



Weaving God's Promises

PAUL SPREADS THE GOOD NEWS

SUMMARY OF TODAY'S STORY

Saul—later renamed Paul—was in his early years a faithful Pharisee, a fierce enemy of Christianity and a persecutor of Christians. As a Pharisee, he believed that Jesus and his Christian followers were subverting Judaism and the Jewish Law and covenant on which Judaism was founded. As recorded in Acts 7, Saul watched or even oversaw the martyrdom of Stephen the deacon.

On the road to Damascus to seek out and punish more Christians, Saul encounters Christ in a flash of light from heaven. He is sent, blinded, to the home of a man named Ananias, who is told to baptize Saul.

Later, while Paul is imprisoned with his friend and fellow missionary Silas, an earthquake opens the prison door. The prison guard thinks that the prisoners have used this opportunity to escape. Knowing that his own punishment for allowing a prisoner to escape will be death, he is about to attempt suicide. But Paul stops him. The guard, apparently moved by Paul's mercy and kindness, asks for Paul's way of salvation. Paul converts him and baptizes him and his whole household.

WHERE YOU'LL FIND TODAY'S STORY

In the Bible

We recommend the *New Revised Standard Version Bible*.

Acts 9:1-22(Paul's conversion)

Acts 16:16-34 (Converting the guard in prison)

1 Corinthians 12:12-31 (Paul on the Body of Christ)

In Our Sunday Lectionary Today's story is told in church on the following Sundays:

Paul's conversion:

Year C: Third Sunday of Easter

Paul converting the guard in prison:

Year C: Seventh Sunday of Easter____

KEY CONCEPTS

- Conversion
- Sharing our gifts
- Spreading the Good News



WEAVING OUR STORY WITH THE BIBLICAL STORY

What a story!

The story of Paul's conversion is validated by the number of times it is repeated in the Bible, both in the Acts of the Apostles written by Luke and by Paul himself in his letters to various churches, which he founded. Paul writes about this experience with an attitude of total humility and gratitude. His vision of the risen Christ on the road to Damascus becomes for him the starting point for his new faith.

Note that Paul was not converted from a “bad” person to a “good” person. As a zealous Pharisee, he was already faithful to God. His “conversion” was inspired by the revelation of Christ as the risen Lord. This revelation was so profound and powerful for him that he spent the rest of his life traveling around the Mediterranean proclaiming the Good News, that God has raised Christ from the dead and that salvation now comes through Jesus Christ and not through the Law.

Paul had his conversion experience while doing what he was called to do in ordinary life. Our call from God often comes not during special times of prayer and meditation, though we need these times of aloneness with God, but during ordinary times doing ordinary things in life.

Paul was convinced that God brought salvation through Jesus Christ and no longer through the Jewish Law. That meant that salvation was open to all people, not just to the Jews. He therefore preached this message to everyone around him, founding churches in Corinth, Thessalonica, Galatia, Philippi and wherever he traveled. His letters, which we know as *Corinthians*, *Galatians*, etc., are letters written by Paul to the people in these churches about particular issues that they are dealing with as new churches of a new faith. Through these letters, written around 30-40 years after Jesus' death and resurrection, Paul becomes for us the first Christian theologian.

He also is the first apostle to take the message of the Jewish-based scripture into the Gentile (non- Jewish) world, the first to proclaim that salvation in God through Christ is available to all people. Peter, James and the other apostles of Jesus were converting the Jews while Paul converted the Gentiles.

Paul's message is simple: Jesus Christ died for our sins, was buried and was raised from the dead. And from God's act in raising Jesus from the dead, we are saved.

These basic themes arise from Paul's letters:

- *Salvation to all:* Paul preached his mission to the Gentiles—that Jew and Gentile alike receive God's salvation through Jesus Christ.**
- *The Body of Christ:* We are all members of the one Body of Christ. All of us have gifts to share “to build up the church” and all are needed. Some are called to be preachers, teachers or evangelists; some are called to other kinds of service, but we all are equal in the Lord and in our service to the Lord in the church.**
- *Living in Christ:* As Christians, we are in union with Christ. In Baptism, we live and die with him.**

It is clear from the account of Paul's conversion experience in Acts that God called Paul to a special mission. Because of Paul, Christianity spread beyond the borders of the Holy Land. Paul gave us a vision of God's church as a place where we all have a part in building up the church and spreading the word of the Good News of Jesus.

Now it is up to us to continue his mission.



