

TURNED AROUND!

Acts 9:1-12; 17-19; 1 Corinthians 15:9, 10a; 2 Timothy 7:7, 8

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Have you ever found yourself heading in the wrong direction? What did you do?

Earlier this year, Loris and I took our holidays on the south coast of NSW, and we decided we'd use our trip over the mountains to test out our GPS. Now over the years Loris has often had the role of navigator on trips like this; so I'm used to a female voice giving me directions. The lady on our GPS had a rather strange computer accent.

On our way home we decided to deviate a little from the most direct route, to check out a power station, part of the Snowy Hydro scheme. Our female guide took exception to this. "Perform a U turn when possible!" she told me emphatically. I chose to ignore her.

About thirty seconds later, noting I hadn't turned round, she told me again, "Perform a U turn when possible!" Now I felt a bit bad. She'd been quite helpful at times on our trip, so I tried to explain. Do you ever have a conversation with your GPS? Does anybody else argue with your GPS, or is it just me? I suggested we were still basically heading the right direction and we could pick up her instructions a little further on. She just interrupted me: "Perform a U turn when possible!"

"OK, if you want to have the last word, fine! But I'm not turning round!" I figured, given time, she would locate where we were, recalibrate the system, and guide us home a different way. She didn't. She persisted with the same instruction. So we switched her off! We had a pleasant drive, through some different country, and made our own way back down to Corryong. Just as I knew we would!

I remember a very different experience, many years ago, before we were married. We'd been out for the evening, and heading home, somewhere around Moe, we found ourselves caught in a very thick, damp, Gippsland fog. Probably the worst fog I've ever driven in. High beam was useless. Low beam, not much better. We could literally only see a few metres ahead, and we were driving very slowly. Not a pleasant experience.

Suddenly, this horrible red sign lit up directly in front of us: "Wrong Way. Go Back!" Now we've all seen this sign. It's the sign on the other section of road, where the cars are coming off the freeway. This sign was on my bit of road; the warning was for me! This time I didn't hesitate, or argue. I "performed a U turn" immediately! I never could work out how we came to be heading in the wrong direction that night. Of course, I blamed the fog!

I remembered these incidents this week, as our series from Acts took me to the story of Saul's conversion (we know him better as Paul.) As we consider his story, and its background, we're confronted with

I. A Scary Prospect;

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a bit like being caught in the fog. Let me try and explain, as we review his background; and we know that

A. Saul was Intelligent, Trained and Sincere.

He got off to a great start in life; he chose the right parents! They had a solid Jewish pedigree. They recognised his potential early; they could afford the best education, and they sent young Saul to study under the noted scholar, Gamaliel.¹ According to Paul's own testimony,² on the surface, he had it all before him. He became a Pharisee, an expert in the law, and describes his own performance, based on legalistic righteousness as "faultless." According to the standards of the day, Saul was one of the good guys.

And this is why I've called this, "*A Scary Prospect*". Saul was intelligent, trained and sincere; and

B. He was Sincerely Wrong!

We're used to thinking "*Pharisee*" means "*hypocrite*"; and no doubt, some of them were. But Pharisees had a strong commitment to taking God and his laws seriously. They held up high standards, and Saul, and many others I'm sure, first held *themselves* accountable to these standards.

As a Pharisee, Saul was fundamentally opposed to this radical new sect, followers of Jesus. We first meet Saul at the stoning of Stephen. Did he physically take part in this horrible act? We're not told. We do know that those who did the actual stoning took off their cloaks and laid them at Saul's feet for safe keeping. Luke tells us "And Saul was there, giving approval to his death."³ At the start of our passage this morning, we read "Saul was still breathing out *murderous threats* against the Lord's disciples."⁴ Whether Saul actually had blood on his hands is a bit academic. He had murder in his heart.

