

Trading places

St Andrew's - 10th July 2022 - Acts 26:9-23

Who would you trade places with?

There might be someone who you admire in some way. Maybe someone who appears to have it all together. Perhaps you dreamed of being the popular person at school.

Maybe you're a looking more at the surface level - a billionaire perhaps? We can look at rich, beautiful celebrities, the sort of people that are constantly laughing and smiling on TV, surrounded by adoring fans - that might be tempting if we could switch places with them.

Possibly the most likely person we might swap with, if it were possible, would be the person we dream of being. Ourselves, but with a bit more drive, better looks, more confidence, a bit more luck whatever it might be.

But a harder question might be: who out there would trade places with you - who would want to take on your life?

v9-12

We're looking at the conversion of Paul - the original Damascus road experience. Acts 9 tells the story in more detail, but we're looking at Paul's retelling of his story.

Paul has had quite the journey to get to this point in Acts. We first saw him in Acts 7&8 persecuting the church, in Acts 9 he is transformed and then almost immediately after that, he's on the complete other side of things - he has to escape a plot to kill him by being let down the walls of Damascus in a basket.

From Acts 9 to our passage, Paul has been on three missionary journeys around the Mediterranean. He's preached to friendly and unfriendly crowds, been driven out of cities, stoned, left for dead, imprisoned, sparked riots.

Now, Paul has returned to Jerusalem, narrowly escaped death at the hands of those who didn't like what he had to say, once again, and was rescued from this by arrest by the Roman authorities. He's testified his story to the crowd that were calling for his death and then spoken to the Jewish leaders of Jerusalem. He's escaped another murder plot and been whisked off with the Romans to another town, and testified to the Roman authorities in the area and now he's in front of Agrippa, the king of Judea, the ruler of this Roman province. Paul has just got through talking about how he was a very strict religious person, then turns to what this strict religion worked out in his life - in the self-righteousness and anger, particularly against those that showed a different way.

9 "I myself was convinced that I ought to do many things in opposing the name of Jesus of Nazareth. 10 And I did so in Jerusalem. I not only locked up many of the saints in prison after receiving authority from the chief priests, but when they were put to death I cast my vote against them. 11 And I punished them often in all the synagogues and tried to make them blaspheme, and in raging fury against them I persecuted them even to foreign cities.

12 "In this connection I journeyed to Damascus with the authority and commission of the chief priests.

Paul, then called Saul totally opposed Christ and Christians. In fact, not just opposed, but sought their death. He went out of his way to persecute them - he went even to foreign cities to seek them out. And he did this with the authority and commission of his religious superiors. He found justification for his rage in his religious fervour.

v13-18

13 At midday, O king, I saw on the way a light from heaven, brighter than the sun, that shone around me and those who journeyed with me. 14 And when we had all fallen to the ground, I heard a voice saying to me in the Hebrew language, 'Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me? It is hard for you to kick against the goads.' 15 And I said, 'Who are you, Lord?' And the Lord said, 'I am Jesus whom you are persecuting. 16 But rise and stand upon your feet, for I have appeared to you for this purpose, to appoint you as a servant and witness to the things in which you have seen me and to those in which I will appear to you, 17 delivering you from your people and from the Gentiles—to whom I am sending you 18 to open their eyes, so that they may turn from darkness to light and from the power of Satan to God, that they may receive forgiveness of sins and a place among those who are sanctified by faith in me.'

Acts 9 tells us more details about what happened - his blindness, his going to Damascus and meeting Ananias. But Paul here recalls the most important parts of his experience.

In an instant, by the blinding light, by the voice of Jesus, Saul was transformed.

Now Saul doesn't just become a *completely* different person - he has the same personality, the same knowledge and experiences - but he is transformed in many ways. He loses his desire to persecute the church, he loses his rage. He has new beliefs about who Jesus is, having heard from Jesus himself.

What Jesus says to him is that he is 'appointed' as a servant and a witness - he gains a new purpose and status. Outwardly, he's much the same, but he has been made new. The Christians in Damascus are still scared of him when he goes there, it takes time for them to see that he's different on the inside.

v19-20

19 "Therefore, O King Agrippa, I was not disobedient to the heavenly vision, 20 but declared first to those in Damascus, then in Jerusalem and throughout all the region of Judea, and also to the Gentiles, that they should repent and turn to God, performing deeds in keeping with their repentance.

But the transformation did not remain only internal - the heart change effected in Saul of necessity spilled out into his actions. He went and preached to the people of Damascus, then further afield on his long missionary journeys.

Paul was not *just* transformed in an instant, but transformed ongoing-ly too. He was commissioned and appointed, but that's not much good if he didn't then *go*. This isn't transformation in name only - not a transformation that nobody could see - it's true transformation that has changed his whole outlook on life, given him new meaning and whilst it is not yet complete, it's real and progressing from the moment he met Jesus.

