

“A Conversion Story”
Philippians 3:1-11
January 30, 2022

INTRODUCTION:

The conversion of the apostle Paul is one of the great stories of the New Testament. In writing the book of Acts, Luke manages to tell the story of Paul’s Damascus Road conversion three times. In today’s passage, Paul tells the story himself. This telling is different from the three in Acts. They describe the event itself as it occurred along the timeline of Paul’s life. Here, Paul is talking more about what was going on in his heart. In this telling, he highlights the doctrine of justification by faith, one of the central doctrines of the Bible. While very few have a Damascus Road type of conversion, every Christian must have a Philippians 3 conversion to be a Christian at all.

Conversion stories encourage us. I heard one this week in a report about Francis Collins, the former Director of the National Institutes of Health and an evangelical Christian. He told of his atheism in his younger years, a commitment that began to change during his third year of medical school. He was attending an elderly woman in the hospital who was suffering and close to death. She was telling him of the great comfort and hope her faith in Jesus brought to her. Then she looked at him and said, “I’ve been telling you about my faith. What about you? What do you believe?” He said that he realized at that moment that his atheistic beliefs had been embraced not because he had found compelling evidence for them, but simply because he found them convenient and easy. He visited a pastor, who gave him a book by a former atheist, C. S. Lewis’ *Mere Christianity*. He was converted not long after that.

A conversion in a general sense indicates a significant change, often from something that is worthless to something useful. A Canadian coming to America converts Canadian dollars, which would be useless in America, to American dollars, and vice versa. Those of us accustomed to the imperial system of weights and measures often find metric measurements useless until we convert them to imperial. No change, though, is more significant than the one described in this passage.

I. Conversion’s High Stakes – v. 1-3

These opening verses teach us that at least two things are at stake in a conversion through faith in the gospel. The first is our joy. Paul brings up the matter of his conversion alongside his repeated command to rejoice. **“Finally, my brothers, rejoice in the Lord.”** The joy everyone desires comes through the gospel that Paul will proceed to repeat to them.

Second, we are kept safe from danger by the embrace of the gospel by faith. **“To write the same things to you is no trouble to me and is safe for you.”** The gospel is something that needs repeating for the simple reason that we so quickly forget it. It becomes evident in the next verse what Paul means when he talks about safety. The gospel keeps us safe from one of the greatest dangers we face, the danger of self-righteousness. The particular version of self-righteousness he mentions in verse two is that of the Judaizers. These were professing Jewish Christians who taught that Gentiles needed to become Jews in order to become Christians. And since circumcision was the introductory rite for one becoming Jewish, they taught that circumcision was a requirement for all Christians.

If you’ve read the book of Acts, you will know that this was a major issue facing the early church. The Judaizers looked to passages like Genesis 17:13 where God commanded circumcision to Abraham and his offspring, even saying that it was a sign of his “everlasting covenant.” Paul understood the gospel to be the fulfillment of this sign. The outward sign of circumcision portrayed the cutting away of the sinful flesh. But in the gospel, the sinful flesh is actually dealt its death blow. That’s why Paul could say in verse 3, **“For we are the circumcision, who worship by the Spirit of God and glory in Christ Jesus and put no confidence in the flesh.”** Paul saw in this conflict with the Judaizers something far more significant than a fine point of theology. He saw it as a complete departure from the gospel. It was putting confidence in the flesh, in human accomplishment, rather than putting one’s confidence in Jesus. Self-righteousness is putting confidence in the flesh.

There was a racial component to the claim of the Judaizers. They assumed the superiority of being Jewish and maintaining the Jewish ceremonial practices of the Old Testament. In an ideal world of the Judaizers, everyone would become like them, practicing the Jewish ceremonial laws while also pronouncing themselves to be followers of Christ. Paul would have none of it because he saw this as a complete rejection of the gospel. That’s why we have the harsh language of verse 2. **“Look out for the dogs, look out for the evildoers, look out for those who mutilate the flesh.”** Jews would often refer to Gentiles as “dogs.” The origin of that name derives from the fact that dogs are often sniffing around unclean things such as dead bodies. So Paul is reversing things here, saying that because of their self-righteous boasting in the flesh, the Judaizers were actually the unclean ones. Their self-righteousness also led them to be evildoers. Perhaps some of the disunity in Philippi was caused by the inroads these Judaizers were beginning to make. And then, in a reference to their insistence on circumcision, he calls them “mutilators.” They weren’t promoting the things of God but were just making a bloody mess.