Can we see the paradox here? Here is a young man, intelligent, well-trained, passionately devoted to God... seeking to destroy God's followers. Can you see why I call this scary in its implications for us today? Just because I believe something sincerely doesn't make me right! In fact, I can be intelligent, trained and sincere; and I'm qualified, by Saul's example, to be sincerely wrong!

Obviously, I don't want to leave things here! But before we move on, let's note of Saul here,

¹ See Acts 22:3

² Philippians 3:4-6

³ Acts 8:1

⁴ Acts 9:1

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C. He was a Hindrance to God's Kingdom.

I wonder how Paul later came to terms with what he'd done. In spite of his good intentions, his total devotion to following God's written laws and advancing God's Kingdom, he was actually harming the cause he claimed to love.

It obviously still weighed on his heart, years later. "As for zeal," he wrote to the Philippians, "persecuting the church."⁵ Zeal is a wonderful attribute. Misplaced zeal can cause so much damage. Paul wrote to the Corinthians, "I am the least of the apostles and do not even deserve to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God."⁶ (That's not the end of that quote either; I have some "tidying up" to do before I'm finished!)

Obviously something more than intelligence, training and sincerity is needed; or we too can find our good intentions becoming counter-productive. Saul set out from Jerusalem to Damascus, zealously seeking to protect God's kingdom by wiping out this ridiculous new sect, just one of many around this time. And on his way

II. Saul Met the Risen Jesus.

We've heard something of Holly's testimony this morning. Saul's was a little more dramatic. We each have our own stories, and each one is special to us. Not many of us have stories as dramatic as Saul's. A number of things happened then, in fairly rapid succession. Let me list them quickly. Firstly,

A. He was Completely Turned Around.

He went to Damascus to persecute the followers of Jesus. He *came from* Damascus a dedicated follower himself. It was an absolute U turn.

You may have heard me talk about change before. Change is inevitable. We may as well get used to it, adjust to it, accept and even embrace it when we can; because it is going to happen, whether we like it or not. We can initiate change ourselves at times, as a way to manage it. This is best done in small increments.

None of that applies here! If you're heading in the wrong direction, you need to perform a U turn. Let me emphasise: it was meeting Jesus, face to face, that turned Saul around. Nothing else was ever going to break through his zeal-inspired blindness. Let me say to you this morning, if you're heading in the wrong direction; if Jesus challenges you as to the course you are pursuing, there is only one solution. Turn around! Make that change!

⁵ Philippians 3:6a

⁶ 1 Corinthians 15:9

We note next,

B. He was Given Back his Sight.

I'm not exactly sure why God took Saul's sight from him. Perhaps it was a natural consequence of that intense light that shone from heaven that day. Perhaps God was drawing attention metaphorically to the spiritual blindness that had afflicted Saul. Perhaps God wanted to focus Saul's attention, free from the distractions that come to us all through what we see. We don't know. It doesn't matter. There in Damascus, under brave Ananias's ministry, Saul was given back his physical sight, and the scales fell from his spiritual eyes too. Perhaps for the first time, he saw, not only what he had been doing, but something of where God wanted to take him. Next we read,

C. He was Baptised.

No waiting around for Saul! He was now a true child of God, with a new direction and a new purpose in life before him. He was ready to announce this to the world; especially, I'm sure, to those nervous disciples in Damascus, wondering if they could really trust this man they had come to fear. And then,

D. He Received a New Name.

Now, to be true to the facts, Saul's name-change wasn't instituted at the point of his dramatic conversion. In fact, "Saul" is the Jewish equivalent of the name "Paul"; probably Greek in its origins. Luke, through Acts, continues to call him "Saul" for a little longer, then "Paul" for the remainder of his record. Paul always refers to himself as "Paul" in his letters. So he's "Saul" as a persecutor of Christians, and "Paul" as the author of those beautiful letters. So much changed the day he met Jesus on the road to Damascus.

