

Personally, of all the people in Scripture, the human being I am most looking forward to talking with someday is the Apostle Paul, sometimes Saul. But really, I think it would be just as fascinating to have had a conversation with him before he became a Christian. We don't have a lot of his backstory beforehand, he's there but not a major player. And yet enough is given to us to make it pretty clear what kind of person he was. This was a Type-A personality to the extreme. Firmly grounded in the teachings he had learned from little on. And in pursuit of his Jewish-raised ideals, he went to extremes that you or I would probably never even consider for most causes. I'd like a chance to talk with this man who traveled all over the countryside just to find and stamp out anyone practicing religion in the name of Christ. I'd like to see face-to-face the passion and the fury he had when it came to rubbing out these idiots who listened to that nobody, Jesus.

Why would I want that? Because even though we have enough of his background to make what happens to him in our reading today impressive, I think it would be something else entirely to have known this man and the zeal with which he persecuted the true church and then to see the impossible change that Jesus himself brought about in him. We see that change in our reading today from Acts chapter 9: <read Acts 9:1-19a>

As Saul walked along the road to Damascus, it is important to remember the attitude he was bringing with him. As we already said, this was not a man who was on the fence about Jesus, this was a man who was deeply rooted in his convictions and would not be changing them by any amount of persuasion or even miraculous signs. You weren't going to argue this guy into Christ. And if he had not witnessed, he was at least around and heard about the miracles that Christ had performed. His reaction? He was a sworn enemy of Christ as he set out on his journey. And then, along the way, he was surrounded by a bright light, unlike any he had ever seen. Up until now Saul had been in complete darkness, he did not know or understand God and when the holiness of the Lord shone around him, it was something he had never experienced.

Now we know the end result of this experience. Saul, whom we refer to more often by his Roman name, Paul, would go on to be arguably the greatest missionary for Jesus' name that the world has ever known. He wrote more books of the Bible than any other author. He has become the shining example of true Christian faith. But we can see here and read elsewhere by his own admission that he did *not choose* this path. God chose it for him. It was only by God's choice and God's work that Saul was converted. And that is consistent with his own confession when he writes later **"No one can say 'Jesus is Lord' except by the Holy Spirit."** (1 Cor 12:3). Saul was immediately converted by the power of the Holy Spirit, the power of God. There was no debate, no evidence. The word was spoken and it worked faith in his heart. Saul did not need time to mull this over. He did not carefully consider his options and decide to believe in Jesus. There was no middle ground...one moment he was a complete enemy of Jesus...the next he was a believer. In this very short speech, our Lord Jesus convicts Saul of his sin and then reveals to him the gospel truth in his very name, "Jesus." "God saves." Certainly Saul had heard the name before, but this time his heart was penetrated by the power of God, and he came to know and trust the truth that he was saved from his crimes against God. That wonderful washing and renewal that happens when faith is created, that wipes away sin because of Jesus' work.

Saul left that experience temporarily blinded by what he had seen. But he could see better than he ever could. In Christ, the world made sense. In Christ, he was at peace because he was forgiven. For Christ, the name he was traveling to persecute, for Christ he would now do whatever was asked of him. So Saul followed Jesus' instructions and went ahead to Damascus. And it was in Damascus that the Lord revealed to him the work he expected. His life for God wasn't complete because he'd been forgiven and come to believe and trust in God. Saul's faith needed to be nurtured and grown. He spent three years there being instructed in the ways of the Lord, growing his faith so that he could carry out the work the Lord appointed him for. Faith does not simply happen and then it's just there. It needs regular instruction and teaching and growth. And then when the time was right, God sent him out to bring that word into the world. To bring the power of the Holy Spirit to others and to nurture the faith of other believers so Jesus could rescue them just as he had been rescued.

Now perhaps a big question for many people who read this account is this: why Saul? Why did God choose to convert him at all, let alone choose him to be the model missionary to take the message of Jesus to the Gentile world? He was the strongest Jew there was and the biggest enemy of Jesus and his church. Why not make an example out of him? Why use him to show what it means to anger God? Well, as we know from many other examples, our God does not operate as we expect, and it always ends up better than what we would have come up with. Saul was chosen to show you and I and the world at large that God forgives all. God does not have a cut-off point. There is no one who is so unworthy of

God that he cannot be changed by the power of the Holy Spirit and be brought to faith. While we look on the outside and see levels of bad, worse and worst...God only sees sinners, all with the same fate, and all needing the same salvation. The fact that Saul of all people could be brought to faith and forgiven is a comfort to us. And more than that, the fact that God *wanted* to save Saul comforts and instructs us.

