

# Contemporary Sermon for Sunday April 13, 2008

## Heroes of the Bible: the Apostle Paul

I once was lost, but now am found; was blind but now I see...

*Acts 9:1-18*

*Cameron Fraser*

If today was an inauguration ceremony for the 'Kingdom of God Hall of Fame' (if such a thing wasn't so much of a contradiction) there might read an introduction something like this:

*"This hero, so captivated by the Good News of Jesus and so intent on announcing the Kingdom of God spent a three year internship in the desert after giving up a promising position in a well respected profession and then subsequently forsook family and comfort and permanent residence and spent the majority of his adult life on the road. Because of his love for God and people he willingly suffered beatings and stonings and even returned multiple times to the same towns that persecuted him the most. He was required to be smuggled out of cities in baskets, ignored at prominent conferences of church leaders, misunderstood and disliked. He survived a shipwreck and a snake bite and had at minimum three stints in prison, before dying of old age under house arrest all the time, satisfied that his life was poured out for God, other people and that it all announced the Good News of the Kingdom of God!"*

You have to think that someone who lived like this must have felt that he owed Jesus such a debt...perhaps someone like a Peter, pulled from a an unfulfilling job, a world that showed him was a nothing and made him a someone. Or maybe someone like Mary or the woman that is brought to Jesus having been caught in adultery, someone who is forgiven such a tangible weight or saved from such mistreatment. Maybe this is the life of one of the many lame, blind or deaf people who were tangibly loved by Jesus and touched by his compassion...but it isn't, this is the life of Paul, a Hebrew born Roman citizen from a town called Tarsus who was raised with the name of Saul.

Today's Scripture reading from Acts records the conversion of Saul who we know as the Apostle Paul, or even St. Paul and it's pretty impressive isn't it? Flashes of light, voices from heaven lots of cool special effects would be needed if this was made into a movie. The Bible is chalk full of drama that we sometimes miss, whether it is through a lack of background knowledge, or maybe our own inclination to read it too religiously...so I'd like to help us build the drama of this moment with a look at who Paul is.

This Saul who is also called Paul has such a great dramatic introduction as a character in the book of Acts. If you're a fan of the big epic movies you know how

the biggest, baddest villain always gets a special welcome, that's how Saul comes on the scene.

In Acts 7 a young Christian named Stephen is arrested and tried by the religious establishment and it is decided that he should be executed – he is taken outside the city and stoned, and it is recorded that “the witnesses laid down their garments at the feet of a young man named Saul”. Now if you're the director of an epic movie you've got a choice here, is Saul uncomfortably watching, unsure about what is going on? Is there an older Rabbi or Pharisee here holding Saul's chin forcing him to watch so that he will learn something...the beginning of Acts 8 gives any perspective director a good hint, “And Saul approved of his execution”. I can picture the camera sweeping from the ground up, a pile of cloaks owned by the old men who in their rage discard them, then up the frame of a young man whose expression is calm, collected and perhaps just a little bit smug, approving.

As we piece together bits of his background we find out what an impressive young man this Saul of Tarsus was. First of all, we know that he is a Pharisee which in our minds likely mounts him in with the cursing hordes that attack Jesus, but we mustn't forget what a respected segment of Hebrew society we are talking about here.

Last contemporary service we watched the video *Dust* by Rob Bell and he taught about the education of young Hebrews. He told us that all Hebrew children in this day would enter a level of schooling called *Bet Sefer* where they would memorize the Torah; Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, Deuteronomy. I consider someone quite impressive if they've read this, but Saul has it memorized. We were also told that only the best students were permitted to go on to the next level, *Bet Talmud* where the rest of the Hebrew Bible, what we call the Old Testament would be memorized...all of this inside Saul's head! Rob Bell ended by explaining to us that only the very best of this group would be chosen by an individual Rabbi, the most respected position in Hebrew society to join and learn from him, only those who could potentially become Rabbis themselves would be allowed into *Bet Midrash* to study intimately under a Rabbi who felt that this young man could do what he could do...the best of the best. This is Saul of Tarsus.

But we actually know more about Saul's education than generalities. In a standoff later in the Book of Acts it is revealed that he studied under a particular Rabbi named Gamaliel, and Hebrew history holds a record of this man. It is written in this Hebrew history that “when Gamaliel died the Glory of the Law died” – he was considered the last of a tradition, never again matched in Hebrew education. So, Saul is not only among an extremely exclusive sliver of society good enough to enter *Bet Midrash* but he is chosen by the best, the most respected, the most glorious teachers of the Law...Gamaliel.

Now I am part of a reasonably exclusive portion of society in being a University Graduate and my Bachelor of Arts from Trent looks quite swank hanging on my wall. But, when I was living in the UK I had two friends named Andrew and Heather Cursham, both Oxford Grads: Andrew from Aeronautical Engineering and Heather from Oxford Law. Don't get me wrong, I am forever grateful to have attended University, but if I was looking for something impressive, Andrew and Heather have me beat. And this is Saul, the best of the best, of the best!

But there's one more thing that just adds to this young man who is watching over the execution...he is from Tarsus. Set just off the coast of the Mediterranean in the Roman province of Cilicia Tarsus was a true cosmopolitan marvel, where all the great forces of the Mediterranean World are represented. Late in Acts, he is asked if he speaks Greek and Paul answers "I am a Jew from Tarsus which is an important city" you can almost hear the scoff in his voice, 'as if someone from Tarsus would not speak Greek'.

