

In Acts 8:3 we are told: “Saul was ravaging the church by entering house after house, dragging off both men and women, committing them to prison.” This great persecutor of the church was Saul of Tarsus.

Tarsus was not a Jewish town. It was in the Roman province of Asia Minor, which is now the nation of Turkey. That meant that Saul was once a Jewish boy growing up in a town that was mostly Gentile. It is never easy to be in the minority, so Saul responded to the challenge by taking his faith very seriously. He eventually made it to Jerusalem, where he studied under the eminent theologian Gamaliel. He became a Pharisee, which was a conservative religious party within Judaism, which believed most of Israel’s problems came from its accommodations with the non-Jewish world. What the country needed, they believed, was a strict observance of Jewish law and tradition. Then Saul got a powerful job with the religious establishment. His responsibility was to make sure nothing changed. Why do so many people always want that job?

The biggest threat to orthodox Judaism at the time was an ever-expanding fellowship known as “The Way.” Much later it would be referred to as the Christian church. The founder was a Galilean rabbi named Jesus, who been crucified by the Romans. The authorities thought they had put an end to it. But his followers kept insisting that Jesus rose from the dead and was their way to back to God, and thus the way back to our true selves. Since Pentecost, thousands of Jews had become followers of The Way.

Saul was determined to put a stop to it. So, when he heard the church was now growing in Damascus, he set out on a quest to throw its members in jail as well. But along the way, in route on a mission to help God, Saul was blinded by light. He fell to the ground, and heard a voice saying, “Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?” He responded, “Who are you, Lord?” And the voice said, “I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting.” This meant Jesus, who claimed to be the son of God, was alive. So there was more to God than Saul knew. A few days later Saul was baptized into the church he tried to destroy, and he became one of its Apostles.

Notice, this is not the conversion of a penitent sinner on the road to Damascus. Saul didn’t come to God to plead forgiveness for his sins. This conversion isn’t even Saul’s idea. That is one of the most important things about real change, or conversion in life. It always comes as God’s idea, not our own. And there is no one in the Bible God loves to convert more than religious people – people who take their faith serious, are devout, full of passion, and wrong. Saul had spent a whole lot of years studying theology and was the model of zealous devotion. But his conversion came when he was blinded by the discovery that he was wrong about God.

Most of us have the humility to admit we are not always right, but it is particularly threatening to discover you were not right about God. This is because, whether we realize it or not, what we think about God is at the foundation of everything we believe about life. If that foundation moves, the former life crumbles.

The inverse of this is also true. If you want to make a substantive change in life, the place to begin is with your image of God. That’s because we are always made in the image of God, even a wrong image. Those who have a flawed image of self have a flawed image of God. Angry people worship an angry God. Those who struggle with love, don’t believe God is love. And judgmental people think God never believes they are good enough. So, Saul’s conversion has to begin with a conversion of his image of God. It is not until he discovers that God has come to us in Jesus Christ, now risen from the dead, that he can be converted from a persecutor, throwing people in jail, to an evangelist who is often persecuted and thrown in jail himself.

It is striking that Saul was blinded by the light of Christ. That doesn’t mean he was walking in darkness before he encountered the risen Jesus. Saul never repudiates Judaism as a faith or as his heritage, any more than Jesus did. He soon goes by the Gentile version of his name, which was Paul, because Jesus gave him a mission to

bring good news to the Gentiles. That's just good missionary strategy, but he never stopped being Jewish. And Christianity can never be seen as a repudiation of Judaism. Remember, most of our holy book is Hebrew Scripture. It's just that there is this new light that shows those of us who are not Jewish, and cannot follow even our own moral laws, The Way to God through the grace of Jesus Christ.

After Saul is blinded by light, he is taken into Damascus where he sits in darkness for three days. In the meantime, another religious person is about to be converted – this time a Christian. Ananias gets a vision of his own from Jesus who tells him to go to Saul and lay hands on him, that he might regain his sight. Ananias tries arguing with the Lord, reminding him, that Saul is the guy they are hiding from in Damascus. “He came here to throw us all in jail, you know?” But Jesus is not impressed with Ananias’ argument any more than he ever is with mine. He just tells him again, “Go.”

Then in one of the most formative moments of the Early Church, Ananias goes to his persecutor, lay’s hands on him and says, “Brother Saul.” It is then that Saul’s vision is restored, the church is blessed, and lives are changed. That was all because Ananias was converted from fear and anger to love and forgiving grace.

The church has long learned to overcome its tormentors by saying “Brother Saul.” For the next 300 years the church was persecuted by Rome, but it continued to spread until it took over the empire all because it returned evil with love and a mission of compassion to its society.

Who is in your life to whom you need to go to say, “Brother Saul?” Maybe it is the ex-spouse, or the person who is trying to get your job, or an abusive parent. It is whoever has hurt you most deeply and given you the wounds you still carry. The call to forgive is not just for the sake of your persecutor, but as Ananias discovered it is also to free ourselves from hiding in the resentment we nurture. This forgiving grace is what the church and its members are supposed to know how to do, what we should be good at it, and what should define our witness in the world.

When the Lord was speaking to Ananias, he assured him that there was a mission for Saul by saying, “He is an instrument whom I have chosen.” In the Bible conversion and mission are always tied together. And the more we engage in our mission, the more ongoing conversion we experience. Apparently, Jesus could use an overeducated Pharisee who grew up around Gentiles. Saul’s background in Tarsus prepared him to be a missionary to the Gentiles, and his theological training in Judaism prepared him to defend that mission to his Jewish church in Jerusalem.

In the hands of a Savior, nothing is wasted. Not the achievements and story of your past, and even the failures and misguided notions of God. There is a conversion waiting for everything. Just accept your mission, and your whole life will eventually become clear.

And what is your mission? In the words of the Jewish prophet Micah: “What has the Lord required of you but to do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly with your God.” And in the words of Jesus, “Love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength; and love your neighbor as yourself.” Even the neighbor who has hurt you. Amen.