

From Saul to Paul

Northwest District of LCMC Annual Gathering 2026

Can people really change?

The theme for the NW District's 2026 annual gathering is entitled from Saul to Paul. The change of the name of a man who identified himself as "Saul of Tarsus" to "Paul" an Apostle of the Lord Jesus Christ, is emblematic of one of the most dramatic and significant transformations recorded in the New Testament. It reflects a change in the life, faith and mission of a man. It points to the transformation of a zealous persecutor of the church, into one of Christ's most passionate advocates and one of the greatest missionaries of the Christian faith.

Saul was born in Tarsus, a city in Cilicia (modern-day Turkey). He was both a Jew and a Roman citizen. He was a devout man and came from a background of privilege. He studied the Torah under Gamaliel, one of the leading Jewish rabbis of his day. (Acts 22:3, 22:25–28). He traced his lineage to the tribe of Benjamin. He was a member of the Jewish sect known as the Pharisees. As a Pharisee he was zealous for the law and its fulfillment. As we will hear later, he described himself as the epitome of what it means to be a "Jew." (Philippians 3:5–6).

He saw the early Christian movement as a threat to Judaism and actively persecuted Christians. We are first introduced to Saul at the execution of Stephen, one of the first seven deacons of the Church and the first Christian martyr. Stephen was a great teacher and defender of the Christian faith. He was falsely accused and found guilty of blasphemy by the Jewish Council and sentenced to death by stoning.

As his sentence was announced Stephen was given a vision. *But Stephen, full of the Holy Spirit, looked up to heaven and saw the glory of God, and Jesus standing at the right hand of God. "Look," he said, "I see heaven open and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God."* (Acts 7:55-56)

As the rocks hurled by the crowd mercilessly pelted him, St. Stephen did not call down curses on his attackers. Instead, the Book of Acts testifies: *"Then he fell on his knees and cried out, "Lord, do not hold this sin against them." When he had said this, he fell asleep."* (Acts 7:60)

In the crowd that witnessed Stephen's stoning was a young Jew named "Saul." The men who stoned Stephen had put their coats at Saul's feet. (Acts 7:58) This gesture meant that this young man was a powerful leader and gave his blessing to this atrocity and affront against God. Saul believed he had achieved a decisive victory over this new sect. A powerful voice in this sect had been silenced, with the approval of the crowd. Saul believed he was unstoppable. However, Saul was no match for Stephen's prayer. Jesus answered Stephen's prayer in the life of young Saul.

We all know the next part of Saul's history. Acts Chapter 9 records that Saul went to the Jewish authorities and asked for permission to go the city Damascus (present day Syria)

to arrest Christians there and bring them back to Jerusalem. The confident persecutor was stopped in his tracks. Suddenly a bright light from heaven surrounded him. He heard the voice of Jesus say, “Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting Me?” (Acts 9:4) Saul’s response: “Who are you, Lord?” The response: “I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting. Now get up and go into the city, and you will be told what you must do.” Blinded by the light, Saul was led into Damascus and he remained there for three days. Jesus sent a convert, a man named Ananias, to restore Saul’s sight and baptize him. Ananias was afraid of Saul. He believed Saul was a leopard, a predator bent on killing Christians and his spots couldn’t change. Jesus calmed his fears by announcing: “He is a chosen instrument of mine to carry my name before the Gentiles and kings and the children of Israel. I will show him how much he must suffer for my name.” (Acts 9:15).

Acts 9 records that Ananias went to Saul. *“Placing his hands on Saul, he said, “Brother Saul, the Lord—Jesus, who appeared to you on the road as you were coming here—has sent me so that you may see again and be filled with the Holy Spirit.” Immediately, something like scales fell from Saul’s eyes, and he could see again. He got up and was baptized, and after taking some food, he regained his strength”*. This moment marked the beginning of Saul’s new life as a follower of Christ. (Acts 9:17-19).

Acts 9 further records that, immediately after his conversion Saul began to preach in Damascus. He proved from the scriptures that Jesus was the Messiah to the consternation of his peers. His preaching was so effective, that his fellow Jews plotted to kill him. As a result, he had to escape. He went to Jerusalem to meet with the Apostles. They also were afraid of him. They also believed that a leopard can’t change its spots. They could not trust this man. Saul’s friend Barnabas interceded for him. Saul met with the Apostles. He preached in Jerusalem with the same fervor. His preaching led to death threats again. He had to escape again. He went to his hometown Tarsus.

