

**CONVERSION OF SAINT PAUL 2014**  
**SERMON - CHRIST CHURCH PARISH**  
**FATHER CRAIG LOONEY**  
**ACTS 9.1**

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It was an epiphany...a striking appearance of the up close and personal kind. Saul the Church's spoiler saw the light...and the light was so bright it knocked him to the ground...and that light was Jesus himself!

What happened on the Road to Damascus two thousand years ago changed the course of the history of the Church. Christianity could no longer be viewed as a fringe cult within Judaism. The truth about Jesus...the Good News...would be taken to the whole world...and Saul was the perfect candidate for the job.

With the exception of Jesus, we know more about Saul than any other character in the New Testament. He was known by both his Hebrew name, Saul, and by his Latin name, Paul. He is traditionally considered the author of fourteen of the twenty-seven books of the New Testament. Half of Acts of the Apostles is devoted to the life and work of Paul...the Apostle to the Gentiles.

Paul was born in Tarsus, a city in Asia Minor, present day Turkey. He was a Roman citizen from the time he was born. This opened up for Paul educational opportunities that for most Jews of the time would have been closed. Paul made his living as a tentmaker. He was a skilled professional whose services would have been in great demand wherever he traveled.

When he was still young, Paul was sent to Jerusalem to study under Gamaliel, one of the most important rabbis of the time. Paul immersed himself in the traditions of the Pharisees. Later on, Paul was critical of the role this played in his persecution of the Church. In his Letter to the Philippians, Paul calls himself a real Hebrew if there ever was one, and a Pharisee who demanded strict obedience to the Law.

We first meet Paul early in Acts. He was present at the death of Saint Stephen the Deacon, the first Christian martyr. The people were enraged by Stephen's preaching about Jesus as God's Son. They dragged him outside the city and threw stones at him until he was dead. Paul held the people's coats, giving tacit approval to Stephen's murder.

Paul's dramatic conversion while he was on his way to Damascus was the epiphany...the striking appearance...that changed his life forever. The bright light that knocked him to the ground was the light of the Risen Jesus himself, who told him to stand up and stop making a fool out of himself. He would no longer be the angry out of control person intent on destroying the Church. Instead, God had work for him to do and it would build up the Church.

After Ananias laid his hands on Paul and his sight returned, Jesus promised Paul he would have to suffer many things for his sake. The work God have for him to do would at times be very difficult. There would be times when he should expect to make great personal sacrifices. Paul's persecution of the Church was over, but the real test of his faith was only just beginning.

Paul's status as both a Jew and a Roman citizen put him in a unique position to talk to both Jews and Gentiles in language they understood. He began his work for the Church in the same synagogues he likely would have brought Christians to for trial and possible execution. He was not afraid to call Jesus the Messiah and God's Son. And he did not back down when he was challenged.

Paul's conversion is an epiphany...a striking appearance...that shows us God has the power to use everything and everyone, even a persecutor of the Church, to accomplish his purpose. The epiphany...the striking appearance...for Paul was his conversion by Jesus himself, and the revelation that salvation by strict observance of the Law is not possible, but only by the death of Jesus that sets us free from sin.

Paul's conversion was not a one-time event; it was a life-long process. It is from Paul's own struggles while he went about spreading the Good News that we learn the most. From his letters we learn our own conversions are life-long experiences, and to never give up. When we think about the struggles in our own lives we should try to remember the people who have been epiphanies...striking appearances...for us and who have helped us through those struggles.

What makes Saint Paul such a credible witness is that he was a human being just like us, who persevered in his work, even when things got tough. Saul the Church's spoiler became Paul the Apostle to the Gentiles. He saw the light that is Jesus...and so can we!

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