



FIRST LESSON

**ACTS 9:1-22**

PSALM

**PSALM 67**

SECOND LESSON

**GALATIANS 1:11-24**

GOSPEL LESSON

**ST. LUKE 21:10-19**

PRAYER OF THE DAY

O GOD, BY THE PREACHING  
OF YOUR APOSTLE PAUL YOU  
HAVE CAUSED THE LIGHT OF  
THE GOSPEL TO SHINE  
THROUGHOUT THE WORLD.  
GRANT THAT WE MAY  
FOLLOW HIS EXAMPLE AND BE  
WITNESSES TO THE TRUTH OF  
YOUR SON, JESUS CHRIST,  
OUR SAVIOR AND LORD,  
WHO LIVES AND REIGNS WITH  
YOU AND THE HOLY SPIRIT,  
ONE GOD, NOW AND  
FOREVER. AMEN.

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## Liturgical Day: The Conversion of Saint Paul

Date: January 25, 2009

Sermon Title: Transformed for Ministry

zealous, certain Saul  
turned around by Christ... and love!  
how would God change me?

Grace to you and peace, from God our Father, and the Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

I've always been intrigued by this story, and its description of the conversion of Saul. It takes place not long after the resurrection and ascension of Jesus; not long after the day of Pentecost. Saul is a leader in the Jewish Church: a Hebrew by birth and a Pharisee by training. He is certain about his faith, determined to be faithful, and filled with confidence and purpose. My favorite description of him comes from his own words, in the third chapter of Philippians:

*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.* (Philippians 3:4b-6)

This is our introduction to Saul, and at first look he is not an easy person to enjoy. Haven't you known people like that in your life? Absolutely certain about what they believe and what they think; they would rather die than change their minds. Contradict something they say, and you are in for hours of debate. When I was younger, I'll have to admit, I did enjoy engaging people like that. But the older I get, the less black-and-white the world seems to me, and the less patience I have for people who think they are right about everything. In some respects, that's Saul.

In the setup to this week's first lesson, we learn that Saul is on his way to Damascus with a full head of steam. He is absolutely certain that these followers of Jesus Christ are spreading an untrue and blasphemous message. He obtains certification from the appropriate authorities, and makes his way to Damascus, so he can arrest these heretics, and bring them back to Jerusalem to be tried in a religious court.

Along the way, however, God captures Saul's attention in a dramatic way. St. Luke, the author of this "Book of Acts" tells us that suddenly a light from heaven flashes around Saul, he falls to the ground, and hears a voice call out to him. It is Jesus himself, calling Saul to stop his persecution of the church, and to become one of them.

This experience leads Paul to a dramatic change – perhaps one of the most dramatic changes in the entire Bible. One aspect of this change is that he receives a new name. He is no longer Saul (named after the first king of Ancient Israel) – a name that gave him credibility with the Jews of his day. Now he has a Greek name: Paul – a name that would give him a certain credibility with his non-Jewish listeners; those people who will become his primary audience. He doesn't receive this name immediately, of course. We won't actually hear him called Paul until the thirteenth chapter of Acts. But he is Paul, nonetheless. And his new name is an indicator both of his new heart, and of his new direction in life. The first aspect of the change Jesus brings to Saul is that he receives a new name.



**Evangelical Lutheran Church in America**

God's work. Our hands.

A second aspect of this change is that many of Saul's long held and adamant beliefs now have to be abandoned. He had lived with a remarkable certainty that this new movement called "The Way" – this movement that will eventually become known as "The Christian Church" – is a departure from God's will. He lived within the system of first century Jewish practice. He saw the Christian movement as opposed to much of what he held dear as a leader in the Jewish church. And so out of his love for God, his commitment to right belief, and his desire to live in a way that was consistent with his ancestors, his disapproval of the Christian movement becomes so strong, that he dedicates himself to destroying it. All that gives way when he meets Jesus on the road to Damascus. He becomes Paul, and abandons his opposition to the Christian movement. And that leads us to the third aspect of change that Paul experienced at his conversion.

