

# THE WAY TO DAMASCUS

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**ACTS 9:1-20**

**LETHBRIDGE MENNONITE CHURCH**

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**APRIL 10, 2016/3<sup>RD</sup> SUNDAY OF EASTER**

During the Sundays between Easter Sunday and Pentecost, we are looking at a few snapshots from the book of Acts.

We so often ask some version of the question, “What does Easter mean for our lives?”

One way to do this is to look at what Easter *meant* for those first followers of Jesus who were sent out into the world with the stunning news of resurrection.

I’ve called this series “Resurrection on the Move.”

Last week, we looked at the story of Peter before the Sanhedrin. We saw that “resurrection” sends us out into the world with the courage to obey like Peter (“We must obey God rather than human beings”) with the humility and openness of Gamaliel.

Today, we have a conversion story. Probably the most famous conversion story in all of history.

My guess is that you’ve heard phrases like, “It was kind of a Damascus road experience,” or “I saw the light.”

Some of our most famous hymns are saturated with the language of this story. John Newton’s “Amazing Grace,” for example. *Amazing grace, how sweet the sound, that saved a wretch like me... I once was lost but now am found, was blind but now I see...*

Many of us grew up on stories of dramatic conversions in testimonies from the front of churches or from missionaries on the mission field.

I remember when I was younger there was kind of this assumption in youth group circles that our own stories should somehow replicate these. And so we had this comical phenomenon of good Christian kids trying to invent lives bad enough to be worthy of an exciting conversion narrative!

Lately, though, “conversion” is a word that has fallen upon hard times.

For some, the word itself smacks of colonialism. We think of overzealous missionaries paying little attention to cultural context in their haste to convert the masses (e.g., Barbara Kingsolver’s *Poisonwood Bible*).

Or, perhaps we think of paternalistic, condescending, even violent approaches to conversion that didn’t respect people’s freedom to choose Jesus for themselves. We might think of fundamentally destructive approaches to mission that destroyed families and cultures. Canada’s own legacy of Indian Residential Schools comes to mind here.

Or, we might think of our current philosophical context of postmodernism where we are increasingly aware that there are so many worldviews and religions out there. How could we *possibly* presume to tell someone that we know something that they don’t?! How could we *possibly* imagine that their way isn’t as good as our way? Is it not arrogant to imagine that there is one Truth and not all kinds of little truths, and that we have it? Are we not all just the product of the time and place and religious/ideological context into which we are born (we discussed this in our adult Sunday School class last week)?

And many of us have never had our “Damascus road” experiences. For many of us, the life of faith has been much more about slow and steady relationships, patient reading and instruction, some doubt and struggle, a life of ups and downs with the church, and God working in and through us steadily over long periods of time and in all kinds of ways.

It has been less about being struck down as we were chasing headlong down destructive paths than about trying on a set of clothes, learning and growing into a way of life that has been passed down to us by others.

So, how do we think about “conversion” in light of all these realities?

For the remainder of this morning's sermon, I want to look at things through the lens of two words.

"Way" and "Damascus."

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## **Way**

We encounter this word twice in our passage today.

The first is in Acts 9:2:

Meanwhile Saul, still breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord, went to the high priest 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.

This how the first followers of Jesus were known. *People of the Way*.

Muslims sometimes refer to Christians and Jews as fellow "people of the book." This is a welcome expression of shared commitment to the Old Testament.

But "people of the book" is not the best description of a Christian, no matter what some of the most enthusiastic proponents of the Bible might say. We are, first and foremost, "people of a person," Jesus Christ, and people his Way.

Christians sometimes act like "people of the doctrine" or "right-thinking people."

Doctrine *does* matter. Truth *is* important. But I think there is something vitally important communicated by the simple reference to how those first Christians were known.

The Way communicates movement. It conveys following after.

Too often there is a "settled" aspect of Christianity. We give the impression that we have all the right answers and "conversion" means accepting this body of propositional knowledge about God.

But is it possible that God might have new things to teach us along the way? New ways in which resurrection life seeks to break into changing realities?

People of the “answer” or “right thinking people” have little need to follow very closely because they already have it all figured out.

People of the way stick closely to their teacher because they are convinced that the story they are a part of is always in motion and that their teacher calls them onward.

We are people of the way.

The second reference to “way” comes in verse 17.

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."

Saul was also on the way, from Jerusalem to Damascus.

Saul was a good Pharisee, among the most observant best of the Pharisees, as he would later describe himself in Acts 22 and 26.

As a Pharisee, Saul thought that Jesus, his Way, and those who embraced it were dangerous, were recklessly wrong, and represented a threat to the stability and legitimacy of the Jewish people and their way of life.

This is why “Saul was breathing murderous threats against the Lord’s disciples” in verse one.

This is why Saul found himself on the road to Damascus, a letter from the high priest in hand, marching off as the righteous defender of God and his people.

So, what happened to Saul as he was on the way to round up the people of the way?

Well, Jesus happened.

The Way, the Truth, and the Life encountered Saul on his righteous, religious way, striking him blind in order to let him see properly.

Jesus himself had described people like Saul in Matthew 23. He uses some of the strongest language we encounter in all the gospels in describing them as a “brood of vipers” and “blind guides.”

This echoes a theme of the prophets more generally—that of the shepherds of God’s people being convinced they are right, that they see clearly, never realizing that they are blind. They are, as Isaiah famously said (and as Jesus quoted in Matthew 13) seeing but never perceiving” (Isaiah 6:9).

This was Saul, on the way to Damascus. This was the Saul that Jesus stopped in his tracks. This was the Saul that would be God’s “chosen instrument” to proclaim his name to the Gentiles.

