read road signs at a distance. Colors became vibrant! Everywhere she turned, she discovered new beauty and wonders! She began to live anew when she began to see.

It's that way with a person who has found Jesus and the new life He gives! Never mind if your experience differs from Saul of Tarsus, or if your conversion experience differs from your friends’. Just make sure of this, that you have come to know Jesus, have invited him into your heart, and have received his offer of new life.
If you have not accepted Christ into your heart, I encourage you to do so right now, right here, dedicate yourself to him during communion, pray to him, listen to him, or during the final hymn invite him to renew your heart.

Let him give you new eyes for old, and a new life with him as your Lord and Savior. Amazing Grace! I once was blind, but now I see! Amen!

Sources

