

Good morning. Welcome to those of you joining us online, and our friends up in The :01.

Those of you that know me, you will not be surprised to hear that I've been reading Bono's memoir. Bono of course is the lead singer of the band U2. If you don't know their music, let's put it this way. If you're ages 40 to maybe mid-50s, they're the greatest band in history. If you're a teenager or in your early 20s, it's that band your parents talk about, and if you're in your late 20s or early 30s, it's that band that put out an album that showed up on your iPhone one day and you couldn't get rid of it, and you've never forgiven them. Bono has apologized for this, so I hope you can forgive him.

Anyway, he wrote a memoir that came out in the fall, got to see his book tour that came through town, it was amazing, and I've been kind of slowly working my way through. So imagine my surprise when, just this week, on Wednesday morning, I get to this section. Chapter 36 of 40. Here's what Bono says:

I return to a spiritual master like the apostle Paul, way back in the first century. I go to someone who overcame himself.

I have so much to learn from this ancient writer. How does someone who first shows up as a monumental pain-in-the-rear fundamentalist become someone who can write the greatest ode to love in two thousand years? Somewhere on his spiritual path he discovers love is bigger than anything in its way. That "no matter what I say, what I believe, and what I do, I'm bankrupt without love." And then he quotes Eugene Peterson's translation of 1 Corinthians 13.

Bono knew I was working on a sermon on Paul, and made sure he could give me a good intro for my talk. That's just the kind of rock star he is, you guys.

Now Bono is a professed Christian, so it's no surprise really that he would feel this way about Paul, but I love how Bono says it.

That's really the simplest way of talking about Paul. Someone who was a fundamentalist. He was into cancel culture before it was cool. But he wasn't just canceling people, he was killing them. And yet, he became one of the most influential people in the history of the world.

I mean, consider this. An obscure Jewish leader from 2000 years ago wrote a number of letters, among other things. And yesterday, one of the most powerful people in the world, the Prime Minister of the United Kingdom, read one of Paul's letters at the coronation of King Charles, read a passage out of his letter to the church at Colosse. It doesn't make any sense, how that happened. But Paul is who we're going to

Many of you know a lot about him, but some of you don't. I didn't know much about Paul till I got to seminary, so if you have no idea who I'm talking about, you've come to the right place today.

Perhaps the most important thing about Paul is that...of the 27 books of the New Testament, Paul wrote almost half of them, 13. And a fourteenth, the book of Acts, two-thirds of it is all about him. You could easily say that besides Jesus, he is the largest influence on shaping Christianity into what it has become. Now, since we don't have time to read all of Paul's letters, and two-thirds of Acts... what can we learn from Paul?

And as I look at his life, I see it dividing up into four sections, and after that I'll share with you five things we can learn. The first one is: Ambition.

I: AMBITION

Paul, who was also called Saul, is from the town of Tarsus, which is sort of at the northeast tip of the Mediterranean Sea, and he grew up a zealous follower of Judaism. He was trained up under the renowned rabbi Gamaliel, which is sort of like going to Harvard and graduating with honors. As Paul described it, he was a Pharisee among Pharisees. If you're not familiar with the term, a Pharisee was a Jewish religious leader of the day, a strong believer in the separateness of the Jewish people.

Very legalistic, a big emphasis on the importance of the law. They were the separate ones—the people who believed that outward appearance and the separating from sin was of utmost importance.

And although he was trained up by Gamaliel, he rejected his mentor's "wait and see" attitude towards this upstart rabbi Jesus and his ragtag bunch of followers. Gamaliel argues in Acts 5, before his fellow Pharisees, that these Christ-followers shouldn't be actively opposed:

"for if their purpose or activity is of human origin, it will fail. ³⁹ But if it is from God, you will not be able to stop these men; you will only find yourselves fighting against God."

You can almost imagine Paul chiding his old mentor for this dangerously open view towards this new attack on the one true religion and the only true God.

Ironically, Paul would discover exactly what Gamaliel warned against. He found himself fighting against God, much to his surprise. But we'll get to that.

We have no reason to believe that Paul ever encountered Jesus before his meeting with him on the road to Damascus, but you can be sure that word spread quickly to Paul about how very little regard this young rabbi Jesus had for Pharisees like him. Finally, though, Jesus is killed and they think their problems are over, but then his followers begin telling people that this Jesus was raised from the dead, and so this talk of his being the Messiah will not go away.

