

“Blinded By the Light”

Acts 9:1-9

(first of four)

Seventh Sunday Morning After Pentecost, July 18, 2004

I'm beginning a series of four sermons this morning entitled “A Turn Around Moment.” The focus is on conversion. We're going to look at some various persons in Acts 9 and attempt to draw some insight that will help us experience some turn around moments ourselves. That is what conversion is. It is a “turn around” event. We'll examine a turn around moment for Paul, one for Ananias, one for Skeptics, and one for Barnabas. Let's look at a turn around moment for Paul. He was blinded by the Light.

Last night something happened to me that occurs at least once a week. I'm sure you can say the same. As I was returning from Amy Adams' and Walt Murphy's Wedding Reception I stopped at the Three Way Stop where Ben Scott Boulevard and North Allison Circle meet. As I crossed, a car rounded the curve and the lighted shinned brightly into my eyes, catching me completely off guard. As soon as those lights hit my eyes, I closed them. For just a moment I was blinded by the light.

Long ago, in another time and culture, on an unpaved dusty road that led to a city in Syria called Damascus, another light shined into the eyes of an individual with such intensity that it blinded him for three days. And His life would never be the same again. Blinded by the light. No other event told in Scripture, outside the story of Jesus Christ Himself, is more important to the ongoing of God's kingdom than the conversion of Paul. He really was blinded by the light: the Light of the world which is Jesus Christ. The significance of this episode in Acts 9:1-9 is seen in the fact that it is repeated two other times in the Book of Acts - chapters 22 and 26. All three accounts indicate it was a turn around moment for Paul.

In his Daily Study Bible commentary on Acts, William Barclay calls Paul's experience the most famous conversion in all history. What actually happened to this Hebrew born of Hebrews, this Pharisee whose zeal for Judaism was unmatched who, in the Christians' estimation was a public enemy number one, was nothing short of a miraculous face-to-face encounter with the Risen and Living Jesus Christ.

In this text, documenting a radical experience of conversion, we come to grips with what it means to come into the presence of Christ. Better still, we come to grips with what it means for Christ to come into our presence. This is what happened to Saul. He did not stumble into the Lord's presence at high noon one day; instead, it was Christ who made a calculated appearance to a man whose heart was enslaved to a passion for legalism. Christ came into his presence and changed his life forever. That's what it means to be converted and one who has been converted knows he or she has been changed forever. This conversion account helps us understand that change really does happen when the Light of the world blinds one, as one stands face-to-face with Jesus Christ.

In this turn around moment for Paul, or Saul as he is called in the text, he came to realize that Jesus Christ wanted to blind him with His light so he could gain a different perspective about others and himself. The same is true for us. Consider that Paul really needed a different perspective. We are first introduced to him in Acts 7:58 as Saul, his Hebrew name. A few verses later in 8:1 we are told that he approved of the killing of Stephen. He was involved in the severe persecution that broke out in Jerusalem that day. He was the most capable theologian of his day, having studied with the great rabbi Gamaliel.

Paul gives us good insight into his perspective years later when he wrote to the Philippians. Listen to chapter 3:4b-6. ***“If anyone else has reason to be confident in the flesh, I have more: circumcised on the eighth day, a member of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew born of Hebrews; as to the law, a Pharisee; as to zeal, a persecutor of the church; as to righteousness under the law, blameless.”***

In Paul's mind he was right. He was always right. For him to be a Christian was a crime. It was a disgrace to Judaism. He was committed to his cause and thus engaged in rounding up all the Christians he could so they could be sentenced to die according to Jewish law. Remember what he said to the Philippians -

“As to righteousness under the law, blameless”? He honestly thought he was right. Yet he was wrong. He was spiritually blinded by the wrong convictions until a brighter Light shined upon him, causing him to become spiritually enlightened. The change was initiated externally and not internally. When the light blinded him on the outside, the beams of a new perspective began to shine on the inside in his mind and heart. He obviously began to consider his actions and ultimately realized that he really wasn't so righteous after all.

In doing what we perceive to be the right thing, the light of Jesus Christ flashes around us with such intensity that we become blinded to our perspective of what we sometimes think is right and slowly begin to see that, in some instances, it really is wrong. Paul was wrong, wasn't he? Yet he really thought he was right, didn't he? Now you and I have never been wrong about anything, have we? Wrong! I have never been able to understand why it is so terrible to utter these words: *I was wrong* or *I am wrong*. You and I have been wrong about some things and in case you're wondering, there'll be times in the future when you and I will be wrong again.

