

25 January 2004
The Conversion of St. Paul

St. Athanasius Lutheran Church
Vienna, VA

Jesu Juva

“Converted in Death and Resurrection”

Text: Acts 9:1-22

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father and from our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. Amen.

A great way to learn about people or to learn about a particular community of people is to go to the bookstore. Not only what books are available, but how they are displayed and organized, can tell you a great deal. What books are near the front? Which are most prominently displayed? Which sections are the largest? What books are on the bargain shelves? Retailers are smart – they know what they’re doing.

So what do people think about religion? What do they think about the Church? If we go to the bookstore we will get a good indication. Because what you will find – almost without exception – is that Bibles and other books about religion are either in, or right next to, the **self-help section**. Right next to all the 12 step books, and the how to books, and the feel good about yourself books, are the Holy Scriptures. Just one of many options for a better life. And polls back this up. Polls tell us that people go to church to feel good, or at least to feel better about themselves, or to improve themselves, to be instructed, or to in some other way, help themselves. For after all, as most people think, God helps those who help themselves.

I think, however, St. Paul would disagree with all of that!

Oh, in the beginning, Paul might have agreed with that. Paul *thought* he knew all about religion and church. He thought he knew better than most. He knew his Scriptures inside and out. He dedicated himself as few others could. He was, as he described himself, a “Pharisee’s Pharisee.” His combination of energy and zeal and knowledge was unsurpassed. He was a model and an example that mothers would probably hold up for their children. Perhaps if he had lived today he would have had his own television ministry!

In fact, so zealous was Paul that he took it upon himself to stamp out this new religious movement that followed this fellow named Jesus of Nazareth. The Jewish authorities did not seek him out – he went to them! This Jesus had been crucified – they’d all seen it – and all this talk of resurrection was just foolishness. So they had to be dealt with, those

“Christians!” Arrest some, kill a few, and the rest would give it up. Surely, it wasn’t worth dying for! What kind of self-help would that be?

Well, as Paul was about to find out, it is the only kind!

For on the road to Damascus, on the road of *Paul’s* way of doing things, Paul is slain. Struck down. Stopped dead in his tracks. A light from Heaven flashes around him and he falls to the ground, deathly afraid. And a voice speaks to him – the voice of the crucified one: “***Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?***” And suddenly the shoe is on the other foot. The arrester is arrested. The slayer is slain. He gets up, but now his eyes no longer work. Divine punishment, no doubt, for his deeds.

And for three days Paul is without sight. For three days he neither ate nor drank. For *three days* – the same number of days in his dark tomb as Jesus was in His.

Then after three days, Paul is raised. He is given his sight back. He is given his *life* back. He is baptized. This was no divine punishment, but grace. And through the grace of this death and resurrection Paul is changed. He is now no longer a persecutor, but a preacher. For, in fact, Paul was not simply given his old life back – a life to improve, a life that he was to change, a second chance to help himself and feel good about himself. No. He was given a *new* life. A different life. And along with this new life came a new name – no longer would he be known as Saul, but now as Paul.

And for his preaching, in return for his “***proving that Jesus is the Christ,***” Paul would experience the persecution he formerly meted out. His former allies were now against him. His conversion did not provide him with a triumphant, abundant Christian life, and health and wealth beyond his imagination. Far from it. He struggled greatly. He suffered much. He was imprisoned and tortured. And from an outsiders point of view, it would seem as if Paul’s life only got worse when he became a Christian.

But Paul knew better. For he knew that Christ and His Church were not about self-help, or self-improvement, or feeling good and escaping problems. The man who wrote almost half the books of the New Testament would not be happy that his writings are today grouped in or near the self-help section in our bookstores! The Church, as Paul learned first hand and as he preached, is not about all of that – it is about far more important things. It is a place of death and resurrection. It is a place of new life. It is the place where the death and resurrection of Jesus is applied to us.

For so it must be. No amount of exhortation, or urging, or instruction, could ever have changed Paul. And it cannot change us. If the Church and her Scriptures are simply

aides for our self-help and self-improvement, then it is no wonder that they are so ignored. They simply become guilt-inducing reminders of our weakness and our failure, the same as our broken New Year's resolutions and the dust-covered exercise machine in the corner of your basement.

No, Paul didn't need instruction – he was already very well-educated. And Paul didn't need encouragement – he was already very zealous. And most of you and the people around you are already well-educated and hard workers. More instruction and encouragement is not what we need! What we need is a new life. A life that will not wear out. A life that will not change. A life that will not be defeated by disease or violence. A life that is not obsessed with itself and characterized by greed and self-preservation. A life that is *free* – free from the bondage of self-help and self-improvement.

And so the Son of God came to give that life. But it is life given through death. His life is not an example for us to follow. If so, we would know much more about His life, especially the first 30 years. But when people want to know “*What would Jesus do?*” the answer is not left to our imaginations – the answer is given on the cross. What Jesus did is die, and that is what He would have us do. Die to our pride and our confidence in our own abilities. Die to our selfish desires and wants. Die to our own self-exaltation. Die to any hope that we place in ourselves, and place our hope instead in Christ. For as Paul would later write to the Romans, “***Now if we have died with Christ, we believe that we will also live with Him.***” (Romans 6:8)

And that is the promise Christ has given to us and *delivers* to us here in His Church. The Son of God came to die and rise to life again so that we who die might also rise to a new life. And in Him, we do. The Church is a place of dying and rising. Dying in repentance and confession and being raised in forgiveness. Being joined to Christ in His death and resurrection through Holy Baptism and given a new life. Receiving the body and blood of Christ into our mouths, so that we are what we eat – sinners slain and raised to a new life. A *new* life – not the same old life given back again for us to improve, or to change, or another chance to feel better about ourselves. No! A completely new life. A life in Christ. A life that will not wear out, nor be defeated by disease or death. A life that is free – free from the bondage of sin, or self-help or self-improvement.

The Lord who gave that life to Paul is the Lord who gives that life to us, here, in His Church. And as Paul was changed and lived a new life, so we are changed and live a new life. And in Paul's conversion and in ours, and in the conversion of every sinner, the words of Jesus again come true: “***The first will be last, and the last first.***”

For He who was first became last, that we who are last might become first.

In the Name of the Father, and of the (+) Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Now the peace of God which passes all understanding, keep your hearts and minds through faith in Christ Jesus our Lord. Amen.