In fact, the very thought of a crucified Messiah would have made Paul's conservative demeanor bristle and would have further fueled his persecution efforts. And so as these followers of the Way begin their proselytizing, Paul, who described himself as "advancing in Judaism beyond many Jews of [his] own age and extremely zealous for the traditions of [his] fathers..." sees what he must do. As any good Pharisee would do, he knew he had to preserve the integrity of the Jewish faith, preserve the *honor* of the very name of Yahweh himself. These rebels had to be stopped, and killing them was not out of the question. Jewish law had blasphemy as a capital offense, and claiming that a God other than Yahweh could forgive sins, and that he should be worshiped, qualified as such an offense. And so we first meet Paul, at that time known as Saul, at the execution of Stephen in Acts chapter 7, where it says he was giving approval to his death, and that he then began to destroy the church.

Remember: this was all done in the name of Yahweh. Saul was *convinced* he was serving God by his actions. He was doing God's work, ridding the earth of those who would come against the will of the Creator of the Universe. So we see that, though misguided, Saul's ambition is relentless.

II: REVELATION and TRANSFORMATION:

And then...Saul moves into a time of revelation and transformation. We'll be looking at Acts chapter 9. Look with me if you like on pew Bible page 1087.

^{AC 9:1} Meanwhile, Saul was still breathing out murderous threats against the Lord's disciples. He went to the high priest ² 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. ³ As he neared Damascus on his journey, suddenly a light from heaven flashed around him. ⁴ He fell to the ground and heard a voice say to him, "Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?"

^{AC 9:5} "Who are you, Lord?" Saul asked.

"I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting," he replied. ⁶ "Now get up and go into the city, and you will be told what you must do."

^{AC 9:7} The men traveling with Saul stood there speechless; they heard the sound but did not see anyone. ⁸ 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. ⁹ For three days he was blind, and did not eat or drink anything.

So picture this scene. Saul's doing his thing, and has got to be thinking: you know, I am so underappreciated for my persecution of these Christians. Here I am, going out of my way to preserve the integrity of the one true religion by killing these rebellious blasphemers, but at least I know that God is happy. He must be just thrilled at all that I'm doing. It's just for an audience of one, that's all that really....

BOOM! Bright light, blinding light, on the ground. And then, *Saul, Saul...* He's thinking: this is God! He *is* noticing! He's knocking me off my horse to thank me. The angels are going to come down soon and sing for me. Really, Lord, this is too much. I'm just doing my part, really, it's no big thing.

Why are you persecuting me?

Wait, wait, persecuting *You*? I'm not persecuting you—I'm persecuting the Chri.... Wait, but that would mean. What a sec...who is this anyway? Is this some kind of a joke? But if you're the Lord, and you're saying I'm persecuting you, this must mean...so he says: "Who are you, Lord?" And you have to think he's going: "Please don't say Jesus, please don't say Jesus, I'll take anyone but Jesus."

I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting.

DANG IT!

And through this one encounter, the rest of his life is transformed. He would never be the same again.

Now capture the weight of this moment. Saul has become a Christian.

- This is akin to a Cardinals fan becoming a Cubs fan
- A Packers fan becoming a Bears fan
- It's famous atheist Christopher Hitchens becoming a born-again Christian.
- Or perhaps, a more close parallel, this is the Grand Dragon of the Ku Klux Klan ...becoming the biggest Civil Rights proponent of his time. This is not a small transition.

What would make any of these scenarios happen? Some sort of massive revelation, which would lead to an unrivaled inner transformation.

Do you feel the weight of this? F.F. Bruce says this: "no single event, save for the Christ-event itself, has proved so determinant for the course of Christian history as the

conversion and commissioning of Paul.”

And historically speaking, this to me is substantial evidence for the validity of Christianity. Only something as powerful as an experience with Jesus himself would have caused a man like Paul to do a complete 180 and become the biggest proponent of the very person he believed was a fraud. One 18th century writer observed that “the conversion and apostleship of St. Paul alone, duly considered, was of itself a demonstration sufficient to prove Christianity to be a divine revelation.”

I will go a step further.

I think you can prove the reliability of Christianity through Paul’s letters.

In fact, you could even throw out all of the gospels, and the book of Acts, and you could even throw out the 6 letters that liberal scholars don’t think Paul even wrote, you go with just the 7 books that absolutely everyone believes Paul wrote: Galatians, 1 & 2 Cor, Romans, Philippians, 1 Thess, and Philemon, and just in those writings you’d have evidence that Paul hated Christians, was actively persecuting them, encountered the risen Jesus, and completely changed everything he believed, and devoted his life to the very Jesus he once hated. *What do you do with that?* I hope there are some skeptics listening, to you I would say: if you aren’t willing to listen to what we have to say about Jesus, how about Paul? What are you going to *do* with Paul?

So for Paul, a mid-course correction was in order. This was a man who had it all figured out. And in the course of one brief encounter, everything he thought to be true had to be thrown out the window.