As Paul looks back on his amazing turn around, he attributes it all to

III. The Grace of God.

Did he have regrets? How could he not regret the damage he inflicted on the early church? "I am the least of the apostles. I don't even deserve to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God." But Paul knew God's forgiveness, even for sins as great as his,

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and he wouldn't live in a constant place of regret. "But by the grace of God I am what I am, and his grace to me was not without effect."⁷ I just love that verse.

My own conversion story is more like Holly's (in some ways); nowhere near as dramatic as Paul's. But I can say what he said. By the grace of God I am what I am, and his grace to me was not without effect. I reckon many of you this morning can join us in that. Where would we be, but for the grace of God?

God took some quite extraordinary steps in changing Saul into the man God knew he could become. And I want us to note this morning,

A. He Wants to Change Us Too.

Paul was perhaps the first, at least the first we know of, with such a dramatic conversion story, a complete 180 degree turn around. He was by no means the last. In fact, through history, there are many accounts of dedicated, zealous, sincere atheists, who set out to disprove once and for all the stupidity of all this Christianity stuff, and wound up becoming passionate believers.

General *Lee Wallace* was one. The evidence he gathered led to his conversion. He later wrote the novel "*Ben Hur*" to put the gospel message into a popular medium. *Josh McDowell* was a sceptic who loved to put down Christians at university. But he couldn't help liking the people he criticised, and in the process of discovering why they chose to treat him as they did, he discovered the truth behind their lifestyle. "*More than a Carpenter*" has become a classic; and "*Evidence that Demands a Verdict*" compiles the truths he discovered.

My all time favourite is *C. S. Lewis*, the brilliant professor of literature and noted former atheist who served at both Oxford and Cambridge universities. He describes his transition from atheist to believer in his book "*Surprised by Joy*". Let me read a little of his story to you; and you'll see something of his humour and his wonderful facility for language. Everyone should read *C. S. Lewis*!

"Amiable agnostics will talk cheerfully about "man's search for God." To me, as I then was, they might as well have talked about the mouse's search for the cat. ... You must picture me alone in that room at Magdalen, night after night, feeling, whenever my mind lifted even for a second from my work, the steady, unrelenting approach of Him whom I so earnestly desired not to meet. That which I greatly feared had at last come upon me. In the Trinity term of 1929 I gave in, and admitted that God was God, and knelt and prayed: perhaps, that night, the most dejected and reluctant convert in all England. I did not then see what is now the most shining and obvious thing; the Divine humility which will accept a convert even on such terms. The Prodigal Son at least walked home on his own feet. But who can duly adore that Love which

⁷ 1 Corinthians 15:10a

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will open the high gates to a prodigal who is brought in kicking, struggling, resentful, and darting his eyes in every direction for a chance of escape? ... The hardness of God is kinder than the softness of men, and His compulsion, is our liberation.”⁸

He’s describing the grace of God! And I want to close this morning by noting again

B. It’s Powerful and Effective.

That one-off encounter with Jesus turned Saul around and gave him a whole new purpose and direction. That was the start, as it is for us, of a life-time to be lived under the transforming power of God’s grace. The encounter is great; it’s the life lived under grace that follows, that changes us, and allows us to live as true disciples.

Jesus taught us this. He said, “Remain in me, and I will remain in you. ... I am the vine; you are the branches... apart from me, you can do nothing. ... Remain in me and you will bear much fruit.”⁹

Our closeness to Jesus helps guard us from the “Saul delusion”: of sincerely, zealously, pursuing what we believe to be the good of God’s kingdom our way, and potentially causing it harm.

If you know this morning that your relationship with Jesus is close and fresh, where you and he want it to be, thank him for this privilege and resolve to play your part in keeping it there.

If you know this morning that things have slipped, or that you’ve never really established this kind of relationship, know that God is seeking that level of relationship with you.

And if you know you’re heading in a wrong direction this morning, perform that U turn; and know that God by his grace is waiting to welcome you home.

⁸ C. S. Lewis, *“Surprised by Joy”* 1955, Fount Books (reprinted 1977) pps. 181-183

⁹ See John 15:4, 5