

CONVERSION

(Evangelism, purpose in life, goal setting)

Acts 9

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43 year old, Lakewood Police officer, Richard Swanson called the police dispatcher on a Thursday afternoon, a couple of years ago, and announced he was about to kill himself.

Police friends rushed to Clement Park where they watched helplessly as this 1990 "officer of the year" and much decorated cop shot himself.

I know only what I read in the Rocky Mountain News but I had to ask myself the questions: What would drive a man to such action? If you had known him at age 25 would you ever have guessed that such could happen? What changed in life? Did Dick Swanson's reasons for living evaporate? Is it possible that he finally realized that what he had built his life around was insufficient?

James Fowler wrote: I am 33 years of age and in perfect health. "It is four a.m., in the darkness of a cold winter morning and suddenly I am fully and frighteningly awake. I see it clearly: I am going to die. I am going to die. This body, this mind, this husband, father, teacher, son, friend, will cease to be. The tide of life that propels me with such force will cease and I - this I taken so much for granted by me - will no longer walk this earth. A strange feeling of remoteness creeps over me. My wife, beside me in bed, seems completely out of reach. My daughters, asleep in other parts of the house, seem in this moment like vague memories of people I had once known. My work, my professional associates, my ambitions, my dreams and absorbing projects feel like fiction. What most call "Real life" suddenly feels like a transient dream. In the strange aloneness of this moment, defined by the certainty of death, I awake to the true facts of life. In that moment.. I found myself staring into the abyss of mystery that surrounds our lives. As never before, I found myself asking, "When all these persons and relations and projects that shape and fill my life are removed, who or what is left? When this biological embodiment of me ceases to function, is there- will there be - any I? "When the I that is me steps into the velvet darkness, will there be this center of consciousness, this I am, or not? And if so, by whom will I be met? What continuities will there be between these full, fleeting days and years I now taste and savor and any enlargement of time I may experience?" Fowler pg xi

James Fowler had never before felt so alone, but it focused him as nothing else ever had. Was he truly alone in this universe or was there something or someone that gave his life a context, a place to belong, a reason to live? Was there anything out there truly big enough to provide his life with meaning and security?

Many men and women reach a place in life where they ask: "What am I doing all of this for?" "I beat myself to get a job and to keep it - but what for?" "I'm in a fast lane but where is it taking me?" "Is there a larger context in which my life makes sense?"

Paul Tillich, not a theologian that I would recommend, nevertheless asks a great question in his book, The Dynamics of Faith, when he asks 'what values have centering power in your life?' What do you center your life around?

Whether they can articulate it or not, most people have a philosophy of life - a belief in something bigger than themselves by which they order their lives. They follow a particular path in their choices because they believe that by so doing they will insure a future for themselves.

Every human being seems to need meaning and security. As to meaning, as far as we know there is no other creature that demands to know "why". Humans are the only ones who require meaning. The only ones who require purpose and priorities.

And as to security, we learn very early in life that we are dependent creatures. We are dependent on others for our very survival. We are not very old when we learn that life can be a dangerous experience and we need help to survive.

And then we learn of death, and it is frightening beyond words. And so early in life we begin to search for something that will give us meaning and security.

I think most children rightly seek and find that meaning and security in their parents but by the time they are in their teen years it becomes obvious to them that that center is not sufficient. Parents are human and just as fallible and just as in need of security.

Where then does a young person look for meaning and security? What center is big enough and strong enough to give ultimate meaning and real security?

By the time he/she is a teenager they have been introduced to many 'gods,' some religious but most secular, that will claim to be sufficient centers around which to build a life that will give meaning and security. But these lesser gods won't cut it in the long run.

A young woman may believe that finding that right young man and becoming his wife will provide the meaning and security that she longs for. How sad when she realizes that her Knight's armor is rusting not shiny. A young man or woman may believe that following the right educational and career path will provide that center. How sad when that career is interrupted or they reach the end and are handed a gold watch.