What an intriguing contrast to Peter, a nobody from nowhere who becomes the Rock upon which Christ builds the church, in comes Saul of Tarsus, a somebody from the somewhere who becomes 'a fool for Christ'. I trust that understanding who Saul of Tarsus is helps is to grasp the drama of the incident recorded in our Scripture reading today.

Peter, a nobody from nowhere. Paul, a somebody from somewhere. Peter had nothing to lose in following Christ away from his fishing nets, Saul of Tarsus who would become known as Paul, had everything to lose...and he lost everything and in so doing finds that he gained everything!

Let's revisit our Scripture, we have Saul, going to Damascus, fully convinced of his mission to find and eliminate the followers of the way, and he is met by a light from heaven and the voice of Jesus. Saul falls to the ground and rises blind; he is taken to a Christ follower named Ananias who prays for Saul and the book of Acts records it as follows:

*Immediately something like scales fell from his eyes and he regained his sight. Then he rose and was baptized.*

This incident is where we as Christians get so much of our language of 'conversion'. One of the most famous Christian songs, *Amazing Grace* certainly draws on this moment in the memorable lyric

*I was lost but now am found, was blind but now I see.*

What a significant moment, when the scales fell off Paul's eyes. The Jesus that he once saw as rebel, blasphemer, and trouble-maker becomes Lord; path of the Way which he saw as rebellion becomes the Kingdom of God and the churches, who were once enemies, becomes beloved brethren.

It is amazing to read Paul's letters, full of emotion, compassion and zealous care for the churches that they represent when one thinks of the zeal with which he hunted them down. All because scales that hung on his eyes had been taken away.

Because those scales that fall off don't just signify the momentary blindness that Saul suffered during the time he could not see, what falls from his eyes was a contrary way of seeing the world, himself and Jesus. When he opened his eyes nothing had changed, but he suddenly saw things differently.

This story is amazing, dramatic and significant, not just because it happened, not just because it records the way that the biggest enemy of the early Christ followers became their greatest ally and the author of much of the New Testament. It is significant because it happens.

When we embrace the story of the Pharisee whose eyes were blinded and then reopened we are reminded that God is in the business of opening eyes.

How often do eyes become scaled over with hurt and wear and need a gracious touch of the Holy Spirit to bring clear and new sight?

How often do eyes become scaled over with stale experiences of church and need the enlivening touch of the Holy Spirit to bring a fresh wonder at the mystery of the Good News of the Kingdom of God?

And especially for us whose lives are full of privilege and ease, how often do our eyes scale over with apathy and complacency, glaze over like we've been watching TV too long, become numb to the cries of others and fail to see the dream of a God who so loves the world. Don't we too need the touch of the Holy Spirit to see those scales fall off to be able to look, like the Apostle Paul and Jesus with fresh compassion on the needs of others.

For me the scales are always peeling back. It is rarely as dramatic or instantaneous as Paul. Not long ago I picked up a book called, *The Irresistible Revolution* by Shane Claiborne and was reminded of the love that Jesus has for the poor and the neglected. I was reminded that to follow Christ was not just to think certain things about religion or moral issues, but to join Christ in a proclamation and demonstration of the Kingdom of God.

With each page I flipped my eyes became a little less scaly. Partially cleared eyes allowed me to see my own privilege and the opportunity I had to bless others, let me open my Bible and be reminded of the call of Jesus to love others as He loves them. Partially cleared eyes allowed me to feel a pull to travel and live alongside people who dwell on the margins, allowed me to see them not as refugees but as brothers and sisters, deserving of dignity and full of the image of God.

Partially opened eyes let me see myself for who I am.

Sometimes, scale free eyes have been exactly what I've wanted, sometimes, they've been really incontinent. Working in a West Ottawa housing development last winter they occasionally forced me to see an annoying child as worthwhile and caused me to feel the need to give a second chance to a kid who tried to punch me on his first visit to our centre. Sometimes they cause me to look again at a cup of coffee and wonder if that purchase announces to the farmer who grew the beans that the Kingdom of God is here. Sometimes it causes me to look at the guy on the corner who is sort of smelly and scary looking and realize that he deserves the dignity that I would like to deny him by walking past without eye contact.

Sometimes I find that I notice the scales, and go looking for the clarity of vision that I know comes from God...and in those times I trust that God is as much in the business of opening eyes now as he was one day on the road to Damascus.

I want to end with a short clip from the movie Hook. Peter Pan has left Neverneverland, grown up, raised kids and become a lawyer. Now on a trip back to what was once his home he is confronted with the assumption that things have changed, or maybe they never were as he once thought. His eyes have scaled over. But his friends help him see this and suddenly empty plates become full, suddenly dishes become a feast. Nothing about the table changed, the change was in Pan's eyes.

That seems to be the way that God works with our eyes. God allows us to see things for how they are and sometimes, just challenges us to readjust our own perspective and look again, for the first time!

**This sermon refers to...**

Scripture Reading – Acts 9:1-18

Nooma Video # 8 *Dust* by Rob Bell [www.nooma.com](http://www.nooma.com)

*The Irresistible Revolution* by Shane Claiborne [www.thesimpleway.com](http://www.thesimpleway.com)

*Hook* starring Robin Williams and Dustin Hoffman