Against all odds, he experiences the forgiving love of God in Jesus Christ. For Paul, this is the most radical aspect of how his conversion changed him. He would no longer approach God with fear and uncertainty. He would no longer depend on sacrifices and faithful observances in order to be well with God. He would, instead, rest in the strength of the promises of his Christian faith – and this sets Paul free to joyfully and enthusiastically live as a follower of Jesus Christ. As a matter of fact, he will spend the rest of his life seeking to promote the church he once sought to destroy.

A wise scholar once said that no matter who the primary characters are in any Bible story, the story is ultimately about God, not those characters. That is true with Paul's conversion. Paul obviously is front and center in this story, but ultimately, it is all about God's power, and God's ability to turn lives around for the better. We learn a thing or two about God by studying this part of the Apostle Paul's life, and the most extraordinary thing that we learn about God, in this story, is that forgiveness and conversion are possible, even in the most unlikely of circumstances.

As the book of Acts makes its beginning, there is no stronger opponent of the early church than Saul. He has a great passion for his faith, a great passion for what he believes, and a great passion to see that as many people agree with him as possible. That leads him to go to great lengths in his attempts to destroy the early church. The book of Acts tells us how God takes that great passion and transforms it into an incredible resource for the life and the faith of that same church.

This is what happens when the power and the presence of the Risen Christ break into our lives. It doesn't leave us unchanged. Instead, it wreaks havoc in our lives, and it can transform who we are. By the power of the risen Christ, the abuser can learn to be respectful of others. By the power of the risen Christ, the alcoholic can become clean and sober. By the power of the risen Christ, the thief can come to honor the property rights of others. By the power of the risen Christ, the self-centered person can learn to live a life of love. An encounter with the risen Lord can do that for a person.<sup>i</sup> As Paul would later write, "while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us." God has a preference for entering into the brokenness of our lives, and transforming us with love and grace. God doesn't wait for us to become perfect – as if we need to be worthy of God's touch. God reaches into the darkest corners of each of our lives, and brings healing and hope and peace and joy.

The story of Paul's conversion is a dramatic one, and it gives us a hint as to just how powerful our God really is. But the truth is: God also works in small and incremental ways. Even the most committed of us – even the most faithful of us – have aspects of our living that cry out for God's transforming touch. The Apostle Paul's dramatic conversion is not *the* way that God enters into our lives. But it is one way, and it is a sign of the many ways, small and large, that God's word enters into our lives and works its transforming power.

So what are those areas that cry out for transformation in our lives? What are those long-held and cherished beliefs that you and I need to abandon, in order to live faithfully? What are those customs and traditions that stand in the way of a clear proclamation of the grace we know in Jesus Christ? How is it that God desires to step into our lives and convert us, so that our witness to others might be more authentic; more believable; more compelling?

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<sup>i</sup> This notion was taken from a sermon by the Rev. Dr. Luke Bouman, Peace Lutheran Church, Austin, Texas, as posted at "Goettinger Predigten" (<http://www.predigten.uni-goettingen.de/archiv-6/040125-3-e.html>).

The Risen Christ who appeared to Saul on the road to Damascus, and who turned his life around that day, seeks to turn your lives and mine back to God as well. May we be open to where the word challenges us and disturbs us. May we be inspired by the faithful witness of others, which moves us explore the ways that we could live in a way that is more pleasing to God. May the Spirit of God convert us – transform us – that we might become a clear sign to others of the God who has so graced our lives, and who desires to enter into their lives as well.

Amen.

David J. Risendal, Pastor (January 25, 2009)

First Lesson; English Text: <sup>ii</sup>

<sup>9:1</sup> Meanwhile Saul, still breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord, went to the high priest <sup>2</sup> and asked him for letters to the synagogues at Damascus, so that if he found any who belonged to the Way, men or women, he might bring them bound to Jerusalem. <sup>3</sup> Now as he was going along and approaching Damascus, suddenly a light from heaven flashed around him. <sup>4</sup> He fell to the ground and heard a voice saying to him, "Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?" <sup>5</sup> He asked, "Who are you, Lord?" The reply came, "I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting. <sup>6</sup> But get up and enter the city, and you will be told what you are to do." <sup>7</sup> The men who were traveling with him stood speechless because they heard the voice but saw no one. <sup>8</sup> Saul got up from the ground, and though his eyes were open, he could see nothing; so they led him by the hand and brought him into Damascus. <sup>9</sup> For three days he was without sight, and neither ate nor drank.

