

# *Sermon Text for April 7, 2019*

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Jeremiah 1:4-9, Acts 9:1-9

## *Coming to love Jesus: Peter vs. Paul*

I don't think sermons should turn into show and tell, I think they should be expositions of what Scripture says and explanations that have an impact upon your daily life. I met with someone who has been attending regularly and they said they want to get involved and they appreciate what is said on Sunday, whether they agree with it or not, they appreciate how it is presented. I don't see myself as the person with the answers, I don't see my responsibility to tell you what to think on Sunday morning. I see my responsibility to give you some insight into what Scripture is trying to tell us and then some suggestions on how this can be implemented into our daily lives, but in no way do I try to give you the answers. That part is up to you.

Our trip to Israel this year was significant. It provided once again another layer of insight that previously we did not have. It provided another perspective on the whole Israel question that I hope previously we didn't have before as we met with a Palestinian Christina whose family has been praising Jesus since Jesus ascended into heaven. Acts contains the story of his family and how from the beginning of the Christian history to today they have been forgotten and considered as less valuable than those who hold them captive behind walls in Bethlehem and other areas around Israel.

I hope you have enjoyed going through Acts over these past many months. For me it is almost as if I were coming home. This section of Acts, where we see a whole different variety of people coming to a saving knowledge of Jesus Christ, is my favorite section. The last few weeks we have seen a super-Evangelist Philip convert an entire race of people, the Samaritans, and a single end of the earth type of guy, the Ethiopian Eunuch, who may have been the one who brought the Gospel to Northern Africa.

Today, we have the conversion story par excellence. We find one person, albeit a very famous person, who is a radical, militant, extremist in his religion, someone we would call a terrorist, in the end come to love Jesus. Saul, who then become Paul and ends up writing the majority of the New Testament, today is confronted by an appearance of Jesus in order to get him to his knees, literally, and humble him to the point of accepting the Lord and Savior.

Have you ever been humbled to the point where you have gone to your knees? Today I want each of you to think of your own experience when you came to love Jesus and understand that Jesus is more than just a name and what that name means for you personally. Was it an emotional bolt of lightning that put you straight on the path? Or was it the comfort of knowing that Jesus loves you, and has been your friend since, as Jeremiah states, you were still unborn.

We are going to look at the conversion of Saul, who becomes Paul, and hold it up to the light of our own experiences of coming to know Christ. Think of the times that Jesus came to you most powerfully and what potentially keeps you coming back here to experience the life giving blood of our Savior. Let's hear about Paul.

### **READ SCRIPTURE**

When we read the Jeremiah passage it reminds me so much of the emails that I send out trying to get volunteers and the responses that I get at times. I've never quite tried this approach of saying to them: "from the beginning of time, even before you were in your mother's womb you were chosen to serve on session, or to sing in the choir." Hard to argue against that. God tells Jeremiah that from the beginning of time you were mine and your whole life I have held you, nurtured you, led you along the path so that you would arrive at this point.

Our conversion ultimately is not about us saying yes, but about God, from the beginning of time, saying yes. It is God's actions that are crucial, not ours. We just respond, we just lay our lives before God and remain amazed at his grace. This is such a different way to look at things as compared to what the culture and especially the religious culture around us requires. As Presbyterians we focus on the work of God and then what we do is a response to that work. As opposed to the work that we do, decide to get baptized, decide to accept Jesus as Savior, decide whether we are saved or not. Those decision, we believe as Presbyterians, are best left up to God, and our job is to respond.

Peter, was very different from Paul. He loved Jesus the moment he saw him. Like Jeremiah he was raised in the church and came to know and love him and be used by him at an early age. He came to love Jesus in a very different way than Paul did. It took a while and it was quite a journey for Peter. It took Jesus a few times to come to Peter to have him follow along. He is someone who maybe like us grew up in the church, never really had that born again experience, but now loves Jesus and can't honestly think

of a time when you didn't love Jesus. That is absolutely legitimate. Who can relate to Jesus having to come to us not once, but a few times because we keep going off line, and turning our back on Christ. I thought so. It was a low level spiritual journey with intermittent peaks of intensity. But he never knew a moment that he didn't love Jesus. Or how many of us can look back over our life and we didn't really stray too far from Jesus, just always knew he was there. It is a typical Presbyterian journey, not one of peaks and valleys, but pretty even keeled.