The good news of Jesus was spread almost exclusively to Jews (Acts 11:19). Some Jewish converts from Cyprus went to Antioch (present day Syria) and began to preach the Gospel of Jesus to Gentiles with success. When the disciples in Jerusalem heard of these successes, they sent Barnabus, who took Saul with him. The two preached with great success to the Gentiles. Acts 11:26 records that “The disciples were called Christians first at Antioch.”

The change in name from Saul to “Paul” first appears in Acts 13:9, “Then Saul, who was also called Paul, filled with the Holy Spirit, looked straight at Elymas and said.” The name change was noted during his first missionary journey. From Acts 13:9 onward, scripture consistently refers to him as Paul. The Apostle also refers to himself as Paul in his letters to the churches.

This name change was not a divine renaming (as when God changed Abram’s name to Abraham or Jacob to Israel, or when Jesus renamed Simon to Peter). However, it does

reflect a shift in mission and audience. “Saul” suited his Jewish background, and “Paul” suited his ministry to Gentiles in the Greco-Roman world.

Paul became the Apostle to the Gentiles, spreading the gospel across the Roman Empire (Romans 11:13). He founded churches, and endured persecution for the sake of Christ. His teachings centered on salvation by grace through faith, unity in Christ, and living by the Spirit.

The change from Saul to Paul symbolizes more than just a change in mission and audience. The name change is emblematic of a movement in Paul’s life from law to grace, from self-righteousness to faith, and from persecution to proclamation.

The Hebrew name Saul means “to ask for, borrow or beg.” It was a good name for him. Saul had “asked for” a mission. He had begged for the authority to destroy this new sect that worshiped Jesus.

The Greek name Paul means “small or humble.” Jesus made a “Saul” into a Paul. Paul no longer approached people full of himself and power he borrowed from some religious leaders; rather, he came humbly and meekly in Jesus’ name. He came only with the words of the Gospel that Jesus had given him. Through the proclamation of the Gospel of Jesus, Paul was the instrument that God used to reconcile sinful people to Him.

The Book of Acts and his own letters reveal that Paul went from persecuting Christians on behalf of religious authorities to being persecuted by Jewish and Gentile authorities for preaching Christ and him crucified. For the sake of the proclamation of the Gospel, Paul was thrown into the same jail cells that he had once thrown his brothers and sisters in Christ. He was shipwrecked. Like his fellow believers he was beaten. Paul was once even stoned and left for dead, but miraculously survived. (Acts 14:19)

By the power of the Holy Spirit he became the New Testament’s most prolific writer (thirteen of his letters are preserved in the New Testament). The Holy Spirit continues to use his letters to inspire, chasten and transform individuals and congregations.

The spots on this leopard had been changed. Scriptures reveal that Paul had been transformed by his ministry on the outside. In Galatians 6:17 Paul declared: “I bear in my body the marks of the Lord Jesus.” Paul here referred to the scars, wounds, and physical afflictions he endured while preaching the Gospel.

Paul also revealed that he bore marks on the inside. Paul testifies in many places in his letters that his heart, mind and soul also bore the marks of struggles for the sake of the Gospel. The seventh Chapter of his letter to the Church at Rome reveals some of these scars. The central thought in Romans 7 is the inner struggle between the law of God and the power of sin within each of us—a struggle that reveals both the goodness of God’s law and the profound inability of human beings to fulfill the law on their own.

Paul declared that the law represents God's perfect will for mankind. The law recorded the creation the nation of Israel and marked out its boundaries. It declared the nation's mission: be fruitful and multiply, take the land, live in it and wait for a Messiah to come who will bless the world. The law regulated virtually every aspect of human life. Punishment was prescribed for each infraction of the law, which, for the most severe crimes, was death.

He argued that God's law was not the problem; the problem was, is and always will be us. Paul declared that because of a force that we received at conception, the law does not naturally evoke thanksgiving and does not naturally inspire the desire for obedience. He declared that the law naturally evokes rebellious behavior. When we are told not to covet, our natural inclination is not to obey the law. He argued the prohibition creates in us an appetite to covet, to want something that belongs to another and inspires us to break the law to get.

