

January 25, 2026 – Galatians 1:11-24

The Feast of the Conversion of St Paul is kind of an odd festival in the church year. Like the Confession of St Peter last Sunday, it is the rare example of a festival commemorating a moment in the life of someone other than Jesus. And for that reason, you might wonder why we celebrate it at all. I mean, nothing against St Paul, but do we really need to remember this event so prominently?

Well, Martin Luther would say yes. Absolutely. In fact, the story of St Paul's conversion was one of Luther's favorite passages in the entire Bible. In January of 1546, while preaching on this feast day only a few weeks before his death, Martin Luther is recorded as saying that it was his opinion that every pastor preach on the conversion of St Paul at least once a year. That's how important he considered it.

But why? Why is it so important? Why should it be brought up so often? Why does it need its own festival? Well, the answer to that comes from St Paul himself. Who explains to the Galatians in our Epistle lesson just what they should learn from his own conversion. And what it teaches them about their own salvation. What it teaches us about our own salvation.

He begins with an important opening statement, one made boldly and confidently and without equivocation: *“The gospel that was preached by me is not man’s gospel. For I did not receive it from any man, nor was I taught it, but I received it through a revelation of Jesus Christ.”*

This is an important foundation that Paul needs to lay down. If the gospel is something that can be invented, adjusted, improved upon, or supplemented by human wisdom, then it is no longer the gospel. At that point, it's just advice. It's just a self-help program. It's just another system of the Law.

But Paul insists: what he preached didn't come from man. It didn't come from personal reflection. It didn't come from philosophical study or moral contemplation. It came from outside of him. It came from Christ.

Now, you might think, didn't Paul already have God's Word? I mean, he was Jew with extensive religious training. Didn't he already know the Law and the Prophets, which point to Christ?

And Paul brings up that history. He says, *“You have heard of my former life in Judaism, how I persecuted the church of God violently and tried to destroy it. And I was advancing in Judaism beyond many of my own age among my people, so extremely zealous was I for the traditions of my fathers.”*

Paul wasn't ignorant of Scripture. He says he was zealous. He was devoted. He was an advanced student. And he was especially devoted to the traditions of his fathers.

And that last phrase is an interesting one. Because Paul is describing in his own history something that Jesus confronted again and again with the Pharisees. Because the Pharisees never rejected God's Word. They knew the Law and the Prophets just like Paul did. They knew the prophecies of the Christ that should have pointed them to Jesus. That wasn't their issue.

Their issue was that they had built such an extensive structure of human interpretation, commentary, and religious practice around God’s Word that the Word itself was buried underneath it. Jesus says to them in Mark 7, *“You leave the commandment of God and hold to the tradition of men.”* God’s Word no longer judged the tradition. The tradition judged God’s Word.

And so what Paul is saying here is that, in effect, even though he had the revelation of God all along in the Scriptures, that revelation had been overshadowed by this manmade religion of the Law. His zeal was real. His sincerity was real. His obedience was real. But his faith was directed not by Christ, but by a religious system that had lost the heart of God’s mercy. Such that it no longer recognized the Christ even when He was staring them in the face.

And so all of that training, that discipline, that Jewish pedigree no longer mattered to Paul. Because if it didn't lead him to the love of God poured out in the blood of Jesus Christ on the cross, then it was not a foundation worth building upon. It was not a path worth walking down.

After his conversion, all that mattered to Paul was that God the Father had set him apart before he was born, called him by His grace, and revealed His Son in him. God didn't wait for Paul to improve. God didn't wait for Paul to reconsider. God didn't wait for Paul to become more teachable.

God acted. God revealed. God called. And notice how Paul describes that revelation: God revealed His Son in him. Not merely to him, but in him. Christ didn't simply give Paul new information. Christ took Paul and replaced one identity with another. The persecutor became the preacher. The self-righteous became the forgiven. The enemy became the ambassador.

