

In his classic book... *The Pleasures of God*... John Piper writes:

Sometimes we joke and say about marriage, "The honeymoon is over." But that's because we are finite. We can't sustain a honeymoon level of intensity and affection. We can't foresee the irritations that come with long-term familiarity. We can't stay as fit and handsome as we were then. We can't come up with enough new things to keep the relationship that fresh. But God says his joy over his people is like a bridegroom over a bride. He is talking about honeymoon intensity and honeymoon pleasures and honeymoon energy and excitement and enthusiasm and enjoyment. He is trying to get into our hearts what he means when he says he rejoices over us with all his heart.

And add to this, that with God the honeymoon never ends. He is infinite in power and wisdom and creativity and love. And so he has no trouble sustaining a honeymoon level of intensity; he can foresee all the future quirks of our personality and has decided he will keep what's good for us and change what isn't; he will always be as handsome as he ever was, and will see to it that we get more and more beautiful forever; and he infinitely creative to think of new things to do together so that there will be no boredom for the next trillion ages of millenniums.

Many believers have been around Christianity long enough to know what John Piper writes is true. ... Piper expresses it in a fresh and compelling manner... and maybe we had not thought of it like that. But generally speaking we might think... “*Yeah... that’s right... That is what the Bible teaches... anyway...*”

But... I am going to go out on a limb... and suggest to you that the normal Christian life includes periods of doubt (where we wonder if God really does love ME like that.) ... Because... really... why would He... and how could He...?

“There is just no way He could love someone: ...with a thought-life like mine ...with a history of terrible choices I have made and horrible

things I've done in my past ...with an anger that lashes out at people ...with a lazy spiritual nature that has a hard time reading the Bible and certainly is not interested in getting too involved in ministry..."

Have you had periods of doubt... that God does love you in the manner the Bible describes...? ... I would like to introduce our passage of study this morning... in the Book of Acts... by first calling your attention to a different passage... which will relate the section of Acts that we will be in... to our doubts about God's love for us. ... So please open your Bible with me first... to 1 Timothy 1:12-16.

1 Timothy 1:12-16

Paul saw his conversion story as profitable for others to hear. ... He wrote to Timothy that it demonstrates how far God will extend His grace. (We doubt God's love for us... when we don't understand the extent of God's grace.) ... The author of Acts **also** saw the value of telling Paul's story... because he tells it in our passage today... and two more times in Acts... (chapters 9... 22... and 26.)

This morning we are going to study the first of three narratives where Paul's conversion is described... and as we do so... I would like us to consider it as a template for how God has pursued you and I. ... This account is dramatic and intense... and of course it's doubtful that any of us have been knocked to the ground by light... and a voice from heaven. Probably none of us began as a vicious persecutor of Christians... either. But this account can teach us some important lessons about the nature of conversion... and God's incredible amount of love... evidenced by the enormous grace that God presents... as He pursues us.

When the persecution broke out in Jerusalem... the church went underground. ...The apostles remained in Jerusalem... but many of the others were scattered... We found Philip up in Samaria in the midst of revival there... Then God sent him out to the desert to lead an Ethiopian eunuch to Christ... and from there along the Mediterranean coast. ... But the thing that triggered Christians moving out with the Gospel... was the stoning of Stephen... followed by persecution.

The other religious leaders in Jerusalem were satisfied after they had run the Christians out of Jerusalem. ...They were willing to let it stay at that point. ... But not Saul of Tarsus! ... He was the one who was breathing out threatenings and slaughter. ... He hated Jesus Christ. ... I do not think that the Lord Jesus Christ ever has had an enemy greater than this man Saul of Tarsus. ... We see the awful terror - worldwide - of ISIS... and their despicable beheading of Christians. ... But Saul's hatred was probably hotter!

He went to the high priest and said, "*Look, I've heard that a group of them have run off up there to Damascus... Let me go get them!*" ... He intended to ferret them out... anywhere they went. ... His goal was to exterminate the Christians.

