

## CONFESSIONS OF A CONVERTED SAINT

Scriptures: Philippians 3:4b-11; Acts 22:1-10

I am a Jew. I doubt that you are impressed by that. Most people regard Jews as strange people who wear funny caps, don't eat pork, and cut away part of the skin from their male babies, in places you don't normally mention in church.

But we Jews were the original chosen people of God. Nineteen hundred years before Jesus, twenty five hundred years before Mohammed, thirty seven hundred years before Joseph Smith, God spoke to Abraham. God promised to give Abraham many descendants who would become a great nation and bring blessing to all the nations of the world.

God chose us to be holy, to be set apart. And God gave us laws to help us be different than other people—laws that defined how we live, how we work, how we eat, even how we circumcise our children. These laws helped us maintain our identity for 4,000 years. How long have you Presbyterians been around? 400 years? We've been around 4,000 years. We survived exile by the Babylonians, persecution by the Greeks, destruction by the Romans, and genocide by the Nazis. We survived because of our laws—those traditions that you find so peculiar.

Not only am I a Jew, I am a Pharisee, trained by the great Gamaliel himself. We Pharisees interpreted God's law and applied it to specific situations, much like your Supreme Court. I was the most zealous of all. I applied God's law to everything. I wanted every inch of my life to be ruled by God's commandments. Isn't that a good thing? Wouldn't this world be a better place if everyone obeyed God's commandments right down to the letter?

I thought so. That is why I hated Jesus. With a wave of his hand he dismissed our laws about food. He said, "It is not what goes into people's mouths that make them sinners; it's what comes out of their mouths." He also dismissed our laws about keeping the Sabbath. He claimed to be the Lord of the Sabbath. He even claimed to forgive sins. What human being has the right to forgive sin? He made it sound like our relationship to God depends not on how well we keep God's commandments but on our faith and commitment to him. That is blasphemy.

It was obvious we had to get rid of him. Jesus traded obedience to God's law for a personality cult. We had to crucify him. And his death confirmed that he was a fraud. If he had been the true Messiah, like he claimed, God would have rescued him.

Unfortunately, his followers continued to believe in him. They claimed he had risen from the dead and that he was coming again to judge those who rejected him. Soon his followers were twisting the minds of more people than Jesus had. It was like cancer. Faith in Jesus metastasized to Syria, and I was sent to Damascus keep it from spreading.

The last person I expected to meet on the way was Jesus himself. If he had appeared as a ghost, I would have dismissed him. I would have considered it a mirage—a hallucination born of heat and indigestion. But he did not come to me as a ghost; he came as a voice. A great light appeared. It was like a blast from creation. God said, "Let there be light," and bam!—there was

light, and I was on the ground. I knew I was in the presence of God, but the voice I heard was the voice of Jesus. He said, “I am Jesus of Nazareth whom you are persecuting.”

How can I explain what that was like for me? It would be like you getting a call from God and discovering it came from Salt Lake City. Everything I had thought about God was thrown into turmoil. The very person I regarded as an enemy of God was speaking for God. The very person I worked so hard to eliminate was back and wanting me to tell others about him.

Have you ever devoted yourself to something, working on it day after day, thinking about it at night, pursuing a goal with all your heart, only to discover that it was the wrong goal, that all your efforts had been misdirected toward something empty and hopeless? That is how I felt on the road to Damascus.

The irony is that I was not failure as a Pharisee. I was the most devout, honest, hard working, scrupulously law-abiding, person I knew. I was a saint. Saint Saul! But when God actually showed up in this world, I wanted to get rid of him.

That moment revealed the lie upon which my life had been built. All my life I had claimed to serve God, but really I was serving myself. It was all about me—my righteousness, my religious zeal, my interpretation of God’s will. That light on the road to Damascus did not make me blind; it revealed how blind I already was. I was so caught up in myself, I could not see God when God was right in front of me.

When the light faded, I was helped off the ground and led me by the hand to Damascus, where a man named Ananias came to see me. I recognized his name. He was one of the people I had been sent to arrest. Ananias said to me, “The God of our ancestors has chosen you to know his will, to see his Righteous One and to hear his voice.”

I thought I was already chosen. I thought I already knew God’s will. But this time I found God’s will, not in a checklist of laws by which to measure my sainthood, but in a person whose love exposed the depth of my self-centeredness.

Which brought me to another discovery. When I met the risen Jesus, I knew he must be who he claimed to be: the Messiah, the promised Savior. Otherwise God would not have raised him from the dead. But that raised a new question: Why did God let him die? If God could raise Jesus from the dead, surely God could have saved Jesus from dying in the first place. Why did God let us crucify him?

The answer had to be “for us.” Jesus died on that cross not for his sins but for ours ... for mine! He had the authority to forgive sins because he took the consequences of sin on himself.

I had never thought of myself as a sinner. Gentiles and prostitutes, tax collectors and criminals—they were sinners. I was one of the good guys. I was devoted to my family, devoted to my country, and devoted to God. But when Ananias opened my eyes, he said to me, “Get up, be baptized, and have your sins washed away.” Before I would have been indignant. I would have blustered something about my membership in the chosen people of God. I would have

trotted out my years of service, my zeal for God's holy truth. But considering I was on my way to Damascus to kill some of God's chosen people, I began to reevaluate myself. I realized that I too was a sinner in need of Jesus' forgiveness, not because I lied, stole, or cheated on my wife, but because pride had blinded me to the grace of God, a grace that God now wanted me to show to others.

So now I have started a new life. I am still a Jew, a descendant of Abraham. But I have a new mission: to invite others to share in the grace that I have received through Jesus Christ.

You can have the same mission. In Jesus we have a new life that will last forever, so it is never too late to start.

- Ken Onstot  
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