

Easter 2017

Darkness to Light and Life!

Acts 26:9-23

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I don't know about you, but I love "before and after" shots. I find them fascinating and motivating. It never ceases to amaze me how dramatically change can take place in a person or in a home. It seems that I'm not the only one who is drawn to these stories or images.

For instance, just think of how many television programs have the story of transformation built into their appeal. You have *Biggest Loser*, where you witness the physical and emotional transformation of a group of people as they get healthy and lose weight. There is *Fixer Upper* and a number of similar shows, where an old, dilapidated house is transformed into a beautiful new home. And you have *30 for 30*, with the subtitle "too dramatic not to be real," which is a series of documentaries about great sports legends and the stories behind their successful careers on ESPN.

There is something endearing and inspiring about these kinds of stories. They give us an element of hope as we look at what a person or home used to be versus what it is now.

What does Easter Sunday have to do with "before and after" moments? Well, the entire Easter story is about a radical transformation. Before Easter it looked as if Jesus was a false prophet and as if all hope was lost. Then the Resurrection happened. Before, there was a bloody cross. At Easter, there is an empty tomb. Before Easter, there was a horrible death. After Easter, there is the promise of new life.

But Easter is not the only "before and after" story in the Bible. The resurrection of Jesus set in motion the transformation of other people as well. The "before and after" story of Jesus began to be replicated in the lives of other people – those who became His followers. They came to believe that He really was the Son of God and that forgiveness was possible, and Christianity spread all over the Roman Empire.

Now, if you were to pick one of the most significant stories of transformation in the Bible, the account of what happened to the apostle Paul would have to be near the top of the list. You see, there was a moment in Paul's life where he encountered the resurrected Jesus, and it changed everything for him. There are two places where we learn about Paul's story of transformation – both are in the book of Acts. Acts 9 tells us the entire story, and Acts 26 is a great summary, as Paul shares his story in front of a King who is deciding his fate.

Our theme for this Easter is "darkness to light," and I want to show you how a resurrected Jesus moves people **from darkness to light for life**. I want to show you that in one person's life, but I hope it happens in yours as well.

Darkness

The particular place that I'm looking at is Acts 26, at the end of the book of Acts and in the final half of Paul's life as a missionary. Just in case you are not familiar with the apostle Paul, he is regarded as the greatest Christian missionary ever. Period. He brought the Good News about Jesus to the Gentiles, and he authored 13 of the 27 books of the New Testament. During the first century, no one had more influence on the spread of Christianity.

In Acts 26, Paul is standing before King Agrippa after having been arrested in Jerusalem. He was making his way through the court system after he made an appeal to Caesar. While Paul was under arrest in Caesarea, the Roman Governor of the region, Festus, wanted some advice. Therefore, he sought the input of King Agrippa, who was more familiar with religious issues. He was the grandson of Herod the Great, who had built the temple in Jerusalem. Agrippa's reign included oversight of "temple issues."

As Paul stood before him, the resurrection is front and center. Paul had been arrested for preaching that Jesus is the Messiah and for telling the story that I'm about to tell you. He said, *"Why is it thought incredible by any of you that God raises the dead?"* (Acts 26:8).

Paul starts to tell his story by recounting what he was like prior to the moment that he met the resurrected Jesus. This is what happened to Paul, and it all started with a life marked by darkness.

In verses 9-11, Paul recounts what he did:

- He was the main persecutor of Christianity as it burst on the scene in the years following Jesus' death. Paul says that he was "opposing the name of Jesus of Nazareth."
- Jerusalem, the religious and political center of Israel, was the base of his mission to destroy Christianity, and he received permission from chief priests to round up, arrest, and even consent to the execution of Christians.
- But Paul didn't stop there. He extended his reach to the synagogues outside of Jerusalem and even into foreign cities. Paul wanted to crush Christianity wherever it was taking root.
- His aim was to make Christians' lives so difficult that they would blaspheme – deny that they really believed in Jesus.

We do not know the number of people that Paul arrested, brought to trial, and saw executed. But we do know that there was no one who was more dangerous to the church of Jesus at the time. Paul was greatly feared. In Acts 9, it says that Paul was breathing out threats and murder against the disciples.

Of all the words in Acts 26, the one word that I want to highlight is the word "convinced." Oh, that's important. You see, the problem for Paul was not just what he did. That was surely bad enough at one level, and Paul would always have that in his past (see 1 Cor. 15:9, Gal. 1:13). No doubt Paul deeply regretted his persecution of the church.

However, the real tragedy is the extent to which Paul was not only doing what was wrong but was convinced that he was justified in what he did. His actions were terrible, but it is his blindness that is truly tragic.

Here he is, a devoutly religious man, trained in the best schools of the day, full of knowledge of the Scriptures, and absolutely convinced. But he is totally wrong. He was not only doing the wrong things, but he was blind.

