

From Saul to Paul

“From Saul to Paul”

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“Then they dragged Stephen out of the city and began to stone him; and the witnesses laid their coats at the feet of a young man named Saul.”

— Acts 7:58

This morning I’d like to introduce you to the most important figure in Christianity apart from Jesus.

We know him as Paul, but Luke introduces him in Acts by his Hebrew name, his birth name, Saul. And Luke introduces him to the story in Scripture and to the world almost casually, near the end of the account of Stephen’s stoning: “the witnesses laid their coats at the feet of a young man named Saul.”

It sounds incidental. It isn’t.

Because the next line tells us the truth: “And Saul approved of their killing him.”

Saul was not a bystander. He was a participant.

More than that, he was a leader in the effort to crush the early Christian movement.

“Breathing threats and murder,” Acts says, Saul sought authority to hunt down followers of “the Way” and to bring them bound to Jerusalem.

Saul opposed Christians not because he was Jewish, but because he was Jewish in a particular way: deeply, rigorously, devoutly, passionately Jewish. Saul believed — sincerely — that this Jesus movement threatened the integrity of his faith. His problem was not lack of conviction. It was misdirected conviction.

And that’s a dangerous thing in any age.

We know something about that danger in 2026. We are living in a time of hardened positions and fragile institutions. Public life is shaped by outrage. Social media rewards certainty more than wisdom. Communities — even families — fracture along ideological lines.

In that kind of climate, changing your mind can feel like betrayal. Admitting you were wrong can cost you dearly.

Which is what makes Saul's story so remarkable.

Because Saul changed.

Not slightly. Not strategically. Fundamentally. Scripture calls that repentance — not just regret, but a reorientation of one's entire life.

That kind of change is at the heart of the biblical story.

One of the defining features of Jesus's earliest followers was their urgency to share what they had experienced. They believed God was doing something new in Jesus — something not just for Israel, but for the entire world.

And yet, what they proclaimed grew out of something ancient. "You are the light of the world," Jesus said. Those words sound Christian to us, but they are deeply Jewish — rooted in the call of Abraham: "I will bless you... so that you will be a blessing... and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed."

Jesus didn't discard that vision. He embodied and elaborated on it in those wonderful little teaching stories of his that we know as parables.

And Saul, for all his opposition, was devoted to that same God. He was educated, disciplined, formed by scripture, and trained under respected teachers. He was, by any measure, serious about his faith.

Which is why his transformation matters so much.

Because many of us Christians — we successors of Paul — are so convinced of our own righteousness that we often do more harm than good professing our faith.

One of the reasons I'm teaching the course on the Jewish roots of Christianity is because of a terrible statement made in 1980 by the Rev. Dr. Bailey Smith, at that time president of the Southern Baptist Convention, the country's largest Protestant body. Speaking to a group of fundamentalist Christians in Dallas, Smith said, "It is interesting, at great political rallies, how you have a Protestant to pray, a Catholic to pray, and then you have a Jew to pray. With all due respect[s] to those dear people, my friends, God Almighty does not hear the prayer of a Jew."

I was a college student when Bailey Smith made that statement, and even as a twenty-one-year-old, I was stunned by its arrogance and religious bigotry. And even

though Smith was called out repeatedly for his presumptuousness over the years, he never retracted his view, never budged from his position, and he remained a prominent and popular religious figure among conservative evangelical Christians to the end of his life in 2019.

When people dig in — entrenching themselves in their views, their perspective, their way of life — we lose much of our capacity to avoid conflict and violence. When memory so overwhelms imagination that we cannot envision a different future, there is little hope for creativity and even less hope that things will in fact get better. Instead, we will condemn ourselves to the same old same old.

We are living through a time of profound transition. Artificial intelligence is reshaping how people work and learn. Climate instability is affecting where and how people live. Younger generations are increasingly skeptical of institutions, including the church. Many congregations feel uncertain about their future.

How will we respond?

In moments like this, the temptation is to react as Saul first did — to defend what we know, to resist what we don't understand, to hold tighter rather than listen deeper, to yearn for a return to the good old days.

But the Bible tells a different story.

Again and again, God works through disruption. Abraham leaves home. Moses confronts empire. The prophets challenge national assumptions. Mary says yes to a future she cannot control. Peter learns that those he thought were outsiders belong at the table.

And Saul — certain, forceful, wrong — is stopped in his tracks.

On the road to Damascus, he is confronted by a light and a voice:

“Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?”

And here's the turning point of the entire story:

Saul listened.

He listened even though it shattered his worldview.

He listened even though it overturned his certainty.

He listened even though it required him to change.

In that moment, Saul became what he would later call “a new creation.”

And from that transformation came one of the most influential ministries in Christian history. Through his journeys and letters, Paul, as he was known by his Roman name, helped shape a movement that would spread across cultures, languages, and centuries.

But Paul never forgot who he had been. He admitted plainly: “I was convinced that I ought to oppose the name of Jesus.”

Notice that: *I was convinced*.

The issue was not sincerity. The issue was direction. It is possible to be entirely sincere and to be entirely wrong.

That remains true for us.

The life of faith is not about never being wrong. It is about being willing to listen to the Shepherd’s voice so that we can be changed — by God, by truth, and by the Spirit’s ongoing leading in the world and in our lives.

That’s what Jesus preached when he called people to repentance. He wasn’t calling them to feel bad about their sins. He was calling them — calling us — to change the direction of our lives.

The church has always had to learn this.

The early church had to change its understanding of who belonged. Christians have had to rethink their positions on slavery, segregation, and other injustices. And in our own time, we are still discerning what faithfulness requires in a rapidly changing world.

Change itself is not holiness. But resisting all change is not faithfulness either.

The question is whether we are listening.

Because when we listen — truly listen — God can transform even the most unlikely lives.

The persecutor becomes the preacher.

The destroyer becomes the builder.

The enemy becomes the apostle.

That is the story of Saul of Jerusalem who became Paul of the mission field.

And it is, in a different way, our story too.

If you want the faith Jesus taught, you have to be open to transformation — not just in the world, but in yourself. You have to be willing to be led by the Spirit of justice, mercy, and peace — the Spirit that creates, disrupts, and renews.

That Spirit has not stopped moving.

You can see it in our own time.

When Rosa Parks refused to accept humiliation, she listened to something deeper than fear.

When Rachel Carson warned of environmental destruction, she listened to something deeper than convenience.

When the gay patrons of the Stonewall Inn resisted police brutality, they listened to something deeper than silence.

When healthcare workers stayed with patients through the darkest stretches of the pandemic, they listened to something deeper than self-preservation.

When young people today organize for climate justice, insisting that the future matters, they too are responding to a call beyond themselves.

In each case, imperfect people heard something — and acted.

They changed.

And because **they** changed, the world changed.

The book of Revelation gives us this promise: “Behold, I make all things new.”

Not “I make all new things,” but rather “I make all things new.” Including us.

And perhaps that is the word we most need to hear right now.

Not fear.

Not nostalgia.

Not rigid certainty.

But courage — the courage to listen for the living God who still speaks, still calls, still transforms.

In this time of uncertainty and possibility, the Spirit is still speaking.

Are we still listening?