

Paul's conversion

Occasionally I've encountered articles where medical experts look back at a historical figure and try to diagnose their ailments. They generally have a heyday with the Apostle Paul. He apparently had lifelong issues with his eyes and later spoke of a thorn in his side that he couldn't get rid of. Lots of theories have been offered for both as well as for the event we just read.

However Luke, the writer of Acts, used them more to make a theological or spiritual point and not so much describe a physical ailment.

When Saul's sight was restored, something like scales fell from his eyes. While there are diagnoses that sort of fit, none that I know of cause complete blindness like Saul experienced. This is less about any physical eye ailment and all about Saul's inability to see in the spiritual sense.

A quick sidetrack – Saul and Paul are essentially the same name. Saul is the Hebrew version and Paul the Greek. After his conversion, he is largely spending time amongst Greek speakers and so the name Paul is what gets used.

So, back to the scales.

Saul gets struck totally blind by this encounter with the risen Jesus. It seems to be Jesus' way to make Saul stop...to force him to be open to the possibility that he's gotten it all wrong.

Completely blind and dependent on those who help him get to the street called Straight, he can no longer be a threat to anyone.

But even before this encounter, Saul was blind. The scales were there before. Also blind was the high priest from whom he got his papers authorizing the capture of the people of the Way...followers of Jesus. Given the time period, that high priest was likely none other than Caiaphas...the leader of those same religious authorities who so wanted Jesus dead.

Now, those religious authorities have to deal with all these wackos running around claiming Jesus had been raised from the dead. The religious hierarchy wants them gone too.

They're all blind to who Jesus really is. They all have scales distorting their vision.

Before Saul's conversion, Luke tells the story of Stephen's death by stoning. The religious authorities who were instrumental in Jesus' crucifixion are also responsible for the stoning death of Stephen.

Stephen was a deacon whose eloquent defense of the gospel of Jesus enraged those religious authorities. Saul was there at that stoning. He held the cloaks of those who stoned Stephen. He cheered them on.

Saul was absolutely certain he was doing God's work. Blinded by his own arrogance and certainty, he believed his education and faithfulness meant he had to be right and those upstart Jesus freaks had to be wrong. He seems to have relished the violence he subjected them to.

It turned out that was not at all God's work. Saul was doing the exact opposite of God's work. Those scales in his eyes distorted his ability to see what God was really up to in Jesus.

Let's go back for a minute to Stephen. Stoning was an awful way to die. Maybe once in awhile a well-placed throw to the head might kill someone right off, but mostly it was a method to cause maximal pain as one stone after another crushed bones and tissue.

Stephen never strayed from his trust in the gospel. Even in the face of torture, he never doubted that Jesus was the fulfillment of God's promise to Israel and to the world.

In the end, he died in much the same way Jesus did in Luke's account. Stephen's last words were Lord, do not hold this sin against them.

Now, Saul becomes the beneficiary of Stephen's prayer for forgiveness for his killers.

Saul is a perfect example of how God's judgment and forgiveness work.

Saul is headed to Damascus to round up Christians. He believes he's on a mission from God. He's breathing threats and murder and believes he's absolutely justified.

Then wham...Jesus says, hold up. You are completely wrong. Saul, being a good Jew, would recognize this experience as a visitation from no less than God almighty. An unusual light, the voice...all of that has happened to faithful people before...think Moses and the burning bush.

But Jesus? What's he doing there? Saul is rightfully very confused.

The blindness that hits Saul then is complete. His life's work is thrown into doubt, but he has no idea what comes next. It had to be frightening and just simply more than he could grasp. But now he is primed for a complete reset.

Although Jesus never announces forgiveness to Saul, at least in the account as we have it, what Jesus does do goes even further. Jesus brings Saul into the fold of the apostles. He calls Saul into ministry of Jesus.

Saul is completely transformed by Jesus' act. The scales of blindness to the gospel fall away. And he becomes a champion of that gospel...a champion willing to suffer for that gospel. And Jesus makes it clear he will suffer. Not because he's being punished, but because that's what zeal for the gospel brings.

Ananias also has to have a vision reset. His story is less dramatic, but when he arrives at the house of Judas, all he can see is a villain who has been responsible for fear and suffering among the followers of Jesus.

He doesn't have scales falling away, but God transforms his vision as well.

Sometimes we are tempted to believe that an encounter with Jesus is going to be filled with warm fuzzy feelings of love. Worship at big Christian conferences is designed to create those kind of encounters. They promise soaring emotions and goose bumps producing inspiration.

Biblical encounters with God are rarely like that. They're often more like what happened with Saul and Ananias. They're encounters that force you to reconsider long-held beliefs and certainties. They're encounters that even cause considerable unease...fear even.

Because the gospel of Jesus Christ, while it promises a world remade as a place of love, justice, forgiveness and peace, it also forces us to leave behind the other things we put our faith in...wealth...power...influence...personality cults that promise what they can't deliver.

The gospel forces us to leave behind a system that encourages us to define some people as less worthy than others...especially less worthy than us.

And while that might sound easy enough, if it were, we would not have the kind of Christianity that forever seeks enemies to condemn and destroy.

We would not have a Christianity that vilifies queer people and people of other racial, ethnic or religious backgrounds.

We would not have a Christianity blind to the beauty and gifts of all people regardless of gender, race, or sexual orientation.

The good news that brings about a more just world for all doesn't always come across as good news for those who like the way things are.

But it turns out that a gospel that is not good news for everyone, is not good news for anyone.

The good news is that the risen Christ is working even now to remove the scales from our eyes. The risen Christ is transforming us to be workers in God's kingdom of justice and mercy.

When Saul was healed physically and spiritually, when his vision was restored, he became one of the major forces for the establishment and growth of the Christian church.

That is the work of transformation that Jesus does...he takes wrong-headed stubborn people and stops them with a question – why are you doing this to me?

And then he reshapes us to be his witnesses to the world.

Forgiveness, transformation, repentance...are often not comfortable or easy. But they are at the very heart of the gospel of Jesus Christ. They come with a call to be Christ's witnesses which also won't always be easy or safe. But in the end, the promise of a world remade as a place of love, forgiveness, reconciliation, and justice for all is a promise we can trust.