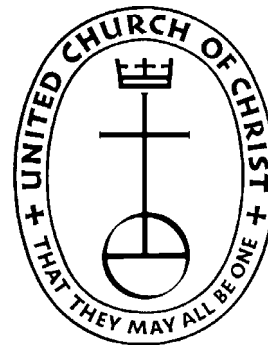


# Saved. From What? For What?

A Sermon By —  
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This sermon about Paul's experience on the road to Damascus discusses what salvation might mean for liberal Christians.

**FIRST CONGREGATIONAL CHURCH**

*A Liberal Church, Welcoming of All,  
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241 Cedar Avenue, Long Beach, California

## **Saved. From What? For What?**

### **Acts 9:1-18**

Let me begin by saying, once again, as Jerry and I both frequently do, that our words, our points of view about God and the Bible and Jesus, are our own. We know that that some, perhaps many, maybe even most of you might disagree with our individual perspective. But that's part of the beauty of being in a liberal church.

It's our job to ask questions, to poke around at our religious and theological assumptions, to help us create a language of faith and lived experience that is helpful and hopeful and stands up to challenges of our day-to-day living. It's our job as your ministers to lay our explorations out before you and hopefully empower you to find words and a theology that makes sense and is life-affirming to you.

In this Easter season, it seemed appropriate to me to explore with you the word "salvation" and to try to unpack what it might mean in a liberal theology.

In contemporary American evangelical Christianity, one of the most important things that you can say to someone is "Are you saved?" The major thrust of contemporary American evangelical Christianity is that Jesus, through his death on the cross and his resurrection, has created a path that we humans can choose to follow, one that saves us from sin and death, and saves us to eternal life in heaven.

As a liberal Christian, this understanding of the life and death of Jesus, and this understanding of the word salvation, do not resonate with me; they don't make sense to me. But this word "salvation" is part of our Christian DNA. If you were to ask me "am I saved?" I would say "yes." But I would mean something very different by that from what my more conservative friends would. So, if not hell, just what am I saved from? If not eternal life in heaven, what am I saved for?

I'm going to approach the topic through a story from the Bible, the book of Acts. The story is known as "the conversion of Saul" or "the road to Damascus." A little background, and a caveat.

First, the background. After Jesus, the most dominant figure in the Christian Bible is the apostle Paul. The letters that he wrote to early Christian groups make up about one-fourth of the Christian Bible, or the New Testament. Paul truly can be credited with the creation of a new religion, Christianity, as it was his version of Christian theology that took hold in the Roman world and became the roots for Western Christianity.

We have two sources for knowing about Paul – who was also called “Saul” – “Paul” is just the Roman rendering of the Hebrew name – his own letters and the book of Acts. There are seven letters in the Bible that are reliably attributed to Paul, and another five, six or seven, depending on who you ask, that have been attributed to Paul over the years.

(You may take comfort in knowing that the “bad stuff” that has been attributed to Paul, men being the head of the house, and women not speaking in church were actually not written by Paul, and there is plenty of evidence that he strongly disagreed with those ideas.)

The full name of the book of Acts, our other source for information about Paul, is “The Acts of the Apostles.” It is a collection of stories, mostly involving Peter and Paul, about the beginnings of the church. It tells about Peter and some of the other disciples, and what happened in and around Jerusalem and Jesus died, and it tells about Paul and his journeys into the Roman world with stories about Jesus.

In both of these sources, we learn that Paul, prior to himself becoming a follower of Jesus, was a devout, practicing Jew who believed that those Jews who followed Jesus were disruptive and blasphemous, and it was out of his devotion to his understanding of Jewish law, order and right ritual that he was involved in rounding up followers of Jesus and turning them over to Jewish authorities. In the book of Acts we find the story of Stephen, the first who was martyred in Jesus’ name, and, according to the story, Paul, then called Saul, was involved in that death.

Paul experienced some kind of revelation or epiphany that changed all of that. He went from being the loudest opponent of the Jesus movement to being its primary mover and shaker. We read about that experience in both the book of Acts and in Paul’s own book of Galatians.

Here’s the caveat: Paul’s version of his experience, in his own words, is very different from the story that is told in the book of Acts, which was written probably some twenty years after he died. The story in Acts has an embellished narrative that Paul doesn’t mention – in fact, some of the parts in Acts are contradicted by Paul’s own words. So, the caveat is that this story is not trying to be an accurate, historical document. Its purpose is to provide a particular and persuasive theological point of view. It’s metaphor – which means that we approach it and interact with it as story; we can try to see if there is something holy that can be revealed to us in the process.

So, here is the story of Paul’s experience on the road to Damascus, from the book of Acts, from *The Inclusive New Testament*:

Meanwhile, Saul continued to breathe murderous threats against the disciples of Jesus. He had gone up to the high priest and asked for letters, addressed to the synagogues in Damascus, that would authorize him to arrest and take to Jerusalem any followers of the Way that he could find, both women and men.

As he traveled along and was approaching Damascus, a light from the sky suddenly flashed about him. He fell to the ground and heard a voice saying, "Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?"

"Who are you?" Saul asked.

The voice answered, "I am Jesus, and you are persecuting me. Get up now and go into the city, where you will be told what to do." Those traveling with him were speechless. They had heard the voice, but could see no one.

Saul got up from the ground unable to see, even though his eyes were open. They had to take him by the hand and lead him into Damascus. For three days he continued to be blind, during which time he ate and drank nothing.

There was a disciple in Damascus named Ananias. Christ appeared to him in a vision, saying, "Go at once to Straight Street, and at the house of Judah ask for a certain Saul of Tarsus. He is there praying. Saul had a vision that a man named Ananias will come and lay hands on him so that he would recover his sight."