Now some of you are immediately thinking, "Man, that's terrible. Inexcusable. Total hypocrite! How could he do that?!" It would be easy to look at Paul's actions and distance ourselves from what he did – as if his actions were the exception.

But the Bible and our experience tell us something different.

- 2 Corinthians 4:4 describes the spiritual condition of people apart from Christ as being **blinded**; they cannot see the light of the gospel.
- Romans 1:21 says that human beings, in our natural and normal condition, become **futile** or powerless in our thinking such that our hearts become darkened.
- Colossians 2:13 tells us that we are all **dead** in our sins.

In other words, the problem with Paul before he met Jesus is the same problem that we all have: we are convinced that we are right. We are blinded to our true condition. We are walking dead people who are convinced that what we are doing is what we should be doing. And we do this in such creative ways.

We look at other people and compare our shortcomings with theirs and **convince** ourselves that we are not as bad. We consider doing something that we know is probably wrong, but we **convince** ourselves that we deserve the pleasure, the joy, or the satisfaction of what that "thing" brings us. We get involved in addictive actions and behaviors, and we **convince** ourselves that we can stop at any moment, but we never do. We know that it isn't right to be hurtful to others, but we **convince** ourselves that our feelings and our pain gives us the right to say things that we later regret.

How many times have you said, "What was I thinking!" But the real problem is not the absence of thinking. It takes a lot of thinking to do the things that we do, even the things we later regret. No, the real problem is that we convince ourselves that our thinking is correct and we act upon it.

My guess is that you can look back at your life and see this. Maybe it was a bad relationship, and you knew you shouldn't have been in it. Or you think back on how you treated your parents or a friend, and you see now how mistaken you were. Or maybe you were terribly unkind to someone, and while it was oddly fulfilling at the time, you now see it for what it really is.

If you look closely enough and far back enough, I know that you'll find some soul darkness. The Bible calls this blindness, futile thinking, and being spiritually dead. This is the darkness of the human heart. Paul's problem is your problem. Paul's problem is my problem. We all share this common issue, and it relates to Easter.

Light

Thankfully, Paul's story did not stop there. In verses 12-15 we learn about Paul's encounter with the resurrected Christ. It changed his life forever, and it is a great example of being brought out of darkness and into the light. Here is what happened:

- Paul was on his way to Damascus for the purpose of arresting more Christians and bringing them back to Jerusalem for prosecution.
- In the middle of the day, a bright light shone all around Paul and those traveling with him. And then Paul heard a voice say, "Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?"
- Paul then asked, "Who are you, Lord?" And the answer came back, "I am Jesus whom you are persecuting."
- According to Acts 9, the effect of this encounter was that Paul was blinded, and he was led to a particular house where he remained for three days.
- After three days, a man named Ananias, at the instruction of the Lord, found Paul and laid his hands on him. Immediately scales fell off Paul's eyes, and he professed allegiance to Christ through his baptism.

Paul was miraculously transformed in this encounter with the resurrected Jesus. He was confronted with the reality of who Jesus was, and it changed everything. He "saw the light."

Now you might think, "Well, I would respond too, if Jesus showed up and spoke to me." But let me help you understand what happened to Paul so that you'll hopefully see the connection between what happened to him and what can happen to you.

First, Paul came to the realization that the message about Jesus was true.

Paul believed that Jesus was a false prophet. He believed that Christianity was ruining everything. He believed that none of it was true. Jesus died on the cross. His resurrection had been faked.

And then he met Jesus. And he spoke to Him. And Paul came face to face with the reality that Jesus really was alive. The resurrection was true. And if that was true, then everything about Christianity was also true.

But do you know that Jesus still speaks today through his Word, the Bible? We read in 2 Timothy 3:16 that Scripture is God's word because it is breathed out by God. Hebrews 4:12 tells that the Word is living and active, and it is able to discern the thoughts and intentions of the heart, which means that the Word is able to show us who we really are.

Have you read the Bible? Do you know what it says about God being the creator? What it says about the problem of our sin and the solution through the cross?

In 2 Corinthians 4:6, we see that the same God who said "let light shine out of darkness" shines into our hearts to give us "the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus." That means you read something or hear something, and belief begins to happen. That is light!

Second, Paul understood that his actions were a personal affront to the risen King.

Paul was persecuting the church, and yet Jesus says, “why are you persecuting *me*?” Paul’s sinful actions were personal for Jesus. But that is not just the case for this section of Scripture; it is true that all sin is personal to God because He is holy.

Romans 3:23 – *all have sinned and fallen short of God’s glory.* Romans 6:23 – *the wages of sin is death.* Why death? Because every sin is an act of rebellion against the Creator, who is holy and righteous.

