

Title: "Transformed to 3D: The Apostle Paul"

Text: Acts 9:1-19; Ephesians 3:1-13

We are continuing our series of sermons called, "Living Faith in 3D,"

- which was inspired by Paul's prayer that all God's people might be empowered by the Spirit to "grasp how wide and long and high and deep the love of Christ is,
- and to know this love that surpasses knowledge so we might be filled to the measure of the fullness of God."

So for the past three weeks we have been exploring how we might ourselves become answers to that prayer.

- How we might grow into a "living faith" in 3 dimensions:
  - Upwardly in our relationship to God
  - Inwardly in relationship to ourselves
  - Outwardly in relationship to the world around us.

Today I would like to remind you of the life of the man who wrote this prayer in the first place: the Apostle Paul.

- He was the one who prayed fervently for Christians everywhere to grasp how wide and long and high and deep the love of Christ is;
  - did he grasp the dimensions of Christ's love himself.
  - Did he have a 3 dimensional living faith?

A few minutes ago you heard the story of Saul's conversion on the Road to Damascus from the Book of Acts.

- Listen now to the first 13 verses of Ephesians 3; the verses that immediately precede this prayer Paul prays,
  - which we are basing this sermon series on.

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When the Apostle Paul was born, his parents gave him the name Saul.

- Saul was a good Jewish name for a Jewish boy.
- Saul was the name of the first King of Israel:
  - King Saul, the predecessor to King David.
- A great many Jews named their sons Saul, and still do to this day.

But later in his life, this particular Saul changed his name to Paul.

Paul was not a Jewish name. It was a Gentile name. It was a Greco-Roman name: Paulos.

-Jewish families would not name their sons Paul.

-So why would a good Jewish boy, who grew up to be a seriously good and devout Jewish man,

-change his own name from Saul to Paul?

Well, in a nutshell, that name change is the story of Paul's life.

Saul was born and raised in the City of Tarsus in the Roman Province of Cilicia,

-which is on the southern coast of what we now call Turkey.

So he was not raised in Israel, but in the Gentile world.

-Yet as a Jew, he was raised in a separate little enclave of that Gentile world.

-The Jews had their own neighborhoods, their own stores, their own Kosher meats and vegetables.

-They had their own synagogue, where they gathered for the worship of their own God and the teaching of their own faith.

They didn't generally mingle with the Gentiles.

-They wouldn't visit their houses or eat their food or adopt their culture or worship their gods or participate in their festivals.

-The Jews generally looked down on the Gentiles as pagan idolaters who were immoral and worthy of hell.

-And likewise, the Gentiles generally looked down on the Jews as strange and uptight and unfriendly and rigid about their faith and about food they ate,

-and rigid about their sexuality and about everything.

So Saul might have grown up among Gentiles,

-but he didn't take on the name Paul because he had always liked Gentiles.

No. He grew up having no love for Gentiles at all.

-He grew up believing they were the enemies of God and the enemies of God's people, and were to be avoided.

And this feeling was magnified in Saul because he did not grow up as just "a regular kind of Jew" either.

-Saul was highly intelligent, and began being groomed at an early age to be a Rabbi, a teacher of the Jewish Law.

- He was sent to the best schools, and studied under the best rabbis,
- and at some point he was sent by his parents to Jerusalem to study under Gamaliel, the most highly acclaimed rabbi in the Jewish world of that day.

And Saul would later write of himself, that at that point in his life he was a “Hebrew of Hebrews, in regard to the law a Pharisee, as for legalistic righteousness, faultless.”

You see, among Jews, Saul was gaining a reputation for being among the best of the best.

- And as such, he was not only being schooled to shun and avoid Gentiles,
- he was also being schooled to shun and avoid and condemn heretical sects of Judaism.

Like this “sect” of Jews who believed that Jesus of Nazareth was the Messiah.

- These Christians who were going around the Jewish world of Israel and beyond to proclaim that though condemned and crucified as a common criminal,
- this Jesus of Nazareth had risen from the dead and was Lord of all.

Saul naturally found this claim to be outrageous, and dangerous to Judaism, and a blasphemy worthy of death.

So in righteous indignation he was working with the authorities in Jerusalem to stamp out this heresy.

- He even had orders from the High Priest in Jerusalem to go up to Damascus in Syria to arrest the Christians they had heard were now preaching in the Jewish neighborhoods up there.

This whole first part of Saul’s life I believe he would himself characterize as 2 dimensional.

- It was narrow, and confined.
- It had an upward dimension, but God’s love was narrow and confined.
- It was limited to the people of Israel, and specifically to those who faultlessly kept God’s laws.

And there was an inward dimension to Saul's life and faith,  
-but it too was narrow and confined.  
-It was about faultlessly keeping God's laws,  
and making sure one didn't step even one step out of line.