He described a profound inner conflict: His desire was to do what was right; yet, he found himself doing what he hated. His behavior was not mere hypocrisy—it was a picture of a person who knew God's will but lacked the power to carry it out. Sin was portrayed as an indwelling force at work within.

So, I find this law at work: Although I want to do good, evil is right there with me. For in my inner being I delight in God's law; but I see another law at work in me, waging war against the law of my mind and making me a prisoner of the law of sin at work within me. (Romans 7:21-23)

His conclusion.

What a wretched man I am! Who will rescue me from this body that is subject to death? Thanks be to God, who delivers me through Jesus Christ our Lord! (Romans 7:24-25)

Jesus saved him through grace and forgiveness. Paul wrote: *"I thank Christ Jesus our Lord, who has given me strength, that he considered me trustworthy, appointing me to his service. Even though I was once a blasphemer and a persecutor and a violent man, I was shown mercy because I acted in ignorance and unbelief. The grace of our Lord was poured out on me abundantly, along with the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus. Here is a trustworthy saying that deserves full acceptance: Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners —of whom I am the worst. But for that very reason I was shown mercy so that in me, the worst of sinners, Christ Jesus might display his immense patience as an example for those who would believe in him and receive eternal life." (1 Timothy 1:12–16).*

Scholars believe that his letter to the church at Rome was written near the end of Paul's journey on this earth. The Holy Spirit inspired him to look over his life and most

importantly his inner life. He confessed to a perpetual and relentless inner struggle. Many times, the struggle would erupt in behavior that he came to regret and he suffered for it.

There was that time that he contended with Barnabas, his best friend, fellow missionary and beloved brother in Christ. The Holy Spirit had directed the duo to embark on their second missionary journey. Barnabas wanted to take his cousin John-Mark along. Paul gave a hard: “No!” He had deserted them on their first missionary journey. Acts 15:39 records “*They had such a sharp disagreement that they parted company.*” Barnabas took John-Mark and left. Paul chose Silas and left.

In this exchange, Barnabas emphasized second chances. John-Mark had given into fear and had deserted the mission; had repented and wanted another chance. Paul emphasized reliability under persecution. They would find themselves going through the same hostile territory. John-Mark’s earlier desertion impacted the team, and Paul did not want this to happen again. Paul was not willing to give John-Mark a second chance, to extend grace to him.

Paul seemed to have forgotten that his ministry was in its entirety by God’s grace. He was the last person God should have used to spread the Gospel. Yet, Jesus called him to be an Apostle to the Gentiles. Ananias, and then the Apostles doubted Paul’s character based on his past performance as a persecutor. Jesus urged Ananias and Barnabas urged the Apostles to trust Paul, and they did. Their trust in Paul paid off. However, in this case Paul did not extend to John-Mark the trust others had extended to him. Paul was convinced that John-Mark could not change his spots, no matter how hard he tried.

Jesus did not leave these men of God and fathers of the Church in this sad state. John-Mark eventually regained Paul’s confidence. Paul named him as a useful co-worker and vouched for him. Listen to what Paul wrote. “Get Mark and bring him with you, for he is useful to me for ministry.” (2 Timothy 4:11). “Mark, the cousin of Barnabas... if he comes to you, welcome him.” (Colossians 4:10). Paul also cited Barnabas approvingly in 1 Corinthians 9:6, implying a restored fellowship between the two. In the end Jesus worked on all three to bring about peace and reconciliation.

Paul’s testimony to us is that his journey with Jesus often seemed to be one battle after another. He fought with Jewish and Gentile authorities who were bent on stopping his preaching. He battled with false teachers who spread lies about Paul and contradicted his teachings. He fought division and conflict in the churches he had established. He fought with the Devil. He fought with himself. He fought through intense physical and spiritual pain. Sometimes he fought until he could no longer stand it. Paul wrote of about an especially severe bout of physical and spiritual pain: *Three times I pleaded with the Lord to take it away from me. ⁹But he said to me, “My grace is sufficient for you, for*

my power is made perfect in weakness.” Therefore, I will boast all the more gladly about my weaknesses, so that Christ’s power may rest on me. That is why, for Christ’s sake, I delight in weaknesses, in insults, in hardships, in persecutions, in difficulties. For when I am weak, then I am strong. (2 Corinthians 12:8-10).