ASBURY

I want to pause here and ask a question that some of you might be asking. Which is: why doesn’t this happen more? If God has the power to reveal himself in this way, why doesn’t he? And the simple answer to that question is: we don’t know.

But I also want to point out that things like this do happen a lot, we just don’t necessarily talk about them enough. If we had time, I bet we could actually go around this room and you’d hear stories, not necessarily of conversions like this. But I can share about a time in my life when I’ve experienced something supernatural that changed me.

Many of you heard about the so-called Asbury Revival which is when a simple chapel service at Asbury College turned into an all-night affair and went on for 2 weeks. People reported this sense of God’s presence there, and it changed people forever.

That’s all this is. It’s just that Paul’s was a little more dramatic. But again, it’s just the move of God in surprising ways. We don’t get to tell God when and where to move, but in His providence, when he does, it changes people.

So that’s part two, revelation and transformation.

The third section is less discussed but is very important, and that’s reflection.

III: REFLECTION

Even after such a phenomenal encounter as that, he had to take time to re-form his theology. Galatians tells us he decided not to consult with other apostles, so that people couldn’t accuse him of just getting the story from them. So he spent three years in Arabia

and Damascus (which is a very long time for someone who had to be thinking—I've been changed, I just want to get out there and preach).

I had this feeling when I was ready to go into ministry. I was like: sign me up. I had a mentor who encouraged me to go to seminary. I was like: 3 years? Studying? Really? And a friend gently asked me: how many years do you think you'll spend in ministry. I was like, I don't know, 40 I would hope. And he said: do you think it might be worth your time to take 3 years to invest in those 40?

I was like: check, makes sense.

Paul didn't go to seminary but he did take three years that I can only imagine were a similar kind of investment in the next part of his life.

So then Paul goes into Jerusalem to meet the other apostles. And he needed Barnabas to defend him in those situations.

You can imagine there would have been some hesitation to allowing this former persecutor of Christians around, so Barnabas vouches for him.

Paul then moved into the final stage of his life, which I will call Passion.

IV: PASSION

He had the ambition before, but now he has the passion to go with it, a passion that could only come from the living God. He is now a man possessed, traveling from place to place, reasoning with people and also waiting for the Lord to guide and direct, and to show up with power. And this will constitute the pattern for the rest of his life. PAUSE

What Paul demonstrated in his writings as well is his personality. He had what I would describe as a "both/and" personality.

- He was both passionate *and* thoughtful; he was a poet *and* a scholar. In essence, he had a heart *and* a head.
- He was often solemn (he said he would gladly give up his salvation if it meant that more of his Jewish brothers and sisters would become followers of Jesus) *and* he had a sense of humor. One of my favorite lines of Paul's is in the book of Galatians when he's talking about the folks that are saying that a Gentile man must become circumcised in order to be a true Christian, he uses sarcasm to great length in saying that if they wish circumcision on the Gentiles, he wishes castration on them! He's so *salty!*
- He was conceptual (going to great lengths to describe what Christ's death means) *and* practical (encouraging Timothy to have some wine to help his upset stomach).
- He was persuasive in his outreach (in the temples wherever he went, reasoning with the Jews) *and* he was dependent on the move of God (saying in 1 Cor 2 that he came with a demonstration of God's power, so that their faith might not rest on men's wisdom but on God's power).
- He was passionate about seeing the gospel spread, that souls might be won to Christ, their spiritual needs being met, *and* he was passionate about their physical needs as well. He talks in Galatians 2 about how remembering the poor is something he is eager to do.
- He was gracious, especially when it involved newcomers to the faith, and yet wasn't afraid to be confrontational, especially when it involved longtime believers who were

holding to beliefs that he felt were clearly wrong. And yet, even in one instance, when he and Barnabas split up because Paul didn't think they could trust Mark, we see later that Mark is listed in one of Paul's letters; he was clearly reconciled to Mark. This is why Paul was quick to point out that we are jars of clay: we are nothing special ourselves, but the message we bring is a priceless treasure. You get the sense that, while passionate, Paul never took himself too seriously.

We can also learn from his both/and type attitude about death. He said, for him, to live is Christ and to die is gain. Which is another way of saying: either way, I can't lose! The joy that I am experiencing right now in my life is so real that I know that I don't have to just wait around till I die to experience that fullness. Living—is—Christ. And yet, what is *dying*? Oh, that's gain. Because going to be with Christ is far better, no question. And this also is why Paul's passion was two-fold. It was to know Christ AND to make him known.

Let's quickly look at 2 passages where we see both of these passions coming out. First, to know Christ.