The central character in our text today (Acts 9) was probably around 35 years of age, almost 10 years out of grad school, and now picked by the bosses for the most politically advantageous task of his career. There was no doubt about it - his career was on the rise and he was approaching real success. He was with the prosecutor's office and he had just been given authority to go to a neighboring country and extradite the people that were all over the news. If he could pull this off - his career was made.

Please find Acts 8 in your Bible and look with me at the beginning of this story: If I had introduced the main character of this story today as the Apostle Paul most of us would have unconsciously dismissed the story as probably not relevant to where we live. But I suggest that the man that history knows as Paul and formerly Saul was a young man very similar to the men and women of our own church - starting out in his career to accomplish something - to make a name for himself.

We first find Saul mentioned in Acts 7:58 and 8:1 where it says that he was present and giving approval at the murder of Stephen. After the death of Stephen, we learn in 8:1, "Christians became fair game" in Jerusalem - and persecution broke out.

If you've ever seen or read descriptions of "Krystalnacht" in pre-W.W. II Nazi Germany, when Jews were driven from their homes, beaten and killed, then you get some idea of what this persecution in Jerusalem was like.

What we find in 8:3 is that the young man named Saul is at the center of these raids, imprisonment's and deaths. When you read 8:3 and see that he "began to destroy the church" and that he "dragged off men and women" and in 9:21 where it says that he "raised havoc" in Jerusalem you get the picture of a very aggressive eager young prosecutor.

But what was driving him? Around what was this young man centering his life? In the long-run would it be sufficient reason to live?

Fortune Magazine's editors sent reporters to talk to 80 of the country's most promising 25-year-old business men and women to discuss values.

The values that this group held most dear were the values of "success". Success meant eventually achieving financial independence and along the way they would achieve top-ranking leadership in one or more of the major corporations of our country. The foundations on which they relied were their own abilities, their luck and their capacity for hard work. They also had faith in the large international corporations that they plan to lead believing that those corporations would determine the world's future. And how does this value or center, this core order their lives? They tell themselves they cannot afford any relationship that might be a drag on their advancement. They make decisions about children based on what it will do for their career. They further tell themselves that the fastest advancement is by moving often and by moving up.

"How will this center...serve them in the world of their next forty years? Will their centers.. hold? Will they confer a sturdy enough sense of worth on their lives to offset their stress and struggle, their loneliness and pain? Will the Center around which they are building their lives prove sufficient? Will having, doing and directing sustain them in face of death, betrayals, and aging...?" Fowler pg 279

Though they would not admit it easily, these young men and women know that they are finite and so they are attaching themselves to something they think is bigger than themselves that they trust will bring meaning to their lives and security in the end.

Though they have picked something bigger than themselves, in their short-sightedness they are trusting in something that is just as finite as themselves. They have chosen a lesser god.

What you give your life to, what you trust will give your life meaning and eventual security, can be called your "god". What those 25-year-olds don't know yet is that their "god" is not big enough, to merit their worship.

In Acts 8 and 9 it seems apparent that Saul had such a "god" - a finite little "god" not worthy of his life.

When Saul tells his own story in Acts 22 and 26 he speaks of the obsession he had for destroying Christians. He tells the Galatians how zealous he was for the cause of his religion. He tells them that he, Saul, was a Hebrew of the Hebrews. He had studied in the school of Gamaliel, the leading Pharisee of the day. He was absolutely committed to the Law of the Pharisees. Just as those 25-year-olds trusted their relationship to the corporate world for their meaning and security, so Saul trusted his relationship to Pharisaic law. He believed in it to such an extent that he was willing to kill to protect it.

For you see, he convinced himself that if he followed that Law and ordered his life around it that it would provide meaning for his life and security for his future.

Why such hostility to Christianity? Because if Christians were right than Saul's lesser god was inadequate.

But an interesting thing happened to Saul: By the time Saul got near Damascus on his way to extradite the Christians there must have been rising doubts about this center of his life.