Some are troubled by Paul's harshness here, thinking he should be a little nicer. Some people just want preachers to be nice. In the right setting, being nice is a good thing, and Paul was often very gentle, kind and nice. But when it's a matter of great consequence, there's a time not to be nice. If you suffer a home invasion that threatens your family and you call the police, you wouldn't criticize the police if you think they aren't being nice enough to those who would harm you and your loved ones. When much is at stake, protection from danger becomes far more important than niceness.

II. A Conversion from Precious to Rubbish – v. 4-7

Paul gives a personal account of the change that took place in his heart when he came to faith in Christ. The change was to open his eyes to the ugliness of self-righteousness, which he refers to in verses 3-4 as having "confidence in the flesh." He lists his self-righteousness in the two categories of what he had by birth and what he had by accomplishment. It is clear that Paul's renunciation of placing his confidence in the flesh was not a sour-grapes rejection. His negative outlook on human advantage and accomplishment wasn't due to the fact that he had none of either. To the contrary, his credentials were impeccable.

His advantages from birth, at least from the standpoint of Jewish thinking, began with the fact that he was circumcised on the eighth day, in accordance with Mosaic Law. He wasn't down on circumcision because he wasn't circumcised. He was of the tribe of Benjamin, like Israel's first king. Perhaps Saul was even named for this king. Benjamin was the son of Jacob's beloved wife, Rachel. The tribe of Benjamin remained faithful to Judah when the northern and southern tribes split. In summary, he was a "Hebrew of Hebrews," as thoroughly Jewish as anyone might be. Many Jews had been Hellenized, embracing Greek culture as their primary identity. But not Paul.

As to his accomplishments, he begins by pointing out that he was a Pharisee in his attitude toward the law. Pharisees were perceived as being the most faithful to Scripture. They were so zealous to keep every minor detail of the law that they added laws just to make sure that they didn't get close to violating biblical law. If the law said, "Don't cross this line," they would draw the line ten feet back just to make sure they didn't even get close to that red line. Paul's life was marked by zeal, which was seen in the fact that he persecuted the church prior to his conversion. According to N. T. Wright, he fancied himself as a modern-day version of Phinehas. He was the one who speared the Israelite man who had taken a forbidden wife, an act that led to idolatry and to God's judgment in the form of a plague. Phinehas was credited with stopping the plague by his act of zeal. That was likely Paul's thinking in his persecution of Christians. And then he concludes by saying that he was blameless **"as to righteousness under the law"** (v. 6). Paul wasn't claiming

sinlessness, only that he had kept the external aspects of God's law. When he sinned, he did what the law said and brought a sacrifice.

Paul then reports a radical change in his heart, and it is this change that constitutes the central aspect of his conversion, and any other conversion to Christ. **"But whatever gain I had, I counted as loss for the sake of Christ"** (v. 7). He uses the word "count" three times. It's a term from accounting, and the idea is that Paul formerly thought of all the things we just mentioned as assets, his best qualities. But his conversion brought about a complete change so that he came to see them as deficits. Instead of bringing him closer to God, they took him in the wrong direction, away from God. Many people think that their good deeds can take them at least part of the way toward heaven, and that God's help is needed to fill the gap in whatever is lacking in their goodness. But Paul says here something that completely undermines that thinking. His good deeds took him not closer to God, but further away from God.

Paul exhibits a ramping up of his negative language about self-righteousness or confidence in the flesh. He says first that he counts these righteous deeds as loss for the sake of Christ. Then he says that all things are loss compared to knowing Christ. Then he concludes by characterizing them as "rubbish." Other translations say "dung." The idea is something that is viscerally repugnant. There is a difference between the pile of junk mail that is sitting inside your trash can and the rotten fish that was dumped in there two days ago. You have determined that both are worthless, but one of them is so repugnant that you want to get it away from you as quickly as possible. Paul says that this became his attitude to all the things he had boasted in. This progression suggests that a growing repugnance of our self-righteousness is both present at our initial conversion and something that increases in time as we walk with Christ.