Acts 9:1-2

Luke's description of Saul is someone "*breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord.*" He could hardly have been a less promising candidate to receive God's kind favor! ... He exhaled hatred of Christians. ... This was the very atmosphere which he breathed. ... He lived in this climate. ... He was dedicated in terrible bloody zeal to

eliminating what he regarded as the cult of the Nazarene. He was breathing in an atmosphere of hate, violence and murder against it. In the third telling of this Story here in Acts... Paul stood before King Agrippa... and Paul himself told the king how he felt at this time.

Acts 26:9-11 (ESV)

"I myself was convinced that I ought to do many things in opposing the name of Jesus of Nazareth. And I did so in Jerusalem. I not only locked up many of the saints in prison after receiving authority from the chief priests, but when they were put to death I cast my vote against them. And I punished them often in all the synagogues and tried to make them blaspheme, and in raging fury against them I persecuted them even to foreign cities.

Like a warhorse who sniffed the smell of battle." He was a frightening... violent enemy... a callous... self-righteous... bigoted murderer... set on a full-scale inquisition. ... Eventually Jerusalem could not hold him. ... He sought and received extradition papers from the Sanhedrin so he could go to Damascus... and ravage the growing Christian community there as well. It was 150 miles to Damascus (about a week's travel)... but he would have traveled a month for the privilege. ... Saul the hunter! ... Saul the man of blood! ... Yet this hunter... by the grace of God... was about to become the hunted by Jesus Christ. ... Paul's change of life... after his conversion... shows the power of salvation.

We would do well to think about those today who hate Christians... often in the name of their constitutional rights. ... We would do well to pray for them... rather than hope for their demise. ... We sure are seeing a lot of Christ-haters who are out protesting and denying yours and my freedom of religion. We lost another one on Friday when the Supreme Court misunderstood... that it's role... is to define what marriage is. They have

replaced God's authority – with their own. ... But let's not wish for their demise... or any who advocated the position that the Court has taken! ... Pray for them as you listen to them on the news... or read their loud opinions online or in print. Saul was not beyond the extent of God's grace... and neither are they!

But returning more directly to our theme from today's passage... Saul's pre-Christian life helps us understand ourselves. God does not sparingly use less of this same grace... on you and I.

Damascus was 135 miles northeast of Jerusalem... a six or seven day journey by foot. It had a large Jewish population... and it has been estimated that there could well have been thirty to forty synagogues in the city. ... The fact that there were already believers there indicates how effective the church had been in getting out the message. ... Some of the believers may have fled the persecution in Jerusalem... which explains why Saul wanted authority to bring them back.

Acts 9:3-6

Verse 3... Sudden... shining... and shocking describes this phenomena. ... Christ got Paul's attention in a hurry. ... The light from heaven indicates the Shekinah Glory... which was God's presence... as often revealed in the Old Testament.

In the Garden of Eden... when sin first occurred... God came into the Garden and addressed a question to Adam. ... I don't know if you have ever thought about this... but... that question was very significant. ... It was... "*Adam, where are you?*" (Gen 3:9). ...There is a sense in which that

is the question God is still asking men and women today. ... If Adam would think through that question... he would find himself well on the road back. You cannot know the way back... until you know where you are. ... Thus the first question God asks men who are without Christ today is, "*Where are you?*" *Where are you in life?* ... When you answer that you are on the way back.

Now... this question... asked of Saul... is very similar. ... Jesus just re-phrases the question. The Lord Jesus says to him, "*Saul, why are you persecuting me? ... What is behind it... what are your motives? ... What are your reasons? ... What do you hope to accomplish? ... What is this that is driving you like this? ... Why are you persecuting me? ... Where are you in all of this... and where are you going?*"

I am sure that in the hours of darkness that followed (once he entered Damascus)... young Saul of Tarsus debated that question many... many times. *Why? ... What was it that had driven him like this? ... What was it that motivated his life through all those years... that led to such violent activity against the program of God?* ... In the answer to that question he would come a great understanding of himself and of human life.

