

Conversion Ex Nihilo
LaGrave Christian Reformed Church
July 25,2021-AM Service
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Acts 9:1-19

Bible trivia to start the sermon. A one question pop quiz. Where does the story of Paul's conversion appear in the book of Acts? It's actually a trick question. There is more than one answer to this question because the story of Paul's conversion is told three times in the book of Acts. The original story, which I will read in a moment, is in Acts 9. But Paul tells the story two more times. In Acts 22 he tells the story in front of an angry mob in Jerusalem. In Acts 26 he tells it in front of Festus and Agrippa. These retellings are all full retellings. Luke doesn't just mention the story; all the details are repeated. Why does Luke choose to include the full conversion story three times? That wasn't an accident, right? That was intentional. Why does the Holy Spirit prompt Luke to tell the full story three times in one book? Because it's so important. There's something in this story that the Holy Spirit wants us to keep in our heart. Let's read the first of the three tellings from Acts 9:1-19.

There is a whole genre of conversion stories that fit what we might call dramatic conversion stories. These are the sorts of stories that get told by speakers at summer camps and high school chapels. In these wonderful stories, a person is lost and far away from God, but the Holy Spirit moves powerfully and quickly, and almost overnight they are changed. Chuck Colson's conversion is an example of a dramatic conversion story. Colson was a cut-throat politician. People called him the president's hatchet man. But after Watergate, his life crashed. During his struggle, Colson's friend Tom Phillips invited him over for dinner and gently offered him the hope of Jesus. After dinner, Colson ends up in a tearful prayer in his car surrendering his life to God. As most of you know, the change stuck. Martin Luther's story—praying to God in a thunderstorm—has the same dynamic. St Augustine's story—weeping in a garden and hearing a child's voice calling '*tolle lege*, take and read'—has the same dynamic. All of these are beautiful stories and all of them are stories where the Holy Spirit works dramatic change in a person.

At one level it seems like Paul's story is one of those kind of stories. Or maybe better, at one level it looks like Augustine's, Luther's and Colson's stories are like Paul's. *But Paul's story is also different.* Paul's story is different in a very important way. It's the difference in Paul's story where the grace of God shines through.

How is Paul's story similar to those other stories? Paul's story is like those other stories in that the conversion is sudden. Paul's story is like those other stories in that the conversion is dramatic. Paul's story is like those other stories in that it leads to a life of productive mission.

How is Paul's story different from those other stories? In all those other stories the person who is converted was already in crisis when the Spirit moved. Augustine was torn up over his struggle with desire. Luther was a mess because of his inability to feel justified by God. Colson was in pieces over Watergate. They were all restless. And that's pretty typical of most dramatic conversion stories. People who tell these stories say things like, "*On the outside I looked fine, but on the inside I was falling apart, then God rescued me.*" But is Paul in crisis? As he gets on his horse to go to Damascus, is he secretly conflicted and struggling? No. He was the opposite of conflicted. Paul was supremely confident. He was utterly committed to his cause.

Paul is so committed that he doesn't wait for the High Priest to send him on a mission, he's takes the initiative. When it comes to persecution, Paul is a self-starter. Paul bangs on the High Priest's door. "Your excellency I want to go to Damascus to arrest these Jesus people. Give

me a letter of authorization and I'll do the rest." "Damascus?! Paul are you sure? We have no record of a church in Damascus. Is that really necessary?" "Your excellency we cannot become complacent. There may be some secret Christ followers in the synagogue. We must root them out by any means necessary!" "Okay Paul, you may have your letters. Honestly sometimes your zeal scares me." Paul is not a man in crisis. He is not a man harboring secret doubts. He is brimming with confidence. *Bottom line: there is nothing in Paul to pave the way for his conversion.*

Not only was there nothing in Paul to pave the way for his conversion, there was nothing in the people around him. In many dramatic conversion stories, there is someone close to the convert who secretly believes in them, who prays for them. Colson had his friend Tom Phillips. Augustine had his mother Monica. In many of these stories, a faithful saint storms the courts of heaven on behalf of the lost friend.

That's wonderful, of course. But is anyone praying for Paul? Does anyone think Paul might somehow be turned to Jesus? No way! I imagine that if people in the early church had to pick one person who was LEAST likely to become a Christian, Paul would be that person. You get a sense of how unlikely this all is in Ananias' initial response to the Lord's instruction. When God tells Ananias he's supposed to go and minister to Paul, Ananias is so incredulous he actually argues with God. "Um Lord, are you sure you've got the right man here? Has there been a mistake of some kind? Because the Paul I know hates you." The Lord pushes back with an imperative. "GO! THIS man is my chosen instrument!" Unlike those other stories, there is nothing in Paul and nothing in the people around him that prepares the way for Paul's conversion

We could say Paul's conversion is a conversion *ex nihilo*. Do you know those Latin words, *ex nihilo*? I've used them before. They mean 'out of nothing.' You usually hear them used to talk about creation. If you study theology, you are taught that God created the world, *ex nihilo*. Out of nothing. God didn't use any raw materials. There was no pre-existing clay that God took to make the world. There was no stack of metaphysical mud needed to mold the mountains. God created out of nothing. He said let there be light, and there was light.