So, can people really change? Can a leopard change its spots?

Paul’s answer: Yes! With a powerful caveat. He declared our sinful nature will remain no matter how hard we try to appear different or to improve ourselves by our own reason and strength. The change comes through Jesus Christ who stands before, beside and behind us in the battles of life. Jesus will come to us and change us and we will love him more and more. Jesus will move us from being self-centered to Christ-centered. Paul wrote:

If someone else thinks they have reasons to put confidence in the flesh, I have more: ⁵circumcised on the eighth day, of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews; in regard to the law, a Pharisee; ⁶as for zeal, persecuting the church; as for righteousness based on the law, faultless.

⁷But whatever were gains to me I now consider loss for the sake of Christ. ⁸What is more, I consider everything a loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whose sake I have lost all things. I consider them garbage, that I may gain Christ ⁹and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which is through faith in^[a] Christ—the righteousness that comes from God on the basis of faith. ¹⁰I want to know Christ—yes, to know the power of his resurrection and participation in his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, ¹¹and so, somehow, attaining to the resurrection from the dead.

¹²Not that I have already obtained all this, or have already arrived at my goal, but I press on to take hold of that for which Christ Jesus took hold of me. (Philippians 3:4-11)

Paul’s conversion should perpetually inspire hope in Christ’s Church. Paul’s life and ministry testify that Jesus can change a violent, self-centered, egotistical, blasphemous and zealous persecutor of the church into an evangelist and missionary. Paul’s life gives rise to trust and faith that Jesus can change people who are captive to lust and greed, who seem irredeemable and who openly hate God. For what purpose? So, as Paul said: “Christ Jesus might display his immense patience as an example for those who would believe in him and receive eternal life.” (1 Timothy 1:16). Paul would also declare that each person that comes to Christ opens the door for the Gospel to be preached to the scores of people who form that new convert’s web of life.

Jesus wants his disciples to have the same attitude as St. Stephen, who prayed for his executioners and the crowd who cheered them on. St Stephen imitated our Lord Jesus,

who in his dying breath begged his Father to forgive those who crucified him. Why? Because they acted out of ignorance, they were blinded and couldn't see. (Luke 23:34)

I guarantee that Paul always gave thanks for Ananias who reluctantly came and placed his hands on Paul's eyes for Jesus' sake and in Jesus' name. By this act of grace Paul gained physical and spiritual sight. Thereafter, at Jesus command, Paul, just like Ananias, removed the scales from the spiritually blind. When he preached the Gospel of Jesus Christ, and him crucified and risen, the Holy Spirit removed the scales covering the spiritual eyes of countless thousands and gave them eyes of faith. Jesus calls all his disciples to be an Ananias for those whom Jesus wants to heal.

Paul would be the first to declare that you can only be an effective Ananias if you know Jesus, the one in the Old and New Testament Scriptures. The one who you know and love as he encouraged you and gave you the strength endure in the battles of life you fight one after another.

Paul taught his disciples that interactions with others should not to be seen as random or coincidental, but many times are divinely inspired and directed and thus an opportunity to bring Jesus into the mix. This is the prayer that Paul prayed for the members of the church at Colossae: *"Be wise in the way you act toward outsiders; make the most of every opportunity. Let your conversation be always full of grace, seasoned with salt, so that you may know how to answer everyone."* (Colossians 4:5-6)).

Paul asked the church at Colossae to pray for him: *"That God may open a door for our message, so that we may proclaim the mystery of Christ, for which I am in chains. Pray that I may proclaim it clearly, as I should."* (Colossians 4:3-4).

How often do we pray for the people that hate God and ask God to forgive them for their ignorance. How often do we ask the Lord to open our eyes to opportunities to share Jesus with others; to give us the right words to say; and pray that Jesus would do the same for other brothers and sisters in Christ? If you don't, will you add these prayers to your corporate and individual prayers?

Paul would also calls us to remember that many of the people we meet may appear strong on outside. They may seem fierce, with impenetrable souls and appear unstoppable. He cautions us, that they, like us, are fighting one battle after another. We must confess to them that we too are fighting one battle after another. We too struggle with what we do and what we say every day and we often fail God. However, we have one who is in the battle with us who helps us endure, and through Jesus we will overcome and so can they. Amen.