From the moment he is knocked off his horse, there's power but the thing behind the power is love, knowing Christ. He says in his letter to the Philippians, a famous passage where he talks about how all of his good works are nothing compared to knowing Christ. He says:

^{PHP 3:7} But whatever was to my profit I now consider loss for the sake of Christ. ⁸ What is more, I consider everything a loss compared to the surpassing greatness of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whose sake I have lost all things. I consider them rubbish, that I may gain Christ ⁹ and be found in him, *not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which is through faith in Christ—the righteousness that comes from God and is by faith.* ¹⁰ I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the fellowship of sharing in his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, ¹¹ and so, somehow, to attain to the resurrection from the dead.

Knowing Christ was everything.

But he also wanted to do everything in his power to help others know Christ.

In another famous passage, he says he did everything he could to shape the gospel message so that his different audiences would understand. He says in 1 Corinthians 9: *20 To the Jews I became like a Jew, to win the Jews. To those under the law I became like one under the law (though I myself am not under the law), so as to win those under the law. 21 To those not having the law I became like one not having the law (though I am not free from God's law but am under Christ's law), so as to win those not having the law. 22 To the weak I became weak, to win the weak. I have become all things to all people so that by all possible means I might save some.*

We would do well to exhibit this balance too.

If all we care about is knowing Christ, that's good for us but it doesn't fulfill our calling to be salt and light in the world.

If all we care about is making Christ known we'll burn out. We need that balance of being fed and filled up by Christ, and then by pouring ourselves out for others.

So as we wrap up our time together this morning, I have 5 implications from Paul's life, things we can learn from his life that informs ours.

1. God redeems the most unlikely of people. Some of you in here have given up on

- certain people in your lives, thinking: God is *never* going to reach *them*. Don't you think they probably said the same thing about Paul? Don't give up believing God can change the life of *anyone*. Don't stop praying and loving and persuading.
2. There are some here who may need a mid-course correction. The path you're headed down is the wrong one. Well here's your chance, maybe even this morning. Don't wait to get knocked over and blinded. The life worth living is a life of following Jesus. Everything else, when compared to it, is garbage. He is worthy of your trust, and even of the only life you've been given. Trust him with it.

- You may be a fundamentalist like Paul. There's all kinds of fundamentalists. Fundamentalist Christians/Muslims/Democrats/Republicans. Fundamentalism is the sure belief that everything you believe is true. There's no room for questioning or doubt or anything.
3. There are maybe some here who still think you need to obey the law *so as to earn* God's favor. If anyone could have earned God's favor, it would be Paul. But even Paul couldn't. Neither can you. What he learned is that God's favor is a gift: it's what grace is all about. Jesus has earned it for you, and you don't need to do anything else to get it except to receive it.
 4. Fourth, we learn from Paul's life that a life of following Jesus is a life of suffering. Get this: Paul was God's *chosen* vessel to carry his name before the Gentiles, and he was called to a life of suffering. You could argue that Paul is clearly one of God's favorites—he was used by God *so* greatly, and yet how does God treat his favorites? He *allows* Paul to partake in the life that Jesus lived as well, a life of suffering.

In that chapter 9 of Acts, God calls another man Ananias to go give Paul a message:

15 But the Lord said to Ananias, "Go! This man is my chosen instrument to proclaim my name to the Gentiles and their kings and to the people of Israel. 16 I will show him how much he must suffer for my name."

If you expect to be called, you should expect to suffer for his name. We are so ready to *rebuke* pain and suffering in our lives, as though it's from the devil. Guess what? It's probably not. I heard someone say: you've heard it said, if you can't take the heat, get out of the kitchen. Not so with Christianity: don't get out, get a fan and stick around, cause that heat is a part of the deal.

5. Finally, an encounter with God changes everything. Paul had everything. He had the correct beliefs. He had the respect of his peers. I can imagine his fellow Pharisees, prior to his conversion, would say: there goes Saul, if only we had the commitment he had. He had everything, and he had nothing until he met with God. Until he **KNEW** God, until the experience with the risen Savior, and the love of the Holy Spirit melted his heart. It's not enough to just know the right stuff. And it's not enough to be zealous. The Holy Spirit has to change you. And what is the Holy Spirit, but the experience of the **LOVE** of God. At the end of the day, it really was about this incredible love displayed on the cross, revealed to Paul in the form of this violent but ultimately merciful revelation.

What Paul discovered and the example for us is that at the center of everything is a being that is full of a powerful and a transformative love, a love as Bono says, that's bigger than anything in its way, a love that was so big in fact that it became a person, and died in our place. And as we come to the communion table, that's the kind of love we celebrate. Let's pray.