Notice that the next thing Jesus says to him is also very significant. He says, "*Arise and enter the city, and there you will be told what to do.*" That indicates a tremendous reversal of this man's whole approach to life. He is now experiencing the lifestyle which belongs to a Christian. "*You are not your own; you are bought with a price. You will be told what to do.*" (LISTEN...) That is what conversion is...! ... It is a change from thinking

that you can run your own life... to an acknowledgment that God holds the program in His hands... and He has the right to tell you what to do.

This was the first thing Paul experienced when he became a Christian... this right of Jesus Christ to be Lord... and to tell him what he was to do. Conversion is a revolutionary *change of government* ... resulting in a radical change in behavior. ... That is what happened to Paul. ... He was put on a wholly different lifestyle. ... He was told to go into the city. ... Now Paul would no longer be giving the orders. ... He would no longer be directing men and sending them where he wanted them to go... and doing what he wanted to do... but he would be told what he was to do.

Paul had to say, *“Everything I have been doing was completely and shamefully and violently wrong! I am blind. I don’t understand myself. I don’t understand the world. I don’t understand God. And I can’t change.”* He came to realize that he was an enemy of God.

The things that are wrong with you and me... go so deep... (the blindness is so complete)... that we have no way out. ... We can’t fix ourselves... because the very effort to change only makes matters worse. ... Most of us were not violently angry in the days just before our conversion. ... We probably had other issues — feeling sorry for ourselves... fighting with people we thought were doing us wrong... trying to impress the people around us... building thicker facades so they would stand up a little longer under harsh treatment... and so on. ... Saul’s conversion was dramatic... but we ordinary individuals are just the same. ... If God does not intervene... we have no hope.

It is also important for us to notice... that in Saul's conversion... the initiative for change is entirely with Jesus. ... He is the one who finds the lost soul. It is not the needy... angry... self-destructive person who is seeking to find Jesus. ... Sometimes you and I will say about our conversion something like this: "*I found Christ under such and such circumstances,*" or "*I came to faith in such and such circumstances.*" ... But we have it backward. Christ found us in these circumstances. ... He sought us and gave himself to us as the initiator of a love relationship.

Those who claim that salvation is all a matter of our choosing God... that He doesn't chose us – we chose Him... (those who believe that it is all a matter of our free will)... have a hard time explaining this event.

Maybe you were once a proud intellectual... who found that you had no answer to your fear of death. ... Maybe you were the victim of abuse. ... Maybe you were a highly skilled and self-sufficient person who saw no need for Christ... Maybe you were an empty shell. ... Christ pursued you with His grace. ... Paul was a vicious hunter... who was hunted down by Christ... and so were you!

God always makes the first move. And just like Saul... we must be brought to our knees. ... We must come to the point where we recognize that we desperately need Him.

Have you been brought to the end of yourself in this manner...? Have you come to see that you are completely helpless without God's intervention...? Have you ever given up the struggle of trying to be good enough to gain God's favor...?

Without your own Damascus Road experience... there is no way you can have a relationship with God... and there is no way you will make it to Heaven. ... And even though... our Damascus Road experience is probably less dramatic than Saul's – it must have the same effect! We must be broken of our compulsive independence... and arrogance. ... Our Damascus Road experience needs to impact our life with a sense of emptiness before God... that there is nothing about us that makes us worthy of God's favorable attention.

Acts 9:7-9

Paul complied with the commands of Christ which gave evidence that he was converted on the spot. Obedience confirms salvation. Lack of obedience gives justification for doubting one's conversion claim.

Paul was blinded temporarily by this light and that made it difficult for him to obey the orders to "*go into the city.*" ... God's commands will face difficulties... but do not reject the command for that reason.

Saul had to wait three days in physical hardship before anything happened. God often tests us with waiting. For Saul... however... this was probably more than a test. Like the deaf-muteness of Zechariah in Luke 1, it was probably designed by God to produce a time of reflection.

His mind would now be shut up in the world of thought alone. He would be left alone...

- to continue praying over his terrible shame.
- to learn and know beyond question that the Lord had confronted

him.