It is important to point out that this was Paul's attitude not toward sinful acts in his life, but toward good things. Other than his persecution of the church in the above list, everything is good. Even his persecution of the church had its roots in the good quality of zeal, though it was a misguided zeal. Why the strong response? Because he came to see these things as substitute saviors that kept him from the true Savior. To put it in the terms of verse 3, Paul saw confidence in the flesh and boasting in Jesus as being mutually exclusive.

III. A Conversion from Rubbish to Precious – v. 8-11

We can appreciate the previous point more fully by understanding this final point. Paul viewed his self-righteousness so negatively because he came to view Jesus as so precious. In many ways, this passage reminds me of Jesus' short parable about the pearl of great value. **"The kingdom of heaven is like a**

merchant in search of fine pearls, who, on finding one pearl of great value, went and sold all that he had and bought it” (Matt. 13:45-46). Paul came to see **“the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord”** (v. 8) and saw his self-righteousness as the thing that was preventing that. Jesus had become precious to him.

What does it mean to know Jesus? It means to be intimate with Jesus, to be in relationship with him. Such a relationship on our part means that we love him, obey him and trust him as our faithful, covenant God. It means to be **“found in him,”** a phrase that speaks of our union with Jesus. We are yoked to Jesus, which has three results. First, it means that we are given his righteousness. This is the doctrine of justification by faith, by which God forgives our sins and declares us righteous because of the imputed righteousness of Jesus. Second, it means that we share in Jesus’ suffering. As Christians we are sometimes tempted to see our sufferings as an indication that God has abandoned us. Paul, writing from the vantage point of suffering in prison, says that we should see it instead as evidence of our union with Christ.

Third, as a result of our union with Christ, resurrection awaits us all. We tend oftentimes to see this resurrection strictly in material terms as our bodies being raised incorruptible. Thankfully, that is true, but it’s not all. Our personalities, our emotions, our will and our intellect will all be made whole. In Jesus, life will become what God always intended it to be. C. S. Lewis tries to capture this in the climax of the Chronicles of Narnia. The redeemed have passed through the catastrophe that consumed old Narnia, and they are sprinting with ever-increasing speed and joy into the new Narnia. Aslan’s joyful roar encourages them, “Come further in! Come further up!” When we are joined into union with Christ, all things are made new for us and in us.

CONCLUSION:

How does one get to this good place of union with Christ that leads ultimately to this resurrection? It comes through repentance and faith. We repent of our trust in our own righteousness. If you want a relationship with Jesus, start by asking yourself how you view what you have always considered your best assets. These assets are gifts from God. But have you used these gifts as a substitute savior? Are you trusting in them? Then repent of that trust, and move it instead to Jesus alone. Our closing hymn today expresses it well. We come to regard ourselves as naked, helpless and even foul. But we come to see in Jesus the one who alone is able to cloth the naked, give grace to the helpless and cleanse the foul. Don’t let your self-righteousness keep you from Jesus’ righteousness, which God offers to you free of charge if you will leave self-righteousness behind.

Small Group Discussion Questions
Philippians 3:1-11

1. This passage is Paul's conversion story. Do you have a favorite conversion story, either your own or that of someone else?
2. In your experience, what is the biggest obstacle for people coming to faith in Jesus?
3. The biggest obstacle for Paul coming to faith in Jesus was his "confidence in the flesh." This is one of his terms for self-righteousness. Are you aware of the pull of self-righteousness in your life? What does that look like for you?
4. If you're having trouble seeing any self-righteousness in your life, think about areas of your life that you would consider to be your biggest assets and greatest strengths. Do you see any ways you may have looked to these to do for you what only God can do?
5. Paul reports that he came to see that the thing of surpassing worth was to know Jesus Christ. What did he mean? What does it mean to know Jesus?
6. What are some practical implications of knowing that Jesus is our righteousness?
7. Paul believed that his resurrection from the dead was wrapped up in his union with Jesus. What aspect of that resurrection, where everything will be made new, is most precious to you right now?
8. A miracle from God is needed for any person to come to regard his or her self-righteousness as something to be willingly lost in order to have Jesus. Are there people in your life for whom you would like to pray for this miracle to happen?