This is what makes the gospel fundamentally different from every other manmade religion. Manmade religions say, "Here is what you must do for God." The gospel says, "Here is what God has done for you. Here is what God now gives to you." Christ comes to sinners who are not seeking Him. Who are not improving. Who are not preparing themselves. And He gives Himself to them.

And that is why Paul is so insistent that the gospel doesn't come from man. If it did, it would always turn back into a system of achievement. It would always become about our effort. It would always be shaped by the expectations of the culture or the preferences of the community. But because it comes from Christ, it remains a message of sheer grace: forgiveness for sinners, life for the dead, righteousness for those who have none of their own.

Then Paul moves to an interest point of clarification. After his conversion, he didn't immediately run to Jerusalem to get approval from the apostles. Yes, later, he did meet Peter and James. Later, he was recognized by the Church. But the Church didn't create his Gospel. The Church confirmed what Christ had already done.

In other words, they arrived at this message of the Gospel independently of each other. Christ gave Peter and James and the other apostles in Jerusalem the Gospel message. And Christ gave Paul the Gospel message. And then when they finally got together, they realized, "Hey, we're preaching the same Gospel message."

Why does this matter? Well, it means that forgiveness through Jesus Christ is not and never was an invention of the Church. The Church does not and never has voted on what the Gospel is. Rather, like Paul, like Peter and James, the Church receives what Christ gives and is entrusted with delivering it faithfully.

I, as your pastor, do not speak on my own authority. I speak on Christ's authority. And our congregation doesn't gather around shared opinions. We gather around a shared Lord, who speaks through His Word and gives Himself in His Sacraments.

And when the churches in Judea heard this, they could only conclude one thing: "*He who used to persecute us is now preaching the faith he once tried to destroy.*" And they glorified God because of Paul.

And that last phrase is important. They didn't glorify Paul. They glorified God. Because only God could do this. Only God could turn a persecutor into a preacher. Only God could take a man devoted to destroying the Church and make him one of her chief servants.

Now, it's easy to think that Paul's conversion is so dramatic, so miraculous, that it has little to do with us. Most Christians do not get a blinding light. Most Christians do not hear the audible voice of Christ. Most Christians are not struck down on the road and led into town by the hand. At first glance, there's very little about Paul's conversion that you or I can relate to.

And yet, like Martin Luther, Paul himself brings up his conversion again and again in his preaching. Why? Because he sees in it a picture of what spiritually happens to every Christian. Every Christian is confronted by the Law. Every Christian is exposed as a sinner. Every Christian is brought to repentance. And every Christian is made alive by the blood of Jesus Christ and the power of the Holy Spirit.

You may not remember the moment when the Holy Spirit brought you to faith. But Scripture says that before Christ claimed you, you were dead in trespasses and sins. You were, by nature, opposed to God. As opposed to Christ and His Kingdom as St Paul once was to the New Testament church.

And yet, like Paul, Christ came to you anyway. Through the Word. Through Baptism. Through the preaching of forgiveness. Through the voice of the Church that spoke Christ's promises to you.

And so, as dramatic and miraculous as St Paul's story is, it's our story, whether we recognize it or not. You and I were saved because God was pleased to reveal His Son to us and in us.

And that's also why Paul's story is such comfort for the Church. Because it reminds us that the gospel doesn't depend on the quality of the messenger. It depends on the power of Christ. The Church grows not because her members are well-trained and zealous in the traditions of their fathers, but because her Lord is merciful. Christ builds His Church by converting sinners, forgiving enemies, and calling the unworthy.

So on this feast of the Conversion of St. Paul, we're not celebrating Paul at all. We're celebrating the triumph of Christ's grace in every believer's life. The same Christ who stopped Paul on the road still stops sinners today. The same Christ who revealed Himself to Paul still reveals Himself in Word and Sacrament. The same Christ who turned a persecutor into a preacher still takes broken, sinful people and makes them His own. And that is something worth remembering. Amen.