



# Conversions

Psalm 30 & Acts 9:1-6

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Rev. Dr. Martin R. Ankrum

I am privileged to have two offices: one here at the church and one in my home. I work in both, but predominantly, it is the church office in which I write my sermons. Because of this I tend to have duplicate copies of some of the books I keep at home. Some are theological tomes to which I refer habitually, but others are works of fiction whose stories have formed my faith as much as any of the great commentaries on scripture. Fiction is typically a commentary on life, and we know that faith and life are so entwined we can't separate nor should we.

Among those duplicate books is the classic collection of the stories of John Cheever and amidst that collection is the wonderful story entitled: 'The Housebreaker of Shady Hill.' The main character is introduced with the simple first line of the story: 'My name is Johnny Hake.'

As the story unfolds in Johnny's own words, we are told that he is in his mid-thirties, married with children, living in the Connecticut suburbs and commuting into the city where is an executive in a bread-wrapper manufacturing company. Cheever does a fine job of illustrating the man's life with all of its pressures and pleasures and then, all of sudden, Hake loses his job and he is out of work.

At first, he strikes out on his own, renting a small office and tries to use his connections forged in his former agency to find work. He continues to commute, so everyone in Shady Hill thinks he is still gainfully employed. However, after a while of course, the money gets tight and he has to do something.

That something was the lifting of a wallet from his neighbor's house after returning to their house following a cocktail party. He crept into their bedroom, took \$900 from the wallet on the bedside table and left.

Ted Thompson, of the Atlantic, described the result of Hake's action this way:

**This one act haunts the narrator for the rest of the story, and very nearly undoes him completely. He comes totally convinced of his criminality. He starts seeing theft and sin everywhere he goes. He starts feeling as though everyone knows he's done wrong. He starts to behave like a person being eaten alive by guilt.**

Hake goes on like this for some time and then, on another night he had determined to try his luck again on with the Pewters who may have overdone their drinking at a neighborhood party, something changed for Johnny Hake. Here's how Cheever wrote it:

**I was thinking sadly about my beginnings – about how I was made by a riggish couple in a midtown hotel after a six-course dinner with wines, and my mother had told me so many times that if she hadn't drunk so many Old-Fashioneds before that famous dinner I would still be unborn on a star. ... While I was walking toward the Pewters', there was a harsh stirring in all the trees and gardens, like a draft on a bed of fire, and I wondered what it was until I felt the rain on my hands and face, and the I began to laugh.**

**I wish I could say that a kindly lion had set me straight, or an innocent child, or the strains of distant music from church, but it was no more than the rain on my head – the smell of it flying up to my nose – that showed me the extent of my freedom [from my past] and the works of a thief. There were ways out of my trouble if I cared to make use of them. I was not trapped. I was here on earth because I**

**chose to be. And it was no skin off my elbow how I had been given the gifts of life so long as I possessed them, and I possessed them then ... I was standing in front of the Pewters' by this time, and I looked up at the dark house and then turned and walked away. I went back to bed and had pleasant dreams ...**

And with that, something happened to Johnny Hake. He returned to his old boss and found him amenable to rehiring him. He got an advance on his salary, put \$900 in a plain envelope and, in the middle of the night later in the week, slipped it in the letterbox of the house from whence it had come and went home, whistling in the dark.

One could say that Johnny Hake experienced conversion in that moment. Neither Cheever nor his narrator attributed this conversion to an intervention of God, but all the same, something outside of Hake influenced this change in him; this conversion back to life and back to hope.

Cheever's stories are full of such moments of change and transition in the lives of his characters. I think this is the case, because Cheever knew that life, any human life, is filled with such moments should we care to take note of them.

The story of Paul's conversion recorded in the Book of Acts is certainly dramatic. There is an appearance of the risen Christ which both knocks Paul to the ground and blinds him as well. It is a remarkable story, but it becomes a problem when we view this particular conversion as the norm for all interaction between God and humanity. Most of us do not have such dramatic conversion stories, but we have become converted all the same.

Joe Harvard, retired Presbyterian minister, puts this in the right perspective in his commentary on the text:

**The main character in this and every conversion story is God. It is God who changes lives. The one thing clear about Saul's Damascus Road experience is the power of God that turned him from someone 'breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord' to someone who 'proclaimed Jesus' so that 'all who heard him were amazed.' Saul's conversion was not something he decided to do on his own. It was God's doing.**

We miss the point of the story of Paul's conversion if we think that it was something that Paul did for himself. We miss the point of God's action in our lives if we believe that we can somehow induce it, summon it, provide a place for it, or create it on our own. Conversion is what happens to us when we finally see the ongoing and constant presence of God in our lives. It is always there; we just often fail to see it.

I am convinced that such conversion is not a singular event for us (and it wasn't for Paul either). Instead, like Johnny Hake, conversion to the ways of God and to the grace and love that marks this life, happens on an ongoing, almost daily basis. This led the great theologian, Karl Barth, to write about not being a Christian, but constantly becoming a Christian.

Again, Harvard is helpful with his words:

**There is no one religious experience that fits all. What happened to Saul on the Damascus Road was dramatic and had a significant impact on the church. Our task is to remain open to what is doing in and around us.**

The God who was at work on that Damascus Road experience of Paul is the same God who was work silently, almost hidden behind the events, in the conversion of Johnny Hake. This God who was at work there, is the same God who is at work here, in your lives, this day and every day ... if only we care to see it!