In theological terms, he's been justified in an instant, and is sanctified over his lifetime.

v21

21 For this reason the Jews seized me in the temple and tried to kill me.

The man that was once the persecutor has become the persecuted. Where Saul once sought to kill the Christians, he now is the one sought to be killed. He's switched places with those he once despised.

His life has been totally turned around. He has taken the place of his once enemy and become one of them.

Now Paul rounds up his defense to Agrippa:

v22-23

22 To this day I have had the help that comes from God, and so I stand here testifying both to small and great, saying nothing but what the prophets and Moses said would come to pass: 23 that the Christ must suffer and that, by being the first to rise from the dead, he would proclaim light both to our people and to the Gentiles.”

Paul's endurance, his ability to withstand the many trials and dangers he's been through, up to this point as a prisoner - and the many trials to come, being shipwrecked in the next chapter and eventually, as other ancient letters tell us, martyred in Rome - his endurance is down to the help he has from God.

To Kings and to ordinary people, Paul testifies the good news of Jesus Christ. It's interesting what Paul does and doesn't say here. If we had to present Jesus to someone, would we start with Christ's suffering? We might go straight to his death and resurrection, but his suffering?

I think Paul is making a parallel - Paul has the help through suffering not from an abstract God far away from human concerns, but from a God that understands what it is to suffer. Paul's help comes from one who knows what it is to go through persecution, because He has lived it personally.

In a similar way that Paul stepped into the place of those who were once his enemies, Jesus takes the place of his once enemies. He goes to those who are rebellious against Him and becomes like us.

Trading places

There's several ways in which Jesus trades places with us.

Jesus became one of us

First, Jesus became one of us. He was born as a real human being - lived a human life. The God that created the world, that created us, humbled himself to become one of us.

And not in half measures - he lived a life of poverty, hardship and suffering. He became one of the least of us - a lowly labourer. If God became human, we might expect him to be a King or an emperor, at least a highly respected intellectual or the like. But Jesus came to Earth to live a real human life - he really took our place and lived a life that included all

the things we experience. Boredom, illness, happiness and sadness - Jesus knows all our emotions and feelings and can sympathise with us completely. God himself took our place.

Philippians 2:6-8

*[Christ Jesus], being in very nature God,
did not consider equality with God something to be used to his own advantage;
7 rather, he made himself nothing
by taking the very nature of a servant,
being made in human likeness.
8 And being found in appearance as a man,
he humbled himself
by becoming obedient to death—
even death on a cross!*

Jesus took our sins, died in our place

But Jesus' life as a human was not limited to merely being one of us. He also took our place in his death. Sinful humanity, rebellious against God, deserves death. Not just the natural death we will all face, but the death that results from sin - God's wrath against our sinful selves.

Jesus takes our place in taking our sin upon himself and taking the just punishment for that sin in his death on the cross. He substitutes himself for us - he dies in our place.

Paul says Christ must suffer and also that he is the firstborn from the dead - he paid the punishment in full and came out of the other side, triumphing over death.

Jesus doesn't just become one of us temporarily either (whats 30 years to the eternal God?) but he always lives as one of us - eternally human after his resurrection.

We gain Christ's status

This brings us to where we in a sense take Christ's place - we likewise are raised from death to life. Just as Jesus is the firstborn from the dead, we look forward to being resurrected in like manner. He gives humanity this new start.

Not just does Jesus take our sin, but he gives us his righteousness - we don't just get a clean slate, we are granted his status. We get to take his place - we become sons of God, brothers of Christ. We call God Father.

Conclusion

This is the great transformation that Paul underwent. He took place of those he once persecuted, just as Christ took the place of those that persecuted him. We persecuted Jesus in our actions - he accepted persecution that we might be free from sin. He turned things around completely. He takes our sin, we take his righteousness. He exchanges his riches for our debts.

2 Corinthians 5:21

For our sake [God] made [Christ] to be sin who knew no sin, that in him we might become the righteousness of God.

We might not have had the dramatic experience that Paul had, but we do have the same offer of transformation. We might not have had the supernatural bright lights and the audible voice of Jesus, but we do know that Jesus is the light of the world, shining down on sinners, we have his words written for us. Paul had only what he heard - we have God's revelation, Jesus' own words for us to understand what transformation is on offer.

Paul's life didn't become great - in earthly terms, it probably became a lot worse. He left a life of worldly status and authority, of control and power and gained a life of persecution and suffering. But his life had new meaning - in Christ, he found meaning in suffering. Paul could only suffer and endure because Christ suffered and endured for us.

The first letter of Paul's that we have, his letter to the Galatians, he writes this:

Galatians 2:20

I have been crucified with Christ. It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me.

True transformation starts not in ourselves, not in our thoughts or deeds - true transformation starts at the cross.