

## SERIES: “Outspoken Heroes of the Faith”

Paul – Acts 9:1-30

We live in a world of trends or fads – things that are popular now, but eventually fade away – that’s a fad. The last few years, one of the fads you no doubt have seen on TV is the idea of personal extreme makeovers. How it works is that certain people are chosen who have all kinds of physical problems or weight issues or bad wardrobes and looks, are given extreme makeovers. They get a personal trainer, or they visit a plastic surgeon, or they get dental implants, or they get new clothes, make-up and a new haircut, and “wha-lah” – they are transformed into a new person. In this day and age when people are fixated on physical appearance, TV shows about extreme makeovers are the latest fad. They’re called “extreme makeovers” because of the extreme changes that take place in people’s lives because of the way they now look.

This idea of extreme makeovers isn’t something new. Actually, there are examples in the Bible of people who have gone through extreme makeovers. Of course, we’re not talking about changing someone’s appearance. We’re talking about changing someone’s heart, someone’s soul. Probably the most extreme spiritual makeover to take place in the Bible was that of the Apostle Paul. **Let’s meet him and see what happened to him.**

Look at the change that took place in him. In verse 1 of our text we see Paul, then known as Saul, **“breathing murderous threats against the Lord’s disciples.”** But then look at verse 20: Here we see Paul preaching in the synagogues that **“he (Jesus) is the Son of God.”**

What a complete turnaround, an extreme makeover of the heart! Today we are going to look at Paul’s story, his conversion, and as we study some of the things that took place in the Apostle Paul’s life, we will see pictures of ourselves. Really, if you think about it, Paul’s story is your story. There are things we see in him, that we can also see in ourselves.

First, let’s take a look at Paul before his conversion, before the makeover of his heart. We have already pointed out verse one, where Paul was breathing murderous threats against the disciples of Jesus. You see, Paul was a Pharisee, and the Pharisees were very hostile toward the teachings of Jesus Christ. Paul was one of the more extreme Pharisees – he was extremely hostile toward Christians. He was a one-man KGB or Gestapo. The words “murderous threats” tell us that Paul threatened to murder anyone who preached the Gospel of Jesus. Paul hated Jesus and hated Christians. He wanted Christians to either give up their faith, or to be killed. At the end of verse two, we see that Paul was sort of a “bounty hunter for Christians.” He was planning to travel to the city of Damascus, hunt down believers, arrest them, throw them into prison, and eventually have them killed.

Paul himself said in Galatians 1:13-14: **“For you have heard of my former life in Judaism, how I persecuted the church of God violently and tried to destroy it. And I was advancing in Judaism beyond many of my own age among my people, and was extremely zealous for the traditions of my fathers.”** Before his conversion, Paul was **“advancing in Judaism.”** Now remember, Judaism was a very self-righteous religion. It was up to you to memorize the traditions of the fathers, to follow all the rules and regulations. It was up to you to strive to keep the Jewish law perfectly, down to the last detail. Paul was following a religion of self-righteousness – relying on himself, depending on himself, for his own salvation. And as we see here, he was good at it. Before his conversion, Paul was advancing beyond many Jews in the religion of self-righteousness.

What an interesting picture of Paul, before his spiritual makeover. A man that was hostile toward Christianity. And a man who was very caught up in a religion of works, and self-righteousness. Can you see yourself in this picture of the Apostle Paul?

You might think to yourself, “Well, I’ve never been that hostile toward God – I’ve never persecuted Christians or anything like that.” But, according to the Bible, there is a part of you that IS hostile toward God. Romans 8:7 tells us that “the sinful mind is hostile toward God.” We call that “sinful mind” our sinful nature. Each of us has one – we inherited the sinful nature from our parents. Each one of us has that certain part of us that is hostile toward God. My sinful nature doesn’t want to obey God, doesn’t want to listen to God, and really, doesn’t want anything to do with God. That’s your sinful nature too. Here we see the Apostle Paul’s sinful nature exhibiting itself persecuting Christians. Your sinful nature has motivated you to do some terrible things as well. Before our conversion, that’s what “ran the show” in our lives.

And as we see Paul’s self-righteousness here, we also see a picture of our own. You see, each one of you is born with a desire to earn your way to heaven. There’s a certain part of you that wants to throw everything about Jesus out the window, so that you can get back to earning our salvation by being a good person. Here we see Paul, being extremely zealous in his religion of self-righteousness, and as we also see ourselves. Before our conversion, we were the same way: “Look at me! Look at how good I am! It’s because I’m so good that I will be going to heaven. I’m earning my salvation, and I deserve it!”

