

Sermon Title: **“Saul or Paul? Converted or Called?”**

Bible: **Acts 9:1-20**

When: on the 3rd Sunday of Easter, May 4, 2025

Where: about 25 people (plus YouTube Live viewers) at Gilroy UMC

Opening Prayer

O Lord, let the words of our mouths, and the meditations of our hearts, be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our Rock, and our Redeemer. Amen.

1. The Apostle Paul

Today’s Scripture Reading is from Acts, which is about the ‘conversion’ of Saul. Who is Saul? This Saul is not King Saul in the Old Testament, who was the first king of Israel, followed by King David. Saul in Acts became Paul later, the so-called Apostle Paul.

Generally speaking, the title apostle can be used only for those twelve disciples who lived with Jesus Christ. But there is only one exception in the Bible, the Apostle Paul. The ‘conversion’ of Saul happened after Jesus’ life and his ascension, which means that Saul could not have seen Jesus with his own eyes, and he could not have lived with Jesus.

However, Saul, or Paul, introduced himself as an apostle in his letters to many churches at that time. We cannot ignore his influence on the early Christian community. We have 27 books in the New Testaments. While we have four Gospels, and the most famous disciple, Peter, wrote 2 letters, the Apostle Paul wrote 13 or 14 letters to the churches, even though many scholars have argued that only 7 letters belonged to Paul. It seems like Paul’s letters

were written and spread far and wide even before the Gospels, throughout the early Christian communities. Therefore, some scholars argue that the Apostle Paul started the early churches or Christianity, rather than Jesus Christ. While Jesus shared and showed God's kingdom on the earth, Paul established the churches—the faith communities.

2. New Perspective on Paul

One of the famous theological debates about the Apostle Paul is how to look at the 'conversion' of Saul. And there is the so-called NPP, New Perspective on Paul. When I learned this New Perspective on Paul a couple of decades ago, it could be regarded as a new perspective among biblical scholars. It was started in 1977 by E. P. Sanders' essay "Paul and Palestinian Judaism." I do not think that it is a New Perspective on Paul anymore among biblical scholars. But I am not sure if it is still a new perspective among people in many churches. So, I would like to share my understanding about this New Perspective on Paul.

How do we explain the 'conversion' of Saul? How do we define the conversion? While Saul became Paul, did his religion change from Judaism to Christianity? As we read in the Acts, Saul was the most dangerous enemy to persecute the early Christians. But after his spiritual experience on the way to Damascus, Saul was converted to Christianity, and confessed that Jesus was the Son of God. Later, he became the most passionate apostle to spread the good news, even to the Gentiles or to foreigners. So his conversion seems like a sudden and dramatic change. It seems like it is clear-cut between Judaism and Christianity.

However, the New Perspective on Paul tried to look at the continuity between Judaism and

Christianity in terms of covenant and grace. How can we be God's chosen people? When our faith ancestor Abraham was called by God, God made a promise or covenant to be Abraham's God. God's covenant was not dependent on Abraham, but dependent on God. God's covenant is not based upon what we do, but upon how much God loves us. In this way, the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob can be the same God of the Gentiles or foreigners, God of us and all. Saul might have had a similar concept of this covenant in his Palestinian Judaism community, and Saul or Paul realized God's grace and love through Jesus Christ to all people, including the Gentiles or foreigners by the encounter with Jesus Christ on the way to Damascus. Grace means the undeserved, unmerited, and loving action of God. This concept of grace can be found in the concept of the covenant. Therefore, Paul, who was Jewish, did not require the Gentiles or foreigners to follow Jewish religious requirements like circumcision, dietary laws, or Sabbath laws, at that time, because what mattered was God's covenant and God's grace. Then, his encounter with Jesus Christ on the road to Damascus can be regarded not as a sudden or dramatic one, but as one of the encounters of God's revelations, somewhat natural and continuous encounters like a rite of passage, on his overall faith journey. Then, probably, we can say that Paul was called rather than converted on his faith journey.

3. Like Paul

We are all on our faith journey, and your faith journeys are unique and special. I believe that there have been God's moments that called you to our Lord Jesus Christ and this church. Can

we discover God's holy presence even before that moment? What I mean is when we look back on our faith journeys, we might be able to discover other instances of God's nudge or hidden presence. There is a sudden or dramatic moment of God's presence or encounter, and there are gentle, gradual, and continuous moments of God's presence and guidance, too. Like the concept of God's prevenient grace or welcoming grace, the Divine love has surrounded us and precedes any and all of our consciousness. God loves us all the time, even before we are aware of God's love and even in our ordinary lives. Let us discover God's amazing love throughout not only sudden or dramatic moments, but also in our normal and ordinary moments.

Closing Prayer

O Lord, we know that you love us all the time. Sometimes we might expect your presence only when we need sudden or dramatic help. But we know that your love and grace was there, even though we might not have been aware of it. O Lord, please guide and help us to discover your love and grace in our normal lives, too. Thank you so much for your unconditional love and holy and gentle presence in our lives. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.