- to think through the confrontation with the Lord.
- to wonder what changes there would be in his life now.
- to switch his mind and his thought patterns, his purpose in life from the past life of religion to the present life with Christ.
- to wonder why Jesus was choosing him, the one who had so fiercely opposed the Lord.
- to wonder what Jesus wanted with him and what Jesus was going to tell him to do.

Acts 9:10-16

Now Paul is converted. Now he is a Christian. And what is the first thing he experienced as a Christian? The life of the body of Christ. That is wonderful, is it not? Two unknown, obscure Christians are sent to him. He meets them and is immediately helped by the strengthening that can come from the body... (from other Christians.) ... First there is a man named Judas. That is all we know about him. Saul is led to his house whom he has never met before. While he is there a man named Ananias is sent to minister to him.

I can imagine Ananias listening to the Lord and responding affirmatively, then asking a question or two. "*Go to Straight Street... Okay, Lord... A man from Tarsus? Fine... Saul? ... **The** Saul...? ... The guy who has been tearing up the church? Lord, are you sure...?"*

The news had traveled quickly to Damascus of Paul's intentions. The saints were in great fear of Paul's coming. Ananias knew that Paul was coming... and he could have also complained about going to the house of Judas. ... But Paul was such a great peril and fear for Ananias that other problems would not seem so great.

“Not him... Lord ! ... That's impossible ! ... He could never become a Christian!” ... In essence, that's what Ananias said when God told him of Saul's conversion. After all... Saul had pursued believers to their death. Despite these understandable feelings... Ananias obeyed God and ministered to Saul. ... We must not limit God... He can do anything. We must obey and follow God's leading... even when He leads us to difficult people and places.

Ananias' fears were understandable... and God shows His grace to Ananias by addressing those fears... by telling him two things. ... What God reveals to Ananias about Saul's commission was for Ananias' benefit. God never told Ananias to say these things to Saul... and there is no indication that Ananias did.

But here is what God told Ananias (for his own benefit.) ... Saul was God's chosen vessel for two things. **First**... he was to bear the name of Jesus. Notice that he is not called a “witness” as the disciples were. ... Although Paul may have seen Jesus at His crucifixion... he had not walked with Him in the days of His flesh. ... He really knew nothing about Him until that day on the road to Damascus. ... Now he is to bear that Name. ... That is the same name we are to bear today, the name of Jesus.

“Bear my name” is a vivid expression of our missional responsibility in every age and every situation. ... Incredibly, and perhaps overwhelmingly, God has committed 'His Name'... (meaning His character and honor)... in the world - to us... (His people.) ... We are “little Christ's.”

2 Corinthians 4:7 (ESV)

But we have this treasure in jars of clay, to show that the surpassing power belongs to God and not to us.

The presence of Christ within our heart is a "*treasure enclosed in a container that holds little value.*" But it is to be displayed to others.

Saul was chosen by God to display this treasure before kings and dignitaries who were Gentile and Jewish.

Second, the Lord said He will show Saul what great things he must suffer for His name's sake. ... "*It's OK Ananias... there are consequences for the bad choices we make in this life... and Saul is not exempt...*"

In my judgment, there has never been anyone else who has suffered for the Lord as Paul the apostle suffered. None of us dare say, "*I'm suffering more than anyone else. Why does God let this happen to me?*" We may be suffering or we may think we are suffering more than we are. At any rate, none of us suffer as Paul the apostle suffered for the Lord.

2 Corinthians 11:23-27 (ESV)

Are they servants of Christ? I am a better one — I am talking like a madman—with far greater labors, far more imprisonments, with countless beatings, and often near death. Five times I received at the hands of the Jews the forty lashes less one. Three times I was beaten with rods. Once I was stoned. Three times I was shipwrecked; a night and a day I was adrift at sea; on frequent journeys, in danger from rivers, danger from robbers, danger from my own people, danger from Gentiles, danger in the city, danger in the wilderness, danger at sea, danger from false brothers; in toil and hardship, through many a sleepless night, in hunger and thirst, often without food, in cold and exposure.

Going before the Gentiles, Israelites and especially before "*kings*" sounds exciting, but it would not happen apart from the "*suffer*" part. Many only see the glory in God's service, but they do not see (or do not want to see) the price for the glory of service, so when the suffering part comes they quit.