In Acts 26 when Paul tells his own story he says when Jesus appeared to him, Jesus said, "It is hard for you to kick against the goads." This was a common rural proverb meaning, "How can you keep resisting the truth"

Saul might have seen Jesus in Jerusalem before the crucifixion. He had undoubtedly heard of the healing of the blind, the crippled, and the sick. He had no doubt heard of the resurrection of Lazarus. Saul had been present at the powerful sermon of Stephen. He had been there when Stephen's face took on the appearance of an angel. He had heard this man forgive them even as they stoned him to death. He had seen the conviction and commitment of these Christians who would rather flee their homes than renounce their belief in this Jesus. And yes he had heard them all claim that Jesus was alive.

I can only imagine the struggle in his mind: "I must do my job, but that Stephen - there's something about him. I can't change - it is all I've lived for BUT what about Jesus.

And now on the road to Damascus, even as he was nearing the city to prosecute more Christians, JESUS, Himself, confronted Saul. The very presence of Jesus challenges Saul's little god of religious law. Like James Fowler at 4 o'clock on that wintry morning, so Saul comes face to face with the insufficiency of his lesser god. If Jesus is who he claims to be then Saul's faith is in something that will ultimately fail him. And if Jesus is the God then centering his life on anything else is the most foolish thing he could do.

"O.K. Saul, maybe you haven't considered it before but now is the time for you to decide: Which Center is truly sufficient for life? Will you yet cling to your lesser god - the finite man-made center of your life?

NO. By God's grace Saul saw it clearly. He converted. He changed Gods.

Look at Acts 9:20. Paul said he was formerly convinced that he ought to do all that was possible to oppose the name of Jesus of Nazareth. Now what do you see him doing? Preaching in the synagogues to Jews that Jesus is the Son of God.

Lewis Rambo wrote: Conversion is "...a significant sudden transformation of a person's loyalties, patterns of life, and focus of energy." (Fowler pg 281)

Saul changed from trusting in the Law to trusting in Jesus. Saul changed from trusting in the finite to trusting in the infinite. Saul changed from trusting in a man-made god to trusting in the God.

By God's grace he came to realize that any other center to life was insufficient to provide real meaning and security.

By God's grace he came to understand that nothing else was worthy of giving his life to.

By God's grace he met THE God - the ultimate Center of life and true Center.

And in that God - the Lord Jesus Christ - Saul would now trust for ultimate meaning in life and real eternal security.

And to that God - Jesus - Saul would now give allegiance - his life, his energies, his time, his all.

"What are you spending and being spent for? What commands and receives your best time, your best energy? What causes, dreams, goals or institutions are you pouring your life out for? What power or powers do you rely on and trust? To what or whom are you

committed in life? in death? What are (your) most sacred hopes, those most compelling goals and purposes in your life?" (pg 3 Fowler)

An unfortunate change has taken place in recent years in the meaning of a word. The word is "Believe." There was a time when "believe" was the same as "trust". Today however, believe means nothing more than to hold certain ideas to be true. Do you believe in Jesus? YES I believe he existed and died for sins and is God. You hold those theological ideas to be true. BUT do those ideas sway your life? Do they dictate how you live? Do they order your actions and thoughts?

"TRUST" on the other hand has to do with what you set your heart on, what you commit yourself to and what you build your life on.

People may say that they believe in many things but you will know nothing about them until you know what they trust in. What they trust in will be evident not most in their words, but in their lives. What do your actions, your time, your investments say you trust in? Around what center are you building your life and eternity? Only a fool picks himself for the center of his life. Likewise How foolish to pick as the center of life - a cause, an institution, a job, a human being - for they must all ultimately fail. **THEY ARE FINITE!**

Saul met Jesus and in meeting Him he met THE God - the supreme center of life, the only foundation worthy of your worship, your honor, your allegiance, your life, your today and tomorrow. There are many lesser 'gods' that would claim to be big enough - they will fail.

On what foundation are you building your life?

What is the Center of your existence?

Is it large enough to carry you when the bottom drops out?