What about Saul, how did he come to love Jesus? Well, he did it the hard way. It is said that the only way to make a Christian out of that one was to knock him off his horse. Who was this Saul? He was mentioned 3 times before these verses, very briefly, let's look at them. The first is in chapter 7:58, he is the one gathering the coats of the ones who stoned Stephen, in 8:1 Luke makes a point to say that Saul approved, put his stamp of approval on the killings. In 8:3, this is the kicker, Saul is described as ravaging the early church by dragging off the men and the women to be brought to justice because they were Christians. This is a pastor, this a passionately wrong pastor.

And it gets worse today. It seems as if he is drunk with the power that he has because he goes straight to the top, to the high priest, to ask for letters to the synagogues, basically warrants that would allow him to enter the synagogues without being questioned. The Scripture states that he headed toward Damascus for the synagogues there, in order to root the people out, bind them and bring them back to Jerusalem. Now that sounds bad enough but put on top of that the fact that Damascus is 150 miles away in the blazing sun.

He was definitely passionate for what he did, but it was completely misguided. Some of us have misdirected passion. Some of us are passionate about our careers: so passionate about making money and achieving success that nothing else is in focus for us, not our family, not our faith. These misdirected passions move us away from that mountaintop experiences of conversion. Isn't it true that sometimes life gets in the way of God? Well, I would argue that our life has to be a complete reflection of our conversion, of our devotion to Christ.

On the other hand, some of us are so passionate about our kids and family activities that we are neglecting the development of their spiritual needs in Sunday School, and church and times that you sit around the table and talk about what they did in

church. Others of us like Saul, are so passionate about our religion that we are pushing our kids and friends away from us and away from God. Misguided passion can be worse than no passion at all. I know the whole lukewarm thing in Revelation, but a passionately wrong father or pastor can have a tremendously negative affect on a child and their relationship to Christ. They understand when your words don't match up with your actions.

Amazingly, Paul's conversion remains one of the most powerful testimonies to God's power because of how passionately wrong Saul was. He was so anti-Christian, that when he became the premier Christian evangelist, it had to be God who made that transition. Look at what happens. He is going toward Damascus, a bright light shines, he is thrown down and then this nearly comical conversation takes place: Saul Saul, Why are you persecuting me? If I hear a voice from heaven I am going to apologize or give a reason why, or at least try to come up with some excuse. Not Saul. Who are you? He doesn't even answer the question. God's answer basically is, you didn't answer my question, I'm the guy that you are persecuting.

He finishes that statement with something that we have heard before. Get up and go, and he went, blind and all. Remember Philip from last week. Get up, and he gets up and goes. Peter and Saul, two very different conversion experiences, but both of them have some things in common. First, Coming to love Jesus is intensely personal, and yet it can happen around a group of people where some will get it and some won't. Paul is surrounded by people who think he is talking to himself. Peter at the fire as he speaks one on one with Jesus is surrounded by people who get it, we hope.

Both Peter and Saul go from self-confident independence to child-like dependence on Jesus Christ. With Saul this happens literally as he goes blind and has to be led by the hand. How humbling. Peter recognizes his betrayal of Jesus and is gradually brought back to full dependence on Christ. This one may be the hardest one for us. In our conversion stories the only way to go forward is by falling back into the arms of Christ. All sorts of helplessness marks our progress. For faith, this is the beginning of wisdom when we lay ourselves at the mercy of God.

Conversion takes place ultimately when we are approached by God and then changed by that encounter. God reaches out to us, sometimes in a way we don't appreciate, but it is for the sake of bringing us back to loving him and getting up and

going after those that he loves.

There is no one legitimate way to come to Christ, but it is important to come. May God bless us as we appreciate our own conversions, whether they have taken place over the years as we have been in the church, or if we have seen a bright light and changed our passions for the world for the passions of God's kingdom. Both of these lead to Jesus Christ who calls us to disciple others into his kingdom. Amen.