<sup>10</sup> Now there was a disciple in Damascus named Ananias. The Lord said to him in a vision, "Ananias." He answered, "Here I am, Lord." <sup>11</sup> The Lord said to him, "Get up and go to the street called Straight, and at the house of Judas look for a man of Tarsus named Saul. At this moment he is praying, <sup>12</sup> and he has seen in a vision a man named Ananias come in and lay his hands on him so that he might regain his sight." <sup>13</sup> But Ananias answered, "Lord, I have heard from many about this man, how much evil he has done to your saints in Jerusalem; <sup>14</sup> and here he has authority from the chief priests to bind all who invoke your name." <sup>15</sup> But the Lord said to him, "Go, for he is an instrument whom I have chosen to bring my name before Gentiles and kings and before the people of Israel; <sup>16</sup> I myself will show him how much he must suffer for the sake of my name." <sup>17</sup> So Ananias went and entered the house. He laid his hands on Saul and said, "Brother Saul, the Lord Jesus, who appeared to you on your way here, has sent me so that you may regain your sight and be filled with the Holy Spirit." <sup>18</sup> And immediately something like scales fell from his eyes, and his sight was restored. Then he got up and was baptized, <sup>19</sup> and after taking some food, he regained his strength. For several days he was with the disciples in Damascus, <sup>20</sup> and immediately he began to proclaim Jesus in the synagogues, saying, "He is the Son of God." <sup>21</sup> All who heard him were amazed and said, "Is not this the man who made havoc in Jerusalem among those who invoked this name? And has he not come here for the purpose of bringing them bound before the chief priests?" <sup>22</sup> Saul became increasingly more powerful and confounded the Jews who lived in Damascus by proving that Jesus was the Messiah. <sup>iii</sup>

First Lesson; Greek Text:

<sup>9:1</sup> Ὁ δὲ Σαῦλος ἔτι ἐμπνέων ἀπειλῆς καὶ φόνου εἰς τοὺς μαθητὰς τοῦ κυρίου, προσελθὼν τῷ ἀρχιερεῖ ἠτήσατο παρ' αὐτοῦ ἐπιστολὰς εἰς Δαμασκὸν πρὸς τὰς συναγωγάς, ὅπως εἴαν τις εὕρη τῆς ὁδοῦ ὄντας, ἀνδρας τε καὶ γυναῖκας, δεδεμένους ἀγάγῃ εἰς Ἱερουσαλήμ. <sup>3</sup> Ἐν δὲ τῷ πορεύεσθαι ἐγένετο αὐτὸν ἐγγίξειν τῇ Δαμασκῷ, ἐξαίφνης τε αὐτὸν περιήστραψεν φῶς ἐκ τοῦ οὐρανοῦ <sup>4</sup> καὶ πεσὼν ἐπὶ τὴν γῆν ἤκουσεν φωνὴν λέγουσαν αὐτῷ· Σαοὺλ Σαοὺλ, τί με διώκεις; <sup>5</sup> εἶπεν δέ· τίς εἶ, κύριε; ὁ δέ· ἐγώ εἰμι Ἰησοῦς ὃν σὺ διώκεις· <sup>6</sup> ἀλλὰ ἀνάστηθι καὶ εἴσελθε εἰς τὴν πόλιν καὶ λαληθήσεται σοι ὃ τί σε δεῖ ποιεῖν. <sup>7</sup> οἱ δὲ ἄνδρες οἱ συνοδεύοντες αὐτῷ εἰστήκεισαν ἐνεοί, ἀκούοντες μὲν τῆς φωνῆς μηδένα δὲ θεωροῦντες. <sup>8</sup> ἠγέρθη δὲ Σαῦλος ἀπὸ τῆς γῆς, ἀνεωγμένων δὲ τῶν ὀφθαλμῶν αὐτοῦ οὐδὲν ἔβλεπεν· χειραγωγοῦντες δὲ αὐτὸν εἰσήγαγον εἰς Δαμασκόν. <sup>9</sup> καὶ ἦν ἡμέρας τρεῖς μὴ βλέπων καὶ οὐκ ἔφαγεν οὐδὲ ἔπιεν.