If Christ is the victorious death-conquering Savior, and if God is our Creator, then the things that we do that we know are wrong are not just mistakes. They are direct challenges to the authority and glory of God Himself. Sin is a problem, not just because of what it does to other people, but also because of who God is.

Third, Paul understood that Jesus was calling him to believe. Right then. Right now.

Jesus intervened in Paul’s life. He confronted him with the reality of who he was and who Jesus is. And in that moment, Paul had to decide if he would believe. The transformation of Paul’s life began in that moment. Nothing about his life would be the same from that moment on.

Jesus had invaded his life, and he believed in Jesus. Years later Paul would write a letter to a church in Rome with a description of how they too could be saved. Here is what he said:

⁸ But what does it say? “The word is near you, in your mouth and in your heart” (that is, the word of faith that we proclaim);⁹ because, if you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. ¹⁰ For with the heart one believes and is justified, and with the mouth one confesses and is saved. Romans 10:8–10 (ESV)

And that is how anyone is transformed by believing in Jesus. It’s my story. As a child, I heard this good news while attending a summer club at a friend’s church, and I immediately knew it was true. My heart was drawn to believe. I did and was saved.

But I’m not the only one. I could line up person after person who would tell you of the moment when they understood the beauty of this heart-based transformation.

Blaise Pascal (1623-1662), the French mathematician and physicist who discovered the principles of the barometer and the law of hydraulics, had a definitive conversion experience. It moved him so much that we wrote about it on a piece of paper that he sewed into his coat. It read:

“From about half-past ten in the evening until about half-past twelve . . . FIRE . . . God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, the God of Jacob, and not of the philosophers and savants. Certitude. Certitude. Feeling. Joy. Peace.”¹

I was reading recently the story of the conversion of Kristin Powers, a columnist for *USA Today* and a political commentator. She was wrestling with the claims of Christianity, and she began attending

¹ <http://www.christianitytoday.com/history/people/evangelistsandapologists/blaise-pascal.html>

Redeemer Presbyterian Church in Manhattan. Eventually she took another step and joined a Bible study.

I remember walking into the Bible study. I had a knot in my stomach. In my mind, only weirdoes and zealots went to Bible studies. I don't remember what was said that day. All I know is that when I left, everything had changed. I'll never forget standing outside that apartment on the Upper East Side and saying to myself, "It's true. It's completely true." The world looked entirely different, like a veil had been lifted off it. I had not an iota of doubt. I was filled with indescribable joy.²

That is what it means to be brought from darkness to light. And I wonder if that might be happening for some of you even today. Is there something about this Easter that is different for you? Is there something within your heart that is drawing you – even daring you – to believe? Do you know that all the circumstances of your life have not just led up to this day by accident?

Could it be that God is shining the light of the glory of God in the face of Jesus in your heart through what I'm saying even now? Why not come to Jesus today? Why not receive Him and respond to the call of God in your life?

Why not move from darkness to light and then to life!

Life

The final effect of the resurrection on Paul was the way that it radically changed his life forever. Acts 26 records the mission that God had for him. Paul was going to be transformed from the greatest persecutor of the church to its greatest apologist.

- God was going to make him a witness – a person who merely tells what happened. And the intervention in Paul's life would be the starting point of many conversations in the future. I hope that today is that kind of day for you.
- Paul was going to be sent as a part of God's mission to open the eyes of other people. God was going to use him to share the good news about the resurrected Jesus with many others.
- His purpose in life is really the purpose of every follower of Jesus once they have been born again. We see it clearly in verse 18:

¹⁸ to open their eyes, so that they may turn from darkness to light and from the power of Satan to God, that they may receive forgiveness of sins and a place among those who are sanctified by faith in me.' Acts 26:18 (ESV)

Here is the good news once again! The Good News is 1) that people can be brought from darkness to light, 2) released from the power of Satan, 3) can receive the forgiveness of sins, and 4) be part of those who are right with God.

What a hope this is! What a transformation!

² <http://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2013/november/fox-news-highly-reluctant-jesus-follower-kirsten-powers.html?start=1>

Everything about Paul's life was changed in that moment. To use Jesus' words to Nicodemus in John 3, he was born again. The resurrected Jesus raised Paul's spiritually dead heart and gave him new life.

Paul was a different person from that day forward. He was moved from darkness to light to life!

That is why Easter is such a significant celebration. It marks the moment when Jesus declared once and for all that sin and death were defeated. It opened the door for the forgiveness of sin, and it made it possible for hope to rise.

So, if you feel the light going on inside of your soul, please know that God is the one who is calling you. Why not put your faith in Jesus today? Why not confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised Him from the dead right now?

Why not open your heart to the light of the gospel and a life that is set on a new path?

Why not be among those who have been transformed by the resurrected Jesus!

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