Look at how Jesus converted the Apostle Paul. In our text from Acts 9, we see Jesus appear to Paul in a flash of light, as Paul was hunting for Christians. In verse 4, Jesus knocks Paul off his horse and says to him, “Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?” Notice how Jesus doesn’t wait for Paul to invite him into his heart. It’s Jesus who makes the first move, who tells Paul that his whole way of looking at life was wrong. In verse 5, Jesus says, “I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting.” What a shock it must have been for Paul, to find out that the very person he was persecuting was God! When Saul got up from the ground, he was blind, and so his traveling companions led him to Damascus, and, as verse 9 says, “for three days he was blind, and did not eat or drink anything.” Paul was in shock – “I thought I was serving God, but instead, I was fighting against him!”

Then God sent a man named Ananias to Paul. Ananias placed his hands on Paul, restored Paul’s sight, and baptized him. And after that happened, Paul was filled with something that he had never been filled with before, and that was the Holy Spirit – look at the last half of verse 17: Jesus “has sent me so that you may regain your sight and be filled with the Holy Spirit.”

That’s what happened to you at your conversion. For some of you, you don’t remember that day – you were converted when the Holy Spirit entered your heart at your baptism when you were a baby. But for others of you, perhaps you do remember your conversion. What happened? First of all, shock. “You mean, all these years, I haven’t been serving God? All these years, my outlook on life was wrong? Upside down? Backwards? You mean that Jesus – trusting in him – is the only way to heaven?” Part of conversion is shock.

But after that shock comes the Holy Spirit. Through the waters of holy baptism, through the spoken Word of God, the Holy Spirit enters into you, and fills you, just as he filled the Apostle Paul. And what amazing changes the Holy Spirit makes inside of you. He creates a new person who, instead of being hostile to God, loves God, and wants to serve God. That’s the new person the Holy Spirit places inside of you. And instead of being self-righteous, that new person inside of you is humble, and trusts in Jesus Christ as the one and only Savior of the world.

That’s what happened to the Apostle Paul. And that’s what has happened to you. Look at what Paul does in verse 20 in our Acts reading: “And immediately he proclaimed Jesus in the synagogues, saying, “He is the Son of God.” That’s the new Paul! The people who listened to him were astonished: “Isn’t this the bounty hunter and Christian killer?” And yet, look at verse 22: “Saul increased all the more in strength, and confounded the Jews living in Damascus by

proving that Jesus was the Christ.” Suddenly, Paul was someone who believed very strongly, very firmly, that Jesus was the Christ, the Son of God and Savior of all mankind.

This great change we see in the Apostle Paul shows us just how powerful God the Holy Spirit can be. What you see here blows away any “extreme makeover” you might see on television. And what you see here is a picture of what God has done for you. He has changed you. The fact that you are sitting here this morning, and that you believe that Jesus is the Son of God - your personal Savior, and the Savior of all mankind – the fact that you believe that is a miracle. Because that’s not how you were born – it goes against everything that you naturally are, as a sinful human being.

But that’s how Christ works. He makes the first move, and comes to you. He shocks you. He fills you with his Spirit. And he turns you into a new person who loves and glorifies God, and who trusts in Christ for the forgiveness of sins. Each one of us has gone through an extreme spiritual makeover, compliments of God the Holy Spirit working through his Word and Sacraments. Never forget to thank God for the way he has changed you, just as he changed the Apostle Paul

Do you have any people in your life who need an extreme spiritual makeover? Do you know anyone who is hostile to God, maybe like the Apostle Paul before his conversion? Do you know anyone who is very self-righteous, just like Paul before his conversion? Do you have anyone in your life that makes you shake your head, and think, “That person is a lost cause. That person will never, ever become a Christian.”

I’m sure that’s what people said about the Apostle Paul before his conversion too. If you have anyone in your life who is like that – a relative, a friend, a coworker – someone you know who is extremely lost, who is completely going in the wrong direction, who seems like the last person on earth to ever become a Christian, then remember what Christ did to the Apostle Paul. Christ can change anyone. Remember what God has done for you. Miracles can and do happen. Perhaps Jesus is planning to knock that relative of yours off his or her horse, just as he did to the Apostle Paul. If you have someone who is like that in your life, pray for that person. And after you are done praying for that person, get down on your knees and pray for that person again, and again and again. Live your faith in front of that person. Perhaps God will even give you an opportunity to share your faith. That person you are thinking of may be God’s next extreme makeover project. That person may be the next Apostle Paul.

You see, the church is made up of people who at one time were hostile, self-righteous, but now, have been converted, changed by the Holy Spirit. Thank God that he has changed you. Trust him, and pray to him, that he will change many, many more. Amen.