



# LIVING WORD EPISCOPAL CHURCH

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## Sermon for the Conversion of St. Paul

Acts 9:1-22 &  
St. Matthew 19:27-30  
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As we've been making our way through St. Luke's Gospel one of the themes we've seen Jesus stressing over and over is this idea that to be a disciple means truly to give up everything for the sake of following Jesus. It means giving up everything to which we've looked for security, whether that be our family or a job or our money or anything we've done or accomplished. And it means reprioritizing everything in our lives so that instead of revolving around self, our lives now revolve around Jesus. As we saw in last week's lesson, many people will come to the banquet thinking they have a guaranteed seat, but find the door closed and locked. They'll beat on the door and yell in at the windows: "Jesus! We listened when you preached. We ate and drank with you! You know us. Let us in!" But Jesus reminded them that it is never enough simply to listen to Jesus. It's never enough simply to passively be there in his presence or even to think positively of him. To truly know him in the way that matters means trusting him enough to give up everything and to completely reorient our lives around him in faith, acknowledging that he is Lord.

Our Gospel today from Matthew 19 gets at this. Just before the section we read, Jesus gives his famous warning about the dangers of riches:

**"I tell you, it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich person to enter the kingdom of God."** (Matthew 19:24)

But riches aren't the only thing that we have a tendency to grasp at. The disciples had given up everything—at least in material terms and at least as far as they understood at that point in time.

Jesus would keep calling them to give up more and more, but Peter asked Jesus: "We've given up everything. We've followed you. But what will we have? You've offered us something better, but what is it Jesus? And that's where we see Jesus in our Gospel urging his disciple again to give up everything:

**"Truly, I say to you, in the new world, when the Son of Man will sit on his glorious throne, you who have followed me will also sit on twelve thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel. And everyone who has left houses or brothers or sisters or father or mother or children or lands, for my name's sake, will receive a hundredfold and will inherit eternal life."** (Matthew 19:28-29)

Jesus calls on them to give up everything that was most important to a Jewish man or woman. It's not just money and material possessions. Now he calls on them to give up land and family. That's a call to give up their very identity. Giving up family meant giving up their identity as sons of Abraham. Giving up land meant giving up the inheritance that went along with being sons of Abraham. And yet these were the very things God had promised to Abraham and to his descendants. But the point is that Jesus has something better to offer. Those old promises of a worldly kingdom and a worldly blessing are fulfilled in Jesus as he opens the way to a far better heavenly kingdom and heavenly blessing.

Land and family are important to us too, but not in the same way. Jesus' warning about riches is probably far more relevant for us today, but there are so many other things in which we trust—so many other things we look to for our identity or our security: money, job, possessions, sex, reputation, and all sorts of good works. And it's not easy to let go of these things, but somehow we have to. And that's where the story of Saul of Tarsus is encouraging. If God could snap Saul out of it and move him to give up everything, there's hope for us.

In today's Epistle we read about Saul. He first comes into the story at the stoning of Stephen. Saul held coats for

people so that they could free up their hands to throw stones. He was a young Pharisee and here in Acts 9 we're told that he was "breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord." He truly hated Christians—hated them enough that he decided to become something of a vigilante. He heard that there were Christians in Damascus some 150 miles away. Damascus was in another country, but Saul was zealous for his faith and zealous for God. He had known about Jesus and was glad that Pilate had put an end to his claims of being the Messiah. And yet Jesus' followers hadn't taken the hint. They were claiming Jesus had been raised and instead of dying out, the movement was growing and spreading amongst the synagogues. And so Saul got some kind of permission from the high priest to travel to far-off Damascus to arrest these Jewish Christians and to bring them back to Jerusalem for a sort of heresy trial. If the high priest wasn't going to protect the faith, Saul would get extradition papers and do it himself!