<sup>10</sup> Ἦν δέ τις μαθητῆς ἐν Δαμασκῷ ὀνόματι Ἀνανίας, καὶ εἶπεν πρὸς αὐτὸν ἐν ὄραματι ὁ κύριος· Ἀνανία. ὁ δὲ

<sup>ii</sup> Link to: [http://www.elca.org/dcm/worship/calendar\\_for\\_2001.html](http://www.elca.org/dcm/worship/calendar_for_2001.html) for a listing of Bible lessons for the coming weeks.

<sup>iii</sup> Acts 9:1-22, New Revised Standard Version Bible (© 1989, Division of Christian Education of the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the United States of America).

εἶπεν· ἰδοὺ ἐγώ, κύριε. <sup>11</sup>ὁ δὲ κύριος πρὸς αὐτόν· ἀναστὰς πορεύθητι ἐπὶ τὴν ῥύμην τὴν καλουμένην Εὐθείαν καὶ ζήτησον ἐν οἰκίᾳ Ἰούδα Σαῦλον ὀνόματι Ταρσέα· ἰδοὺ γὰρ προσεύχεται <sup>12</sup>καὶ εἶδεν ἄνδρα [ἐν ὀράματι] Ἀνανίαν ὀνόματι εἰσελθόντα καὶ ἐπιθέντα αὐτῷ [τὰς] χεῖρας ὅπως ἀναβλέψῃ. <sup>13</sup>ἀπεκρίθη δὲ Ἀνανίας· κύριε, ἤκουσα ἀπὸ πολλῶν περὶ τοῦ ἀνδρὸς τούτου ὅσα κακὰ τοῖς ἁγίοις σου ἐποίησεν ἐν Ἱερουσαλὴμ. <sup>14</sup>καὶ ὦδε ἔχει ἔξουσίαν παρὰ τῶν ἀρχιερέων δῆσαι πάντας τοὺς ἐπικαλουμένους τὸ ὄνομα σου. <sup>15</sup>εἶπεν δὲ πρὸς αὐτόν ὁ κύριος· πορεύου, ὅτι σκεῦος ἐκλογῆς ἐστὶν μοι οὗτος τοῦ βαστάσαι τὸ ὄνομα μου ἐνώπιον ἐθνῶν τε καὶ βασιλέων υἰῶν τε Ἰσραήλ. <sup>16</sup>ἐγὼ γὰρ ὑποδείξω αὐτῷ ὅσα δεῖ αὐτὸν ὑπὲρ τοῦ ὀνόματος μου παθεῖν. <sup>17</sup>Ἀπήλθεν δὲ Ἀνανίας καὶ εἰσήλθεν εἰς τὴν οἰκίαν καὶ ἐπιθεὶς ἐπ' αὐτόν τὰς χεῖρας εἶπεν· Σαοὺλ ἀδελφέ, ὁ κύριος ἀπέσταλκεν με, Ἰησοῦς ὁ ὀφθεῖς σοι ἐν τῇ ὁδῷ ἣ ἤρχου, ὅπως ἀναβλέψῃς καὶ πλησθῆς πνεύματος ἁγίου. <sup>18</sup>καὶ εὐθέως ἀπέπεσαν αὐτοῦ ἀπὸ τῶν ὀφθαλμῶν ὡς λεπίδες, ἀνέβλεψεν τε καὶ ἀναστὰς ἐβαπτίσθη <sup>19</sup>καὶ λαβὼν τροφὴν ἐνίσχυσεν.