When it comes to our spiritual journey, the broad strokes of our path have not been much different than Saul. Though we may have not demonstrated the same level of passion in our rebellion, we were born into this world in that same condition. We were enemies of Jesus by birth. Paul himself later writes, "**The sinful mind is hostile to God.**" (Rom 8:7) As enemies of God, in our heart, we are seen by God no different than Saul who chased after the imprisonment and death of the early Christians. By God's standards you are just as bad as Saul was. And as spiritually dead and hostile enemies of God, there is no way we could ever come to him on our own, or even want to come to him. Like Saul, it is all God's doing. God sent the Holy Spirit to us, at our baptisms or when you heard the word of God, and through his power, a blinding light was shone around us and the blindness we were born in was lifted. We saw our sin before God clearly for the first time and we saw our savior Jesus who washed them away. And because God causes us to, we believe it. It is not a work of our doing, but entirely of God's doing.

There are some who want to say that believing in God is something we choose to do, and something that we do for God. But as we've seen, that simply cannot be the case. We are dead and hostile to God in our natural state, we cannot possibly come to him. And even if it were true, that would mean that our salvation in some part relied on us, on our work and if *that* were true, then how could we ever be certain we'd done it well enough? It would lead to terrible despair or uncertainty, never being sure if you believe well enough to be saved. Thankfully, in God's plan, nothing in our salvation is left up to us, he has done all the work and because of that we can be one hundred percent certain that it was done right.

Our path after we have been brought to faith is similar to Saul's as well. Just like him we need our new faith to be nurtured and grown. If we are baptized and come to faith young like most of us, our parents have the primary responsibility for this, but as we grow up and move on, we all have someone we look to in order to continue to help us grow our faith. It could be a teacher, a pastor or just a fellow member, but just like Saul had Ananias to help him grow in his new faith, we all have help from someone else that God provides for us. And also like Saul, God is not done with us just because he has brought us faith and forgiven our sins. No, just the same he has work for us to do. Just like Saul he expects us to take his message, his word into the world and share it with others who are still his enemies, share it with people who are still trapped in darkness. As we grow ourselves in the word, our God expects us to go with his word.

And as we look to carrying out that mission, we need to make sure we've taken a closer look at Ananias here. Ananias received a message, direct from God, that Saul was to be ministered to. Ananias hesitated. "That guy, God? Are you sure you have the right man? I've heard all about him. He's done nothing but attack your church, your loyal believers." Ananias perhaps didn't feel that Saul deserved the chance to be a Christian because of his crimes against the church. Or even more likely, he didn't think it was possible that such a man would join their cause. He was probably scared of the implications if God were wrong. But, he should have known better than to question God and thankfully for him, God returns a gentle answer and instructs Ananias to go to Saul all the same, and we've seen the blessings for us all that come out of Saul's training.

As God expects us to go with his word, we have to keep the example of Ananias in mind. It's not our place to choose for God whom we think will believe or not. It is not our place to tell God who is worthy of being let into his church or not. It's not up to us to withhold the message of Jesus because you think that person's heart cannot possibly be turned. Those are the people who need to hear most! Jesus himself said, "**It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick. I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners.**" (Mk 2:17) Our mission is simply to bring the word to others, share it with them and trust in the power of the Holy Spirit to change hearts. It is not up to us to be more convincing or to debate someone into faith. It's not about knowing all the right answers to all the objections. It's simply about bringing the word of God to sinners. All sinners appear the same to God and the power of the word is enough to turn any heart. When you trust in God to do the work, as eventually Ananias did, then you won't fall into the trap of pre-judging who can and can't believe. And you'll see everyone as the unworthy sinners they are, and not think of anyone as not good enough for the church. None of us are "good enough". We are only here by the grace of God.

So take comfort in the fact that your faith is not your work. It is something that was given to you by God and because he worked it, we don't have to worry about whether we've done it right or believe enough. And now that we have been given this great blessing of faith, continue to nurture it. Feed it regularly with the word so that it grows and your salvation may be made more sure. And then take that word into the world and share it with others so the Holy Spirit may work on them and give them the same freedom and peace that we know through Jesus. Amen.