N.T. Wright brings out the comic irony of this situation well:

[W]hen you want to reach the pagan world, the person to do it will be a hard-line, fanatical, ultra-nationalist, super-orthodox Pharisaic Jew. And then they say God doesn’t have a sense of humour?<sup>1</sup>

Who could have imagined it? Saul, the fire breathing religious zealot, stalking the terrain from Jerusalem to Damascus, satisfied in his righteousness, convinced he was on a holy mission in the service of the one true God becoming the most influential Christian missionary in all of history—the one who would go on to pen the vast majority of the remainder of the New Testament from Acts onward.

God does, indeed, have a sense of humour.

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## **Damascus**

The second word I want to focus on is Damascus.

Damascus is obviously a city in Syria, about two hundred kilometers north of Jerusalem. A city some believe to be the oldest city of continuous habitation in the world.

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<sup>1</sup> N.T. Wright, *Acts for Everyone, Part One* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2008), 145.

Damascus is an important place in our story today.

Damascus is where Saul's blindness—literal and spiritual—is healed.

Damascus is where Saul encounters Jesus again—this time, not in a blinding light on the way, but in an ordinary house, through the voice and the touch of another human being.

It's fascinating how God restores people.

God could have spoken to Saul directly again. He could have come with a cloud of smoke and a booming voice, saying, "Ok, Saul, now it's time to be a good boy and set out on a different path."

But he chooses a different route. He chooses Ananias, a disciple of Jesus, a follower of the way, someone who would have been a target of Saul's zealous religious rage, to be the agent of his restoration.

When do the scales fall off Saul's eyes? When does he begin to see again? When does he step out into resurrection life?

When Ananias reaches out and touches Saul and says, "brother Saul..."

Think about what would have been necessary for this to happen. Ananias would have understandably been horrified at the idea of going to Saul!

He quite obviously knew who Saul was (it says so in verse 13).

He knew that the man on the way to Damascus was the self-proclaimed member of God's hit squad. He knew that Saul of Tarsus meant big trouble for people of the Way. And *this* is the guy God is telling him to move toward?!

And yet, he steps out in trust toward his enemy. Ananias chooses to trust the voice of God rather than his quite logical fears.

Damascus becomes the site of transformation.

Damascus marks the place where Saul the murder-breathing, pharisaical Jewish zealot takes his first steps toward becoming Saul the first missionary of Jesus Christ to the Gentiles.

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I want to close with asking us to look at our own lives through the lens of these two words. “Way” and “Damascus”

We, too, are on the way.

This is what life is—a journey. Physical, relational, spiritual, existential. We are never standing still. We are always moving somewhere.

And Jesus encounters us on the way, too.

Not, perhaps, in flashed of light and dramatic encounters. Sometimes, as I said earlier, it’s simply through the mundane, everyday events and relationships of our lives, where we hear the steady invitation to live our lives in pursuit of the God who made us, loves us, and is daily calling us to himself in all kinds of ways.

But sometimes God does get our attention in dramatic ways.

A health crisis.

The death of someone close to us.

A relationship breakdown.

A breaking point with a crippling addiction.

A crisis of faith or doubt where the beliefs and assumptions we have just don’t fit with the reality we’re experiencing.

Maybe we’ve spent years in righteous zeal for God or religion or doctrinal purity that has only left a trail of wreckage in its wake, and has done little to improve the lives of those around us.

Maybe we've spent years spent in diligent pursuit of social justice and worthy causes and failed to recognize that the gospel makes claims on us at deep and personal levels.

Maybe we just find that life just doesn't seem to be "working" anymore, at least not the way we're living it.

Each one of these things can be an occasion for God to blind us on the way and to set us on the path to seeing clearly.

Some say that moments of weakness should not be the moments when we think about big changes like conversion. But maybe these are the very *best* moments to change course!

Christian Wiman in his book, *My Bright Abyss*, puts it like this:

That conversions often happen after or during intense life experiences, especially traumatic experiences, is sometimes used as evidence against them. The sufferer isn't in his right mind. The mind, tottering at the abyss of despair or death, shudders back toward any simplicity, any coherency it can grasp, and the man calls out to God...

But how could it be otherwise? It takes a real jolt to get us to change our jobs, our relationships, our daily coffee consumption, for goodness' sake—or, if we are wired that way, to change our addiction to change. **How much more urgency is needed, how much more primal fear, to startle the heart out of its ruts and ruins?**<sup>2</sup>

Saul had his heart startled out of its ruts and ruins on the way...

....and had his compass turned Jesus-ward in Damascus.

Almost invariably, at some point in our lives, we will have our Damascus moments, too.

**Moments when we will be faced with the choice that Saul had to make in Damascus.**

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<sup>2</sup> Christian Wiman, *My Bright Abyss: Meditation of a Modern Believer* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2013), 146.

Will we humbly accept that our way isn't working, is less than God intended for our lives? Is actively working *against* the good, the true, the beautiful?

Will we shed our self-righteousness and religious zeal and embrace the way of the Servant King who calls us to lives of love and service to others?

**We will also have our moments where we will be faced with the choice Ananias had to make in Damascus.**

Will we extend our hand to the one who frightens us? Will we trust and not be afraid. Will we recognize that God comes to us in the people of our lives and asks us to step forward, together, in love, community, obedience and trust?

Will we recognize that conversion is not about arrogantly telling others what to think or how to live but seeking to be converted to Jesus and his way on our *own* ways.

And about inviting people that we encounter along our way to the person of Jesus and to being willing to encountering Jesus in others—perhaps even the most unlikely others—as well?

May God help each one of us along our way to our Damascus.

Amen.