THE EPISCOPAL THREAD

As the church's “first theologian,” Paul has an enormous influence on the whole Church—and the Episcopal Church is no exception.

Some church bodies disagree about the doctrine of “salvation by works” (James) versus “salvation by faith alone” (Paul). Episcopalians see a balance between faith and the good works that come as a natural consequence of faith lived out in one's life. For the Anglican temperament of moderation

and balance, both are needed and both are signs of commitment to God in Christ.

Episcopalians refer often to Paul's writings and Paul's various epistles, along with other epistles in the New Testament, which form part of the corpus of readings each Sunday.

Some passages in Paul's letters are often quoted by Episcopalians in their effort to carry forward the work of Christ. Among them is the passage about Baptism (in Romans 6:3-11) on how we die and rise with Christ. In the rubrics about Holy Baptism, the Prayer Book says that Holy Baptism is full initiation into "Christ's Body the Church," using Paul's analogy of the body to describe the community of Christians.

Episcopalians are also fond of Paul's insistence that all persons have gifts of the Spirit and that they are various gifts. All are given gifts from God, but no gift is worth more than another. Likewise, all are called to ministry and no ministry is worth more than another. This teaching accords well with the Anglican broad-mindedness that welcomes a variety of ministries and talents and that recognizes the splendid diversity of God's people.

WEAVING GOD'S BELOVED COMMUNITY



After Jesus was revealed to Paul in that encounter on the road to Damascus, Paul devotes the rest of his life to preaching salvation by God through Jesus Christ. And he empowers all of us to do our part in building up the Body of Christ, the Church, so that the mission of Jesus and the work of God would continue. During Paul's journey, he encountered people who had been hurt or who felt hopeless.

God's Beloved Community follows his guidance, that salvation comes to all persons and is not exclusive to a single group, and that all people are equal in the eyes of the Lord and all hands are needed on deck to create that Beloved Community. Part of cultivating community is supporting and caring for those who may be having a hard time

- Have you ever been sad or hurt and someone cared for you? Who was that person? How did it feel to be cared for?**
- How can you use your gifts to care for others?**



Weaving God's Promises

ACTS 9:1-22; 16:16-34;

1 CORINTHIANS 12:12-31

When Paul was born, he was named Saul. He was Saul until after he met Jesus. Then Jesus gave him a new name – Paul. This is Paul's story of how he used to hate Jesus and then came to love Jesus.

Saul meets Jesus

Saul is not a bad person. But he hates the followers of Jesus because he thinks that they believe dangerous things. His job, he thinks, is to round up all the followers of Jesus that he can find, arrest them and put them into prison. Then they won't be dangerous anymore.

One day, Saul is on his way to Damascus to look for some followers of Jesus.

It will be a long journey, over 100 miles, so he travels with a group of men. It will take a few weeks to get there. "Never mind," thinks Saul. "Those Christians will still be there when I get there. They don't know I'm coming. If they find out, they would all hide from me."

This is supposed to be an ordinary journey. Saul does not expect the light flashing down from heaven and surrounding

him. The light is too bright! Saul falls to the ground, pushes his face into the ground, trying to hide from the light. He covers his eyes, but it's no use. The light is still too bright.

But then, the light doesn't matter anymore, because now comes the voice. A voice is speaking from heaven. The whole traveling party hears the voice, and they fall silent. You can't hide from this voice!

"Saul, Saul! Why are you punishing me?" says the voice.

Saul hears the voice speaking to him. As frightened as he is, he must answer. Still with his face on the ground and his eyes closed, he asks, trembling with his whole body, "Who are you, Lord!"

"I am Jesus, the one you are punishing by punishing my followers."

Paul is shocked. So this is Jesus! Jesus from heaven! His voice has so much authority; I must do whatever he asks of me! There is no question but that I am listening to God! Paul waits for more.

Jesus says, "Now get up and go to Damascus, just as you were planning to do. But do not do what you were planning to do – do not arrest my followers. Instead, go into the city, find the house where you are staying, and then wait for me to tell you what to do."

The voice is gone. The light is gone. Saul gets up and opens his eyes. He can't see. He is blind. He waves his arms around trying to find something to hang onto. The other men in his group see that Saul is now blind. One of them takes him by

the hand. Another takes his other hand. Together they lead him to Damascus and find the house of a man named Judas, who has a room for him.

Saul stays there for three days. He still can't see. He waits. "Jesus said he will tell me what to do," Saul thinks to himself. "I will trust in Jesus." Saul prays hard for Jesus to come help him.