And so off he went, but Luke tells us that along the way Saul was confronted in an amazing way:

**A light from heaven shone around him. And falling to the ground he heard a voice saying to him, "Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?" And he said, "Who are you, Lord?" And he said, "I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting. But rise and enter the city, and you will be told what you are to do." The men who were traveling with him stood speechless, hearing the voice but seeing no one. Saul rose from the ground, and although his eyes were opened, he saw nothing. So they led him by the hand and brought him into Damascus. And for three days he was without sight, and neither ate nor drank.** (Acts 9:4-9)

Luke doesn't tell us anything more than that Paul was travelling, but more than one New Testament scholar has suggested that Paul may have been meditating when this happened. There was a technique for devotional meditation that developed in the century before Jesus that focused attention on the prophet Ezekiel's divine vision of

the Lord's chariot. It's a vision that's hard to imagine: angelic living creatures with four faces and four wings apiece and with them—seemingly driven or propelled by them—were wheels within wheels. And carried by the heavenly chariot was a throne on which Ezekiel saw the glory of the Lord. It's a vision that's weird and bizarre and glorious and overwhelming all at once. And pious Jews took to meditating on Ezekiel's vision, fasting and praying in the hopes that they might catch a similar glimpse of God's glory in visions of their own.

Slowly making his way to Damascus, his horse clip-clopping rhythmically along, up and down, some New Testament scholars think Saul may have been quietly meditating on Ezekiel's vision and hoping for the Lord to make himself known to him to as he had made himself known to the prophet. And suddenly the Lord did precisely that. In blinding glory that threw Saul from his horse, he manifested himself. If Saul had been meditating in this way, this is exactly what he had hoped for and we can imagine him hesitantly looking up as the Lord called to him—hoping to see, like Ezekiel, a glimpse of that heavenly chariot and of the Lord's throne. And he sees that chariot. And he sees that throne. But to his horror he sees Jesus being carried by the four living creatures. "No! It can't be. Who are you, Lord?" And the voice calls out, "I am Jesus—the very one whom you've been so zealously persecuting!"

Imagine what this means for Saul. He tells us later that he was a Hebrew of Hebrews. He had studied the Scriptures and he has studied theology and philosophy with the best. He was a Pharisees, which meant he was zealous for the law. This was a man who was *passionate* about God and *passionate* about God's people and *passionate* about God's kingdom. That was why he was persecuting Christians—they were a threat to that kingdom. And yet here Jesus himself appears to him and shows him that he was all wrong.

There's an old joke that might give us a sense of how Saul may have felt that

day. In the joke the Pope receives a phone call. As he picks up the phone a voice on the other end says, "It's Jesus calling. I've got good news and I've got bad news." The Pope was incredibly excited. Jesus! "This is great, Jesus. What's the news?" And Jesus responds, "The good news is: I've returned. The bad news is: I'm calling from Salt Lake City."

Saul's vision would have left him something like that. Suddenly the very thing he was so convinced was wrong and that he was persecuting so zealously turns out to be right. Suddenly Saul was forced to give up everything as the faith he knew so well was transformed as it took shape around the person of Jesus the Messiah.

It often takes something dramatic to get our attention. Remember that Jesus calls us to give up everything and to follow him. For some people it means taking them to rock-bottom: the loss of family, of friends, of reputation, of money or possessions. For some it takes a loss of health. For some it means coming to an end of oneself intellectually. I think of C.S. Lewis writing of how he became convinced of the truth of Christianity and went home to his college that night thinking he must be the most dejected convert in all of history. Like Saul of Tarsus, he was confronted by truth and forced to rethink everything in which he had invested. And yet Lewis later said that humbling experience resulted in him being surprised by joy. Saul's experience was similar. His confrontation with Jesus was humbling and terrifying, but he came out the other side with joy, because in that confrontation he came to know his own sin while at the same time being embraced by the loving grace of Jesus. He who could admit that he was the greatest of sinners was also confronted with the redeeming love of Jesus.

Brothers and sisters, that's how we're able to give up everything in order to follow Jesus—to commit and to devote our all to him. This is how we're able to give up everything and find our identity and our being in him. It's when we are

confronted by the magnitude of our sinful and foolish rebellion against our Creator, and yet we discover that we're still embraced by his love, still offered forgiveness and restoration, still offered new life, and then called to be his ambassadors in the world. Brothers and sisters, when you have trouble giving of yourself, when you have trouble letting go of things, when you have trouble setting aside sin, when you have trouble pursuing holiness and holding tightly to Jesus, remember his amazing grace. Think on the Incarnation and think on the Cross. Think on the humility and suffering of our Lord and consider that he humbled himself and suffered for you and for me—for foolish, rebellious sinners—that we might be restored to his fellowship and restored to life. In Jesus, God gave up everything for us; let us give up everything for him.

Let us pray: "O God, who through the preaching of the apostle Saint Paul caused the light of the gospel to shine throughout the world, grant that as we remember his wonderful conversion we may show our thankfulness by following the holy doctrine which he taught, through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen."