

Could You Be Wrong About God?

[Acts 9:1-19a](#)

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Most of us can muster up enough humility to admit that we are not always right. But it's hardest to be wrong in our ideas about God. That's because, whether we realize it or not, our understanding of God is at the base of everything we believe. So if our understanding of God changes, everything else in life will have to change as well.

The inverse of this is also true. Sometimes you want to make a few changes in your life. Maybe you would like to be less stressed, less controlling, more patient. But you'll never succeed in changing until you see God differently. Change, or as we religious folks prefer, conversion, begins with your vision of God. That is certainly what the Apostle Paul discovered.

In his early years, the Apostle Paul was known as Saul of Tarsus. Now, Tarsus was not a Jewish town. It was in Asia Minor. That meant that Saul the Jew grew up around Gentiles. It wasn't easy to be a minority, but Saul responded to the challenges by taking his faith very seriously. He even became a Pharisee, and went to Jerusalem where he studied law under the eminent Pharisee scholar Gamaliel. The Pharisees were a conservative religious party in Judaism that believed all Israel's problems were a direct result of experimenting with the non-Jewish world. What the country needed, they believed, was to return to a strict observance of Jewish laws and tradition. Before long, Saul got a good job with the Pharisees. His responsibility was to make sure nothing changed.

At the time the greatest threat to orthodox faith was a new sect within Judaism called "The Way." Much later, in Antioch, the followers of this sect would be called Christ-ians. Jesus, the founder of this Jewish sect, had been crucified, but his followers were claiming he rose from the dead. Since Pentecost, thousands of Jews had become followers of this Jesus and joined their new organization called the church. Saul was determined to put a stop to it.

In Acts 8:3, Luke tells us, "Saul was ravaging the church by entering house after house, dragging off both men and women, committing them to prison." The word was that many of these converted Jews were now in Damascus. Saul was so afraid of what they were doing to his faith that he got permission to go to Damascus to hunt them down.

You remember the story. Along the road, en route, on a mission to help out God, Saul was blinded by light. He fell to the ground and heard a voice saying, "Saul, Saul. Why do you persecute me?" "Who are you, Lord?" "I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting." There was more to God than Saul knew. So he really had come to earth in Jesus. And Jesus was alive! Now that he has discovered a new vision of God, it will change everything. Notice that this is not the conversion of a penitent sinner. Saul is not coming to God asking forgiveness. That comes later. In the words of John Stott, he did not decide for Jesus; Jesus decided for him. In fact, this conversion is not even Saul's idea.

This is the most important thing to remember about true conversion. It always comes as God's idea. Not our own. And there is no one in the Bible whom God loves to convert more than religious people - those who, like Paul, have spent a lot of time learning theology, who are on a mission to do something that will help God, who are zealous, committed, and yet wrong. Isn't it interesting that Saul was blinded by light? There was more to the light of Christ than he had seen. And when he did see the truth, it overwhelmed him. No information, no matter how theologically correct, will do that for us. Only a vision of Christ himself can convert us, change us.

So again, if you would like to see some changes in your life, the place to start is to dare to look at Jesus Christ. Is this not why, years later, the Apostle would make such a strong case in his letter to the Ephesians for seeing ourselves "In Christ"? As the Holy Spirit adopts you into the Son's relationship with the Father, only then do you start to change, looking like the beloved of God.

After Saul was blinded, they led him into Damascus. The place he set out to go as a persecutor of the church turned out to be the place of prayer. For the next three days while life was darkened for Saul, he focused on the risen Jesus Christ. When you find that your life has been interrupted by God, so that you cannot even see how to keep moving ahead, have the courage to do nothing for a while. Nothing, but prayer. For it is in prayer that we stand before God, and then see the new directions he is calling us to move.

Meanwhile Ananias, one of the followers of Jesus in Damascus who was hiding from Saul, got a vision of his own from the Lord. The Lord Jesus told him to go to the home where Saul was staying and lay hands on him that he might regain his sight. Ananias gently reminds the Lord that Saul is the guy they are all hiding from because he has "done evil to your saints in Jerusalem." The Lord doesn't really argue with Ananias. He just gives the commission again, "Go." Thus again we see a religious person getting converted. Saul was converted from being a persecutor to an apostle of the church. Ananias was converted from fear to hospitality.

In one of the finest moments of the Early Church, Ananias goes to his persecutor Saul. He places his hands on Saul. And the first words he says, the first words Saul heard from the church he tried to destroy were, "Brother Saul." He made his tormentor his brother. At the time Luke wrote this story, the Early Church was at times severely persecuted, as it was for the next three hundred years, and as it still is in some parts of the world today. The way the church has always, always, overcome persecution is by reaching out to the tormentor, saying, "Brother Saul." That is what Christ asks of you in responding to your tormentor as well. Can you say it to the ex? To the person who is trying to get your job? To the person who has dragged you into court? Or who hurt you so deeply? It is the only way to transform evil - with love.

The Lord also told Ananias that, "Saul is an instrument whom I have chosen to bring my name before Gentiles, and kings, and before the people of Israel." Conversion in the Bible is always, always, linked to vocation or calling. The purpose of the changes God brings to our lives is not just because it feels good, but because it allows us to serve as his instruments. Saul's calling was to bring the name

of Jesus to the Gentiles, and to Kings, and to Israel. So it was never his intent to bring a new religion, which was a historical development, but to bring the name of a person - the risen Lord Jesus Christ. He alone can bring changes to people and their leaders.

In his book *The Call*, Os Guinness tells the story of Dr. Arthur Burns, the former chair of the Federal Reserve Board. Although he was Jewish, Dr. Burns agreed to join a White House Bible Study. But since he was Jewish, the other members of the study were afraid to ask him to pray at the end of their time together. One day, they had a guest leader, who didn't know about this unwritten rule and asked Dr. Burns to pray. To everyone's surprise, he stood up, and began to pray, "O God, may the day come when all Muslims will come to know Jesus, and when all Jews will come to know Jesus, and when all Christians will come to know Jesus." I know what he means. Much of my own ministry is spent introducing Christians to Jesus Christ.

The religion that bears Christ's name can only talk about him. He alone can change us, as he did Saul, giving us not a religious, but a sacred purpose to our lives. Jesus can make you his instrument, which he will use to change your part of the world until it looks like him.

When Jesus gets hold of our lives, we discover that in his hands nothing is ever wasted. As it turns out, Jesus could use a feisty, over-educated Pharisee, who grew up with Gentiles. That is the perfect job description for one whose mission was to take the name of Christ around the world. Without his background in Tarsus, Paul would never have understood the Gentiles to whom he introduced Jesus Christ. And without his training in Jewish law, he would not have been able to defend those converts against those who insisted they must first become Jews in order to follow Jesus.

The things about you that you cherish, and the things about you that you would like changed, are all things Jesus would like to transform for sacred purposes. That even includes your hurts, your limitations, and all the time you thought you had wasted. Jesus will use you not in spite of those things, but through them.

Now maybe you have not had a Damascus Road experience. The light hasn't blinded you. There have been no voices saying, "Hey! What are doing?" But I wonder if that is true. Peter Berger has said, "It is not given to us to make God speak. It is only given to us to live and think in such a way that if God's thunder should come we will not have stopped our ears." Do not dare stop your ears. I believe God is talking all the time. The question is, are we listening.

When a child wanders into your office at home, it could just be an interruption of important work, or it could be the voice from heaven asking if you are going blind with ambition.

When you pick up the newspaper to read about violence in Sudan or the streets of Washington, D.C. it could just be unrelated news, or it could be the voice from heaven asking why you have constructed such a small, safe, world for yourself.

When you come to the Lord's Table, it could just be bread and wine that you find here, or it could be the Body and Blood of your only Savior. If you could only see the power and love that is at this table, it would change everything in your life.

There is more to God than you know. Which means there is also more to your life than you know. Amen.