

## Paul's Path

Friends in recent months I've shared with you an embarrassing hobby of mine,  
I am a birdwatcher, not the most exciting hobby I'll admit, but there it is.

Let me share with you another unusual interest: I love maps.

Do any of you who are here today love a good map?

When I was growing up my parents had on the wall a map of the world,  
I'd spend hours looking at that thing.

The most well-worn pages in my copy of LOTR are the maps in the back.

One of the first gifts my wife ever gave me when we were dating was an atlas  
– Now that's Romance my friends, that's romance!

I love my smart phone but I do regret the demise of the street directory,  
nonetheless among the most used apps on my phone are Google maps  
And also flightradar24.

Does anyone else wish to admit to having flightradar on their phones?

It's a map that has the flight path of every plane that's in the sky at any one  
time. A plane goes overhead, and you can see instantly where its come from.  
Kinda like bird-watching and mapping all in one, its great!

Maps can tell you where you've been,  
they can tell you where you *are*  
they can tell you where you're going,  
and perhaps most importantly of all  
they can tell you how it is you're going to get there.

How would you map out your journey in the Christian faith?

If we think back to what Catherine shared with us  
we can discern a path from one point in her life to another, cant we?

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I'm sure that you could trace your own development  
as you discovered the truth about Jesus,  
as you placed your trust in him,  
and then as you have continued to grow as his disciple,  
as one who is continually learning from him through his people.

One of the most famous spiritual journey's in the history of the church  
was the one we heard in this morning's Bible reading  
the story of how Paul became a Christian  
is one I'm sure many of you have heard before,  
but I'd like us to consider it briefly once more,  
because, although it seems completely out of this world,  
there are great encouragements for us  
as we seek to help people to both know Jesus and to grow as his followers.

One of the first encouragements is to be reminded that no-one is beyond saving!

Make no mistake, Paul was a *very bad man!*

Have a listen from Acts 9, verse 1

Meanwhile, Saul was still breathing out murderous threats against the Lord's disciples. He went to the high priest <sup>2</sup> and asked him for letters to the synagogues in Damascus, so that if he found any there who belonged to the Way, whether men or women, he might take them as prisoners to Jerusalem

Once I did the exercise of tallying up all the crimes that Paul is recorded of doing and I worked out that under the NSW crimes act

he could have received a sentence of about 60 years.

Now, sentencing is a little more subjective than just adding up a formula, but the point is, he was a violent man:

Intimidation, kidnapping, threats against people's lives,

these were the marks of Paul's first career as a persecutor of God's church.

He's the very last person you would expect to become a Christian.

In fact, we see later on in our Bible reading that the other disciples took some convincing when it came to news of Paul's conversion

I wonder whether you know someone who is a long way from faith in Christ?

Is there anyone that you know who you think is a lost cause?

Paul's story is that even the most aggressive, hard hearted individual can meet and hand everything over to Christ.

But I do admit that not everyone is going to meet Jesus

in exactly the same way that Paul does from verse 3

As he neared Damascus on his journey, suddenly a light from heaven flashed around him.

<sup>4</sup> He fell to the ground and heard a voice say to him, "Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?"

<sup>5</sup> "Who are you, Lord?" Saul asked. "I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting," he replied. <sup>6</sup> "Now get up and go into the city, and you will be told what you must do."

Was this the first time Paul had met Jesus? I'd say *No it wasn't.*

One thing the NT teaches us is that Jesus becomes known

when his people speak about his life and work;

People will meet Jesus when we speak about Jesus.

And before this Damascus Rd experience

we know that Paul had heard God's people speak about Christ.

In Acts 7 Paul had heard Stephen speak about Jesus.

At the time Stephen's speech didn't do much to alter Paul's course,

But, when God decided it was time, there was a meeting that was effective.

Here's another point of encouragement:

don't feel discouraged when your efforts to speak about Jesus fall flat.

Paul's path teaches that ultimately it's God's action that makes the difference.

Sometimes that action will involve your efforts, and sometimes it won't,

but ultimately the faith of others is God's business more than it is ours.

As we'll see later on in the passage

we do have a responsibility to make ourselves available to be used by God,  
and that responsibility remains even when the task looks daunting,  
but God remains the key evangelist,  
and that can be a great comfort when the people we love ignore our ministry.

After Paul met Jesus, he found he had to trust Jesus.

For Paul this trust took a very physical form as we read from verse 7

The men traveling with Saul stood there speechless; they heard the sound but did not see anyone.

<sup>8</sup> Saul got up from the ground, but when he opened his eyes he could see nothing. So they led him by the hand into Damascus.

I love the physical symbolism of Paul being led by hand into Damascus.

His plan was to enter into this city wielding a sword,

but meeting Jesus has turned everything around.

Becoming Christ's follower will involve eating some humble pie

as we realize that we are not as powerful and as important as we think

It will involve a change of our life's plans,

it will involve a day by day dependence upon God.

The once mighty Saul had become a helpless man, forced to place his trust in Christ,

which we see him doing in verse 9 For three days he was blind we are told,

and did not eat or drink anything.

We learn that in verse 11 this fasting was of the praying and fasting type,

the time he was going to spend persecuting God

was now spent in prayer with God,

no doubt confessing his sins and seeking forgiveness,

and also enquiring of God as to what was going to happen next.

One of the next steps was for Paul to become connected with God's people.

Paul's conversion might have happened without human help,

but his induction into the church was facilitated by two people,

one named Ananias, the other named Barnabas.

Have you ever been asked by management to buddy up with a new employee?

Now imagine that the new employee was someone you recognized

because they tried to run you off the road on your way in that morning

Or because they pulled knife on you as you walked up to the lift.

That's probably how Ananias felt,

but God called him to the task and he put his fear behind him.

It's true that Paul did experience an almost instantaneous change. We read in v20

that At once he began to preach in the synagogues that Jesus is the Son of God.

But it would be a mistake to think that Paul immediately became the Apostle

who would later conduct his great mission trips around the mediterranean.

After he placed his trust in Jesus there was a period of growth.

There's a phrase at the beginning of v23 that's easy for us to misunderstand  
When Luke speaks about many days passing by,  
the period he's referring to actually amounts to a period of three years.  
Before Barnabas introduces Paul to the rest of the disciples in Jerusalem,  
there's a period of three years where he no doubt learns a great deal.

Then putting together what we know for other parts of the NT,  
Paul spends another 10 years back in his home town of Tarsus,  
then another couple of years in Antioch,  
and only *then* does he set out on his first missionary journey.

It's easy to read Acts 9 and think "Bang! Paul became the famous apostle overnight".  
But there does seem to be an extended period of growth before he set out.  
I find that to be encouraging,  
because it says to me that each one of us is a work in progress.  
If we feel that we have a lot to learn about who God is  
and about the work that he has for us,  
then that's ok because growth is part of the path.

But there's a challenge there too isn't there, because it's also easy to get distracted  
and to stop growing in our knowledge of God  
and in our capacity to serve him.

So what might Paul's spiritual map look like?  
He starts off a long way from Christ,  
but in his journey he starts to hear of Jesus  
until the day God acts and he's led to place his trust in Christ,  
then he moves into a era of simultaneous growth and service,  
then he goes off in Christ's name to far distant lands.

It's a model that I'd like us to keep in mind  
as we think about our own context  
which we'll do after we sing our next song.