I simply don't understand why people can't admit they are wrong sometimes. What I am about to say, I say with humility. That has never been a problem for me. It does not bother me to say *I was wrong* or *I am wrong*. I've been in the parenting process for over 17 years now. It is a wonderfully draining experience. I mess up with my kids more often than I would like to admit. I sometimes am short-tempered with Emily and Nicholas. I'll do something and then think, *Well, great Jimmy, you just blew that one*. Many times I have walked into my children's rooms or sat down on the steps with them and said, *I was wrong* and *I'm sorry*. I'm a better parent for doing that too. Believe it or not, I even hear them acknowledge they are wrong from time-to-time.

Sure I could be proud and never tell them that I was wrong. Think how miserable they would be and how miserable I would be, even if I didn't know it. Pride is deadly for it results in seeing your perspective as always right. Now when you think about it, failure to see a different perspective is a form of persecution. In his mind, Paul was right, wasn't he? He said he was blameless. When the light on the outskirts of Damascus blinded him, there was only one charge leveled against him. Listen to verse 4: ***“Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?”*** The Contemporary English Version uses the question: ***“Why are you so cruel to me?”***

What raced through his mind when he heard those words? What burdened his heart most as he considered that penetrating question? Paul was persecuting Jesus Christ. He was being cruel to him. and my understanding of this text and the context leads me to believe that Paul persecuted Christ not only with his behavior, but with his attitude also. While the scholar from Tarsus was slugging the church, Jesus was feeling the pain.

Jesus, therefore, blinded Paul with the light so he could see his sinfulness. He was a sinner and those words, ***“...why do you persecute me?”***, indicate his sinfulness. I don't know of anyone who can say he or she doesn't need a turn around moment. Even Christians need to be blinded so they can see their own sin and respond according. Our culture, however, suggests it isn't necessary to do that. Have you noticed how we don't talk about our actions being sin today when those actions are sin?

Yesterday morning I brought Jackie over to the church at 6:45 so she could join with other members of The Tabernacle Choir and depart for their ministry in Lawrenceburg, Tennessee where they are singing this morning at First Baptist Church and where they'll sing at a Cumberland Presbyterian Church this afternoon. Afterward I went to Wal-Mart to get the oil changed in our van.

I walked over to Kroger and got a few things and then back to Wal-Mart. While waiting for the folks to finish I went to the book section and picked up Bill Clinton's book, *My Life*. I haven't bought it yet, but I will eventually since I am attempting to read a biography on each of the presidents, in addition to some of their individual writings. Clinton's book is massive. I love to read, but I'm a slow reader. I did peruse the section in which he deals with the Monica Lewinski scandal. One of the things he noted was his fascination with the reaction of far right-winged politicians. It's interesting that back in 1998 when all that came out how folks, especially in the religious community, were referring to what President Clinton did. Here are some of the things people were saying: *“It's a blot on the Oval Office.” “It is a disgrace to the Office of President.”*

“It has wounded the conscious of America.” “This is a shameful and embarrassing act that has been committed by our President.” I never heard anybody say that it was a sin against God. I never heard anybody say that it was a cruel act against God. Even Jerry Falwell talked more politics and impeachment than he did religion. I mean he’s the Pope, isn’t he? I never heard him or any other big-shot television preacher talk about sin. What Bill Clinton did was commit a sin against Almighty God. He didn’t make Bill Clinton to behave that way.

Now lest you think I’m partial to pointing out only the Democrats’ sins, let me be bipartisan and note something that happened a few weeks ago. This time the person is a Republican. Vice President Dick Cheney. In an argument on the floor of the United States Senate Mr. Cheney used a four-letter word in reference to Senator Patrick Leahy doing something to himself. It’s a horrible word. I can’t and won’t use it here on this platform. I don’t like to hear the word. I don’t like to read it. It is, in my estimation, the worst word in the English language. I hate it when that word races through my mind. But our Vice President used it. Some in the media and the Republican arena have said, “Well that God-forsaken liberal Senator from Vermont, who is a Democrat, deserved that.” I haven’t heard anybody say what it really was – especially in the religious community. What our Vice President did was commit a sin against Almighty God. He didn’t make Dick Cheney to talk that way.

Osama bin Laden orchestrated the terrorist attacks on the United States. On that fateful day, Tuesday, September 11, 2001, the Twin Towers of the World Trade Center crumbled to the ground. Lives were taken in death. Some said, “This is an assault on American democracy.” I didn’t hear anybody say that what Osama bin Laden did was commit a sin – a sin against Almighty God. He didn’t create Osama bin Laden to hate other people.

What Clinton, Cheney, and bin Laden did were acts of sin. And in their sins they persecuted Jesus. They hurt Him. They were cruel to Him. Clinton, Cheney, and bin Laden need a turn around moment. They are sinners. George W. Bush is a sinner. John Kerry is a sinner. Jimmy Gentry is a sinner. And in case nobody has told you lately, all of you are sinners too. And all of us, like Paul, need a turn around moment.