But there was no outward dimension of Saul's faith life.  
-God's love wasn't for the world,  
-and Saul's only concern for the world was to avoid it.

So what happened on that road to Damascus?  
-I'll tell you what happened: the resurrected Jesus appeared  
to Saul in a vision of light,  
-and revealed to Saul a multidimensional reality he had  
never even dreamed of.

In an instant Saul became aware that his whole narrow and  
confined view of God, and of himself, and of others in this  
world was severely limited.  
-His narrow view of God had no place in it for Jesus.  
-He thought that Jesus was a false messiah and a heretic.  
-But on that road to Damascus he discovered that Jesus  
was in fact the Son of God, the Savior, and Lord of all.  
-And Saul had always had a view of himself as one of God's  
chosen servants.  
-He thought he had been doing everything right for God!  
-But he discovered that he had been actually working  
against God and against God's purposes and had been  
persecuting God's only begotten Son, and his followers.

-Saul thought that he was entirely justified in despising the  
Gentiles of the world as much as he did.  
-He thought that God's love and God's plan of salvation was  
limited to the Jews.  
-But he discovered that God so loved the world that He sent  
his Son into the world not to condemn the world, but to  
save the world through him.

This is the "mystery" that Paul writes about in those verses we  
just read from Ephesians 3.  
-Paul says that in this revelation that God gave him on that  
road to Damascus,  
-this mystery was opened up to him:

-that through the Gospel the Gentiles are heirs together with Israel, and members together of one body, and sharers together in the promise in Christ Jesus!

My friends, that blew Saul's mind!

-And it changed his life forever.

-Unbelievably, the risen Lord Jesus called Saul, of all people to be the one to take this Gospel out of the Jewish world and into the Gentile world.

He became the Apostle to the Gentiles.

-And so you know what he did, he changed his name from Saul to Paul.

-He took upon himself a Gentile name, so as to more readily connect with the Gentile world and culture and people to whom he was sent.

He writes here in verse 7, *"I became a servant of this gospel by the gift of God's grace given me through the working of his power. Although I am less than the least of all God's people, this grace was given to me: to preach to the Gentiles the unsearchable riches of Christ."*

Do you see how Saul's view of God was expanded from 2D to 3D at his conversion?

-He discovered how wide and long and high and deep the love of God is in Christ.

-He discovered that God was not just the God of the Jews, but of the whole world.

-And that God loved the people of the whole world, and His plan of salvation was, and always had been, for the people of the whole world.

God's amazing grace was not narrow and confined,

-but expansive, and abundant, and overflowing!

And Saul's view of himself was expanded from 2D to 3D.

-He now saw himself more deeply as a "sinner" than he ever had known himself to be before.

-Yet he also saw himself as more deeply loved by God, saved by his grace, and forgiven his sin than he ever had before.

- And so Saul no longer prided himself on his faultless behavior, or on his status as a trained rabbi, or his birthright as a Hebrew.
- All of that which used to be the whole source of his superior self image, he now considered rubbish.
- It was all a 2 dimensional waste heap compared to the beauty of his 3 dimensional experience of the love of God in Christ.

And so Saul's 2D view of the world and its people around him was expanded into 3D as well.

- He gave up the narrow life he had led, and went in wonder out into the great wide world to discover who else God might want to reveal the mystery of the gospel to.

Taking on the name Paul was a sign and a symbol of his new 3D faith life.

- He was not just a Jew with a narrow tribal allegiance to Israel anymore.
- He was now a child of the living God who had called him to a global perspective as a citizen of the world,
- and a friend of sinners everywhere.

That world was indeed a broken place with many dangers, toils, and snares,

- but Paul went freely out into that broken world to bring a message of God's amazing grace.
- He went forth with an invitation to receive from God what he himself had received,
- the love of God which was wider and longer and higher and deeper than Paul had ever imagined.

This is what he is praying that all people in this world might grasp and come to know.

- And he prays it so that we too might be transformed from a 2 dimensional life to a 3 dimensional life.

How do we actually do that?

1. Pray for it.

This kind of transformation isn't something that we can do to ourselves or for ourselves.

- Like with the Apostle Paul it is a transformation that God must bring about in us by His Holy Spirit.

But we can pray for it.

-We can ask and seek and knock.

-Because in doing so we are actually opening ourselves up to the very transformation that God desires to work in us.

So we ask for God to enlarge our view of who He is,

-and enlighten our view of ourselves,

-and expand our view of His Kingdom and just how wide and long and high and deep His love really is.

He may not knock you down and blind you with light and give you a vision of the risen Jesus,

-but He will be only too pleased to reveal Himself to you in a way that is personal to you,

-and in a way that will enlarge your vision, and enlighten your understanding, and expand your heart.

Because He really does want us to grasp how wide and long and high and deep his love really is,

-and to know this love which surpasses knowledge that we might be filled to the measure of the fullness of God.