I remember when I learned this doctrine as a theology student, I accepted it, it seemed right to me, but I remember thinking 'why does it matter? So God created the world out of nothing, would it matter if he made it out of some sort of pre-existing clay? Would that make any difference? Why do I need to learn this doctrine? Why is this something the church wants me to understand?'

Here's why. When you read the whole of Scripture, it's clear that God prefers to work in cooperation with human abilities. God prefers to work through people's capacities. Instead of speaking to us directly, he calls preachers and prophets who speak to us on his behalf. Instead of magically feeding the poor with manna from heaven, he calls people to works of charity. Instead of magically zapping little babies with foolproof faith, at baptism he calls parents and church members and grandparents to tell the children about Jesus. God wants servants and followers. God likes to work through us.

Sometimes we get so used to that mode of operating that we make a mistake. We go from thinking that God wants our cooperation to thinking that he needs it. We start to think that justice and righteousness and the triumph of goodness depends on us. Like we are the raw material, and God needs our cooperation and effort and excellence to accomplish his purposes and make his kingdom come. God prefers our obedience, God wants our obedience, God calls for obedience, but he doesn't need it. God prefers to use the raw material of our cooperation and our capacities, but he doesn't need them. He's an *ex nihilo* God. He's a God who can create out of nothing.

There are lots of stories in the Bible where God uses the faithfulness and hard work of his people to accomplish his purposes. But then at the critical turning points in the Bible, we will see God do *ex nihilo* things. At critical turning points in the Bible, God works salvation out of nothing. In Genesis 1, he creates the world out of nothing. In Genesis 21 he causes 90-year-old Sarah and Abraham to have a baby. They don't get any credit for Isaac. It's conception *ex nihilo*. In Exodus 14 when the armies of Pharaoh are bearing down on them, God opens up the Red Sea to let the Israelites through. And before he does it he says to them: "I will fight for you. You only need to be still." I don't need your cooperation here. Stand aside, I'm about to do something *ex nihilo*. In Luke 1, the angel comes to Mary and tells her that she will give birth to the Messiah even though she is a virgin. The virgin birth is an *ex nihilo* movement of God. On Easter morning, a morning when all the disciples had given up, a morning where the women came to the tomb expecting to find death, God raised Jesus from the grave and changed the world. Resurrection *ex nihilo*. And now on the Damascus road God takes the least likely person on earth, he takes an enemy who was breathing murderous threats, and he turns him into his chosen servant. God makes him a man who will preach before kings, he makes him into this man whose words still shake the world with their power. It's conversion *ex nihilo*.

Notice that these aren't just minor stories. These aren't little asides in the history of God's people. These are main events. God prefers our cooperation, but at critical moments in the story he bursts out and makes a solo flight. At critical moments he does infinitely more than we could ask or imagine, and he does it to show that this all surpassing power is from God and not from us.

Most of us here work really hard at being good people. Most of us are trying hard to cooperate with God. We genuinely want to be more like Jesus. We resist temptation. We try to be kind and generous. We work at loving each other well. And that is so good. God calls us to seek his paths. You are dutiful and it's beautiful. Keep it up. Run your race. But in all our days of striving there will be these days of helplessness; days when we will face a situation where we have no words, no strength, no strategy, no ideas and no answers. On that day we need stories like this one, so that we know that we may feel like there is nothing to be done, nothing is all God needs to work his salvation.

Early in my ministry I visited a man who was dying with cancer. He was a lifelong church member-served on committees, served on council. The cancer had come as a shock to him, and he had done everything he could to fight it, but the treatments didn't work. The doctors had recently told him there was nothing they could do. This man had real trouble with that. He wept for most of the visit. And between his tears he expressed a lot of fear and doubt. He couldn't feel God in any of this he said. He couldn't find God. He couldn't pray. All he could feel were waves of doubt and fear. "I feel like I'm losing my faith," he said. I was a young minister and I tried to say something to comfort him. I tried my best. I brought every ounce of my human pastoral skill to the task. My words felt inadequate.

In moments like that, we need stories like this. That man's hope does not depend on the strength of his feelings, his hope does not depend on his ability to banish his doubt and fear. Nor does that man's hope depend on the quality of my pastoral comfort. Would it have been better if the man had been able to face his death with hope and trust? Yes of course. Would it have been better if I had offered better pastoral counsel? Yes, absolutely. But ultimately God doesn't need my words or his feelings to work salvation. Because he is an *ex nihilo* God. He works salvation out of nothing. He makes a way out of no way. The God who can make a servant out of Paul can make a new creation out of you.

We need this truth. If you are a parent struggling with a difficult child and you've tried everything and nothing seems to improve, in fact it gets worse, you need this story. If you are a person who lost someone you love to suicide, someone you love deeply who fell all the way down to the bottom of their depression. Even though you did everything you could to help them—everything! They fell all the way down. You need to know this story. You need to know the ex nihilo power of God. If you are a person frustrated because you are getting to the end of your life and your faith is still full of holes and questions. You thought you would be a rock of faith and certainty by now, but you are still at sea. You need to know the ex nihilo power of God.

Friends I wish for all of us deep faith, committed righteousness, fruitful service. That is what we all work towards and that is what we are called to. But for those moments where you are out of words and out of strength, I proclaim to you the God who saved Paul. I proclaim to you the God who raised Jesus Christ from the dead. I proclaim to you the ex nihilo God who makes a way out of no way.

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