You see each of us, from time-to-time, is the persecutor. Consider this. What about our persecution, our cruelty? Our persecuting may be mild compared to that of our spiritual ancestor from Tarsus; but it is just as real and damaging. When we complain and are apathetic, we are persecuting Christ. We are being cruel to Him. When we fail to embody a vision for tomorrow, we are persecuting Christ. We are being cruel to Him. When there is only one way to do something and that is my way, we are persecuting Christ. We are being cruel to Him. Whenever we make uniformity a test for fellowship, we are persecuting Christ. We are being cruel to Him. Whenever we bury our heads in the sand of mediocrity, we are persecuting Christ. We are being cruel to Him. Whenever we ignore needs and focus on self, we are persecuting Christ. We are being cruel to Him.

Paul wanted everybody to conform to his perspective. There is always the danger of wanting everyone to become “Just Like Me.” That’s another way of saying, “You can be my friend if you pass my litmus test, if you meet my standards.”

A turn around moment is needed for you and me. The blinding light of Christ will allow us to gain a whole new perspective on others and ourselves. It will permit us to see as Christ sees. Instead of running the risk of becoming “Just Like Me” or “Just Like Us Baptist Church,” we’ll genuinely begin to understand that all that is necessary is a common faith and confession: Jesus is Lord. And if the way someone else comes to that faith and confession and approaches it throughout life is different, that is acceptable as long as it is Christ-like and found upon biblical principles.

A young man felt the need to commit his life to Jesus Christ and wasn’t sure what he needed to do. He sought out the advice of three friends he knew to be Christians. One said to him, “Hold on. When I was saved, I really had to hold on.” The other said, “Let go. When I was saved, I really had to let go.” Still the third friend said, “Look for the light. When I was saved, I saw a light.” Later, the young man said that between holding on, letting go, and looking for the light he almost missed being saved! There is no one form that is

normative for all Christians. What is normative is the result, for when Jesus Christ comes into your presence, He's there for the duration of life as we know it and for the life to come which we look forward to in faith and hope.

My senior year in high school I was one of the national finalists in the Veterans of Foreign Wars-Voice of Democracy Contest. While in Washington, DC during the competition, I was privileged, with the other finalists, to meet President Gerald R. Ford on Wednesday morning, March 12, 1975. I shall never forget standing in the President's Cabinet Room in the White House when unexpectedly, a door opened, and into our presence stepped three Secret Service agents and then Mr. Ford. I was awe-stricken. I was impressed. I was moved. Later I thought, "Nothing like this has ever happened to me before and probably never will again! Gerald Ford walked right into my presence!" It had a profound affect on me.

And then, just a bit more than 18 years later, in May 1993, it happened again. I was honored to meet the 39th President of the USA, Jimmy Carter at a breakfast in Birmingham. He and Rosalyn walked into the banquet room from a side entrance, near where I was seated. No pomp. No fanfare. He walked straight to me and extended his hand with that wonderful smile and said, "I'm Jimmy Carter." I got the words out, "It is an honor to meet you Mr. President." His reply, as he looked at my nametag, was "I really like your name. It's a good one. I'm partial to it. Please call me Jimmy, Jimmy. It is an honor to meet you, too." I responded, "Thank you Mr. President." He looked at me with a scolding look and then I said, "I mean Jimmy!" Then he smiled and embraced me. I melted in awe and once again was overwhelmed as I stood in conversation with a most Godly and Christ-like man.

As I've reflected on both of those events – one more than 29 years ago and the other more than 11 years ago – I've come to appreciate another Presence that walked right into my life that has had an even more profound affect than that of the 38th and 39th Presidents of the USA. When Jesus Christ walked into my life, I was even more awe-struck, more impressed, and more moved than when Presidents Ford and Carter walked into my presence. Presidents Ford and Carter, you see, eventually turned and walked out of my presence. Christ didn't. And He's not going to either. Gerald Ford and Jimmy Carter changed my life for a moment. Jesus Christ changed my life forever. It was one of those turn around moments. And He is still changing me and I'm still having turn around moments.

Saul's life had momentarily been changed by members of the Sanhedrin, the High Priest Caiaphas, his able teacher Gamaliel, his unshifting commitment to Judaism. But now, now his life was changed forever because a flash of light at high noon blinded him. He understood that it only took one flash to get his attention and change him forever and thus turn him around. He would stop using his Hebrew name and use the Greek equivalent, Paul, so he could connect with those Gentiles to whom he would go.

Jesus Christ, who is ready to come into your presence, too, can change your life forever. Have you been blinded by the Light lately? Why not allow the Light of the world, Jesus Christ, to shine on you and blind you today? Heaven will come down and your live and mine will never be the same again. May the Light blind you and me. In less than an hour, it will be high noon. I hope you'll have a turn around moment before noon today.

**Sermon by Dr. Jimmy Gentry, Pastor
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All scriptures, unless otherwise noted, are from The New Revised Standard Version, 1989.