When we are called to follow Jesus Christ, we are called to suffer. ... There is a word we do not like -- *suffer*. Yet the Christian life invariably involves suffering. This same man will write to the Philippians and tell them that they were called not only to believe in Jesus but also to suffer for his name's sake. ... God calls us to commitment... not to comfort. ... He promises to be with us *through* suffering and hardship... not to spare us from them. ... Spiritual usefulness and honor go hand in hand with suffering. Both were part of the Hunter's plan for Saul — and for us.

Even though God revealed this information to Ananias to encourage his obedience... Ananias probably left his house with trepidation, but to his credit he obeyed. And as had happened with Philip the deacon, Ananias' obedience made him party to a great work of God.

Acts 9:17

"*Brother Saul*" - How unthinkable that phrase would have been only a day or two before! Yet this is what Christ is ever able to do... turn enemies and persecutors into sisters and brothers. ... God could even turn the leader of ISIS into a brother in Christ... and certainly anyone who has dedicated themselves to restrict our religious freedoms in this country.

God did this with Saul... and in obedience to the Holy Spirit... Ananias greeted Saul lovingly. It is not always easy to love others... especially when we are afraid of them or doubt their motives. ... Nevertheless we must follow Jesus' command to love one another... and follow Ananias's example... showing loving acceptance to other believers... despite our fear.

Acts 9:18-19

Saul was struck blind and his old way of life ended in a moment. When the scales fell from his eyes... he was somebody completely different – a new creature.

Why is that important to observe? If we don't realize that Christian faith is a revolution... our tendency will be to try to add Christianity to what we already are... like getting an advanced degree to improve ourselves... or else undertaking a moral reformation of some kind. ... Having come to Christ... He gives us a new heart that wants to clean up our act... make new friends... add some discipline... ... Like Saul... we will never again be the person we once were.

The revolution comes at the core... from a new/regenerated heart. The foundation is destroyed and a new one is built. We are now the residence of the Holy Spirit, children of God. Everywhere we go and everything we say and do, the way we influence the world, comes from a change that is rightly described as new birth.

The great persecutor then confessed Christ through baptism. ... Please stop and consider the statement Saul made by this. In those days being baptized would forever stigmatize Saul... and make him an outcast among all of his Jewish friends and family. Saul was immediately “sold out” for Christ!

Let us understand that we can be changed even as Paul was... if we discover the same principle that he discovered. ... We who are nothing can be filled with Him who is everything... and that will make us something!

We began this morning with the question – does God really love me the way the Bible says He does...? ... The story of Paul’s conversion assures us that He does!

If God loves His enemies this much... if He invites those who hate Him to come to him... if He wins those who terrorize His beloved... if He is vitally interested in failures and enemies and rebels... why would we doubt that it is possible for Him to love us...?

Who can say... “*My sins are too great to be forgiven...?*” ... Who can honestly say... “*There is no hope!*”...? God’s mercy was extended to the very chief of sinners... (the bitterest of all enemies of God)!

Who of us could ever think of themselves as too far gone to be reached by God’s grace...? Is not the same grace that transformed Saul sufficient for us...? Lets stop treating God’s grace so cheaply! God changes lives! Blaming things of our past denies the power and the grace of God!

So I am going to close with a portion of the quote from John Piper that I began with. Listen again – and know it is true.

God says his joy over his people is like a bridegroom over a bride. He is talking about honeymoon intensity and honeymoon pleasures and honeymoon energy and excitement and enthusiasm and enjoyment. He is trying to get into our hearts what he means when he says he rejoices over us with all his heart.

And add to this, that with God the honeymoon never ends. He is infinite in power and wisdom and creativity and love. And so he has no trouble sustaining a honeymoon level of intensity; he can foresee all the future quirks of our personality and has decided he will keep what’s good for us and change what isn’t; he will always be as handsome as he ever was, and will see to it that we get more and more beautiful forever; and he infinitely creative to think of new things to do together so that there will be no boredom for the next trillion ages of millenniums.