Ἐγένετο δὲ μετὰ τῶν ἐν Δαμασκῷ μαθητῶν ἡμέρας τινὰς <sup>20</sup>καὶ εὐθέως ἐν ταῖς συναγωγαῖς ἐκήρυσσεν τὸν Ἰησοῦν ὅτι οὗτος ἐστὶν ὁ υἱὸς τοῦ θεοῦ. <sup>21</sup>ἐξίσταντο δὲ πάντες οἱ ἀκούοντες καὶ ἔλεγον· οὐχ οὗτος ἐστὶν ὁ πορθήσας εἰς Ἱερουσαλὴμ τοὺς ἐπικαλουμένους τὸ ὄνομα τοῦτο, καὶ ὦδε εἰς τοῦτο ἐληλύθει ἵνα δεδεμένους αὐτοῦς ἀγάγῃ ἐπὶ τοὺς ἀρχιερεῖς; <sup>22</sup>Σαῦλος δὲ μᾶλλον ἐνεδυναμοῦτο καὶ συνέχυνεν [τοὺς] Ἰουδαίους τοὺς κατοικοῦντας ἐν Δαμασκῷ συμβιβάζων ὅτι οὗτος ἐστὶν ὁ χριστός. <sup>iv</sup>

### Gospel Lesson; English Text:

<sup>21.10</sup> Then he said to them, "Nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom; <sup>11</sup> there will be great earthquakes, and in various places famines and plagues; and there will be dreadful portents and great signs from heaven. <sup>12</sup> "But before all this occurs, they will arrest you and persecute you; they will hand you over to synagogues and prisons, and you will be brought before kings and governors because of my name. <sup>13</sup> This will give you an opportunity to testify. <sup>14</sup> So make up your minds not to prepare your defense in advance; <sup>15</sup> for I will give you words and a wisdom that none of your opponents will be able to withstand or contradict. <sup>16</sup> You will be betrayed even by parents and brothers, by relatives and friends; and they will put some of you to death. <sup>17</sup> You will be hated by all because of my name. <sup>18</sup> But not a hair of your head will perish. <sup>19</sup> By your endurance you will gain your souls. <sup>v</sup>

### Gospel Lesson; Greek Text:

<sup>21.10</sup> Τότε λεγεν αὐτοῖς· ἐγερθήσεται θνος ἐπ' ἔθνος καὶ βασιλεία ἐπὶ βασιλείαν, <sup>11</sup> σεισμοὶ τε μεγάλοι καὶ κατὰ τόπους λιμοὶ καὶ λοιμοὶ σονται, φόβητρα τε καὶ ἀπ' οὐρανοῦ σημεῖα μεγάλα ἔσται. <sup>12</sup> Πρὸ δὲ τούτων πάντων ἐπιβαλοῦσιν ἐφ' ὑμᾶς τὰς χεῖρας αὐτῶν καὶ διώξουσιν, παραδιδόντες εἰς τὰς συναγωγὰς καὶ φυλακὰς, ἀπαγομένους ἐπὶ βασιλεῖς καὶ ἡγεμόνας νεκεν τοῦ ὀνόματος μου· <sup>13</sup> ἀποβήσεται ὑμῖν εἰς μαρτύριον. <sup>14</sup> θέτε οὖν ἐν ταῖς καρδίαις ὑμῶν μὴ προμελετᾶν ἀπολογηθῆναι· <sup>15</sup> ἐγὼ γὰρ δώσω ὑμῖν στόμα καὶ σοφίαν ἣ οὐ δυνήσονται ἀντιστήναι ἢ ἀντειπεῖν παντες οἱ ἀντικείμενοι ὑμῖν. <sup>16</sup> παραδοθήσεσθε δὲ καὶ ὑπὸ γονέων καὶ ἀδελφῶν καὶ συγγενῶν καὶ φίλων, καὶ θανατώσουσιν ἐξ ὑμῶν, <sup>17</sup> καὶ σεσθε μισούμενοι ὑπὸ πάντων διὰ τὸ ὄνομα μου. <sup>18</sup> καὶ θρῖξ ἐκ τῆς κεφαλῆς ὑμῶν οὐ μὴ ἀπόληται. <sup>19</sup> ἐν τῇ ὑπομονῇ ὑμῶν κτήσασθε τὰς ψυχὰς ὑμῶν. <sup>vi</sup>

<sup>iv</sup> Acts 9:1-22, The Greek New Testament, Aland, Kurt, Black, Matthew, Martini, Carlo M., Metzger, Bruce M., and Wikgren, Allen, (© 1983, Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft Stuttgart).

<sup>v</sup> St. Luke 21:10-19, New Revised Standard Version Bible (© 1989, Division of Christian Education of the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the United States of America).

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