While he is praying, he sees in his head a picture of a man named Ananias.

This Ananias is coming into Saul's room. He lays his hands on Saul, and Saul can see again.

But then Saul opens his eyes. He is still blind. It was just a dream.

Ananias to the rescue

Meanwhile, Jesus has a talk with someone else. This time, Jesus talks to one of his followers, named Ananias. Ananias is sleeping. Then he hears a voice: "Ananias."

Ananias knows who is speaking to him. He says, "Here I am, Jesus."

Jesus says, "I want you to get up and go to Judas' house. When you get to his house, look for a man named Saul. Right now, he is praying. He has just seen a picture of you coming in, laying your hands on him, and giving him back his eyesight. And that is just what I want you to do."

But Ananias says, "But Jesus! I've heard about this man Saul! Everybody who is your follower knows about him! He's the one who wants to send all of us to prison! If I go to him, he will just arrest me and send me to prison!"

But Jesus says, “No, not anymore. I have just chosen him to spread the news about me to all people, poor and rich, kings and homeless. So go, Ananias, and heal him.”

Ananias gets up and goes out of his house. He winds his way through the city, looking for the right house. He is nervous. Will it happen as Jesus promised? Or will Saul put him in prison?

Well, here is the house. Ananias goes inside. There, on his knees, is Saul praying. He doesn’t see Ananias. Of course, he doesn’t. He’s blind! Ananias goes up to Saul and lays his hands on his head. He says, “Brother Saul, I know that Jesus came to you on your way here. And Jesus sent me to you, to help you get your eyesight back and be filled with the Holy Spirit. So now...”

But then it happens. Scales fall from Saul’s eyes. He can see again! He gets up and sees Ananias. Ananias looks at Saul. At first he is afraid, but then he knows what to do. He baptizes Saul.

Paul in prison

Now Saul is named Paul. Today Paul ends up in prison. He was with his friend Silas in the city. He had made someone angry, so the police put them both in prison.

The police tell the jailer, “Make sure you lock them up tight! Put them in heavy chains, and just to make sure, put big, giant locks on their doors!”

The jailer obeys. He puts Paul and Silas into the prison cell that is farthest from the outside, just to make sure they can’t

get out. And then he locks up their feet into heavy blocks called stocks so they can't walk or even get up.

This doesn't stop Paul and Silas from being with God. They are praying and singing their favorite hymns. The other prisoners are listening to them. How strange and wonderful that we can hear about God even in this terrible place!

It is midnight. The jailer is sleeping. Nothing is going to happen now, in the middle of the night. Time to get a bit of sleep.

Paul and Silas are singing. Suddenly the earth starts to move. An earthquake! The earthquake shakes the ground so much that it opens all of the prison doors and breaks all of the prisoners' chains.

The earthquake wakes up the jailer. He opens his eyes and lets out a shout.

The doors are all open! The prisoners must have escaped!

"My bosses will punish me for letting all of the prisoners escape! I will just kill myself first, before they kill me!" He takes out his sword and points it at himself.

Then he hears someone shout to him. "Stop!" It is Paul. "Don't hurt yourself! We are all still here!"

The jailer turns on some lamps and sees Paul and Silas and all of the other prisoners, still standing inside their prison cells. They are all there! He knows that this is God's doing. And he knows that it is God working in Paul and Silas, so that they spread goodness to everybody around them. Didn't we just hear them praying to God and singing?

The jailer falls down on his knees in front of Paul and Silas. He is shaking. He takes them outside and walks them to his house. All his family is there inside the house. He says to them, “What must I do to be saved, like you?”

Paul knows the answer. He says to the man, “Believe in Jesus and what he has taught and done.” Then Paul tells all of the people in his family all about Jesus.

Then because they ask him to, he baptizes the man and everybody in his whole household, right then and there. Then they all shout and sing with happiness at meeting Jesus.

Who is part of Christ’s community?

Paul teaches us that all of us are part of the body of Christ—the Church. And no one is more important than anyone else.

It would be silly if your foot says, “I must not be very important, because I’m not a hand.” And it would be silly if your ear says, “I am not a real part of the body, because I am not an eye. I’m just an ear.”

And it would be silly if your eye says to your hand, “I don’t need you! I’m an eye! I don’t need a hand!”

Just so, with the church. We call the church the Body of Christ. And it needs to act like a body. Every part of the body needs every other part. And in the church, every member needs every other member. We are all important in the church, and important to Jesus Christ!