But Ananias protested, "I have heard from many sources about Saul and all the harm he has done to your holy people in Jerusalem. He is here now with authorization from the chief priests to arrest everybody who calls on your name."

Christ said to Ananias, "Go anyway. Saul is the instrument I have chosen to bring my Name to Gentiles."

With that Ananias left. When he entered the house, he laid his hands on Saul saying, "Saul, by brother, I have been sent by Jesus, who appeared to you on the way here, to help you recover your sight and be filled with the Holy Spirit."

Immediately, something like scales fell from Saul's eyes, and he regained his sight. He got up and was baptized, and his strength returned after he had eaten some food.

I want to pull out four phrases from this story and play with them a little bit, and see if they can give us any insights into what “salvation” might mean for us, liberal Christians, here in Long Beach, in 2010.

The first phrase: “Who are you?” When he saw the light and heard the voice, Paul asked, “Who are you?” In Sunday School classes as a kid, I always imagined Paul, sort of quivering with awe, a reverential whisper, flat on the ground, shielding his eyes from the light, a barely audible “who are you?” coming from his mouth. The more I know about him, I think it was more like a “who the blank are you and what is up with this light?” Paul was a tough guy, with a clear mission, and nobody was gonna mess with him.

As I said earlier, Paul was a devout Jew, educated, faithful, and even fanatical in his adherence to the laws and the practices of Judaism. He was a Pharisee, a scholar; he had studied all of the writings. Keeping the law was his life. It was why he was rounding up followers of Jesus – he believed that they were corrupting his religion. Paul was so invested in the letter of the law and the rituals of being a good Jew that maybe he forgot that God is a God of compassion. Maybe he forgot that God is a God of love. Maybe his focus on the rules and regulations made him lose track of the God who asked people to welcome the stranger, care for the widow and orphan, practice hospitality.

Maybe one of the things that Paul needed to be saved from was forgetting who God was and who God’s people are. That is certainly one of the things that I need to be saved from. I need to be reminded over and over again that I am not the center of the universe, that my needs do not come first, that others people’s perspectives are as valuable as my own, and just because I think it, that doesn’t make it so. I need to be saved from the prison of my own self-importance.

The second phrase: “They had to take him by the hand.” After seeing whatever he saw, hearing whatever he heard, being challenged and confronted in whatever ways he was, he got up. But he couldn’t see. He couldn’t manage on his own. He needed to be led by the hand.

Within this story, and it is just story, can you imagine how challenging this was? For a guy like him? An in-charge, round-‘em-up, get-it-done, follow-me kind of guy? He had to be saved from his independence, his strength; he had to be vulnerable.

This is a tough one. I like to talk a lot about the power of vulnerability, the need for vulnerability, but I really hate to feel vulnerable. I bare soul to a precious few, and I pride myself on my ability to take care of myself. I know it’s true, I’ve experienced it

over and over again: we can't touch if we're unwilling to be touched. We can't heal if we don't admit our pain. We can't teach if we're unwilling to learn. We can't be wise without being humble. We can't forgive without recognizing that we need forgiveness. It's a hard, hard thing to experience grace if we don't admit that we need it.

The third phrase: "Go anyway." When Ananias was told that he was to go see Paul, he said, "No way – I know who that is – he's arresting us!" God's reply was "Go anyway." Ananias was afraid – and with very good reason. Paul was implicated in the death of at least one follower, and looking for more.

Remember, this is story, and I'm not suggesting that we have to go around putting ourselves into harm's way. But I do think that one of the things that we need to be saved from is fear ruling our lives. Fear can be paralyzing, it can be crippling to our souls, and we can get so stuck in it that we never act. Another angle to the fear that Ananias expressed was because of what he'd heard about Paul. Reading the story, we know that Paul was a changed man, and Ananias had to learn that. Maybe part of what we need to be saved from is chronic mistrust, or our dim view of other people.

And the fourth phrase: "My brother." This is what Ananias called Paul when he met him, and it was in the touch of a brother that Paul recovered his sight. Paul wasn't able to do this alone. He needed to be a part of group, a community, that was willing to risk, that was willing to trust, that was willing to change, and that was willing to act.

Salvation for me is many things – but it is at least these four things: Salvation from the tyranny of self-importance. This allows me to be saved to the grace of knowing and caring about others, and of seeing God in other people. Salvation from my staunch independence and untouchableness. This saves me to the grace of vulnerability, which allows me to be touched and moved and healed. Salvation from being ruled by my fears. This saves me into the grace of learning to trust God and to trust other people. Salvation from my isolation. This saves me into the grace of community – a shared life where people of faith bear one another's burdens and ease one another's pain.

In an interview with Krista Tippett for the radio show "Speaking of Faith," theologian Karen Armstrong talked about Paul, about his experience of grace in his moment of revelation, and how he brought the story of Jesus into the lives of ordinary people, through the rituals of baptism, in the breaking of the bread, and brought this story of a radical new way of understanding God to life in the Roman world.

Armstrong said, "Paul was inspired by Jesus, passionately in love with a Jesus whom he'd never met. Paul's epistles are overflowing with affection for people. It is Paul who says, 'You can have faith to move mountains, you give over your body to be

burned as a martyr – words that have terrible resonance with us these days – but if you lack charity, it's worth nothing at all.' Here, he's in line with all the major teachers – what brings you into the divine presence is not spiritual gifts, not martyrdom, but the practice of charity, compassion and kindness toward all.”

That seems right to me. That is, I believe, the heart of the Christian faith, and what salvation is really all about. Amen.