

The Damascus Road

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 01 January 2000

Preacher: Rev R.G.Mackay

[0 : 00] Let us turn back now to Acts chapter 9, and we may center our thoughts around verses 11 and 12 of Acts chapter 9.

And the Lord said unto Ananias, Arise, and go into the street which is called Straight, and inquire in the house of Judas for one called Saul of Tarsus, for behold, he prayeth.

And hath seen in a vision a man named Ananias coming in and putting his hand on him, that he might receive his sight. The conversion of the Apostle Paul on the road to Damascus has remained a very powerful witness down through the centuries.

People today talk about a Damascus road experience far beyond the bounds of the Christian church. It's spoken of to represent a sudden change of heart, not just in Christian things, but in other things as well.

And the way that the Damascus road experience has become proverbial has brought its own witness into the world. It has left some understanding in the world at large that to be a Christian involves some radical change in our lives from what we once were to what we now are.

[1 : 34] To be a Christian is something that doesn't come naturally to us. It comes by way of Christian conversion. God changing us.

And the witness of Paul's conversion helps with that understanding. But it has also left a misunderstanding about Christian conversion.

And that's the reason why I feel we need to take a second look at the Damascus road experience this morning. A Damascus road experience, when it's used proverbially, yes, speaks of a change, but speaks of a sudden and dramatic change.

And although Paul's conversion was certainly that, all Christian conversion is not that.

The Bible makes that abundantly clear. But the devil is very expert at giving the impression, even to folks who have grown up in the church, and who have attended church perhaps all their lives, the devil is very good at working this misunderstanding that to become a Christian must involve a change that is both sudden and dramatic.

[3 : 01] And that often appeals to our natural sinful nature. Because it allows us to believe that we really have very little responsibility for our own conversion, if we're going indeed to be Christians.

Because conversion is to do with the sudden and the dramatic. And if we're going to be Christians, it will overcome us in that sudden and dramatic way. It will have very little to do with our own responsibility.

It will be easy. It will be without doubts. Because it will be so sudden. It will be so dramatic. And that appeals to the flesh.

Something that's easy. Something that I don't have to think about too much. Something that I don't have to apply myself too much. If it happens, it will be clear. And I will hardly need to think about it. It's because of that misunderstanding that I think the aftermath of Paul's conversion is most important. You see, the story does not finish with what happened on the Damascus road.

[4 : 26] It goes on to tell us also what happened in Damascus itself. And this also, this part that is often so neglected, is a real and integral part of the story of Paul's conversion.

And that's what I want us to look at this morning. Because it teaches us a most important lesson.

The evidence of Christian conversion.

The true and the most important evidence of whether you and I, whether you are a Christian or not. Is not how that conversion took place.

Whether it was sudden or dramatic. We hear of Lydia, for instance. That she was the one converted whose heart the Lord opened.

Seems to have been very quiet. And very andramatic. Very unlike Paul, but still conversion.

[5 : 43] Still a heart that was closed to God and to Jesus Christ. Is converted, is changed, and is now a heart open to God and to Jesus Christ.

And the important proof, therefore, is not the way that that conversion happens. But the evidence that it has happened. In other words, what a person is converted to.

What they have become. Is the important evidence. Of Christian conversion. And that's why we need to move on from what happened on the road to Damascus.

To see what happened in Damascus itself. Because what happened in Damascus. Is the evidence. That Paul was truly converted.

And that it wasn't just some mere emotional experience. But was truly a work of Jesus Christ by his spirit. And when we move on to Damascus with Paul.

[7 : 01] We find that two things had happened to him. That proved that he was converted. Two things that were to laugh. Two things that were to stay with him. In some form or another.

As a Christian believer. First of all. Paul was weakened. When Paul is converted.

He shows some signs of weakness. And this is evidenced for us. Especially by the words in our text. That remind us. That the great change in Paul.

Is proved to Ananias. By the Lord telling Ananias. He's praying. That's the evidence of this converted man.

He is now praying. He is revealing a true sense of need. A true sense of dependence on the living God. He's praying. He's no longer the bold.

[8 : 01] And brash. And super confident Paul that he was. He's got many felt needs in his life. He is aware of his need. To trust in the living God.

And sincere prayer. That we know having started in Paul's life. Continued throughout his life. We have so many evidences in the epistles. We'll come across one of these evidences.

Evidences tonight. In the service. If the Lord speaks. The importance of prayer. In the life of the apostle Paul. And so you see what happens.

When Paul is converted. Is not flags of joy. Not super confidence. That a praying.

And a praying. And a praying in some darkness. In some real sense of felt need. Because at this point. Paul is physically blind.

[9 : 05] Although not spiritually blind. And he is feeling his inadequacy. And his need. And he is praying. And he is praying.

Not an easy experience. It may be for Sam. That it wasn't for Paul. That it wasn't for Paul. And this we have to take on board.

When we talk about a Damascus Road experience. You see Christian conversion. Sooner or later. For Paul it was sooner.

For all who will be converted. For all who are converted here this morning. There must be the experience. Sooner or later. Of learning something about our own hearts.

Of learning something about the depth. Of the sin of our hearts. And our consequent need. To trust wholly.

[10 : 11] In Jesus Christ. That's what Paul's prayer. In his blindness. Isabel. He has much still to learn.

He has much still to get sorted out. That will go on. In the process of sanctification. But he's praying. He has a feeling. Of felt spiritual need.

And he takes that need. And entrusts that need. To the living God. Whom he has just met. In the person of Jesus Christ. Of course conversion.

Was not easy for Paul. Because in his conversion. Paul had to face up to. What his life had been. Up till that point. He had been persecuting.

Jesus Christ. That's what Jesus revealed to Paul. On the Damascus road. I am Jesus. Whom you are persecuting.

[11 : 12] In all that life. Up till now. Of super confidence. Where Paul was trusting in himself.

And was full of confidence. That he was doing the right thing. We found out. A little bit more about this. On Sunday evenings recently. As we've been going through. Philippians chapter 3.

Where Paul details there. The way that he was so confident. Of pleasing God. By his own effort. And on the Damascus road.

Jesus says to him. Paul. All you've been doing. Is persecuting me. All you've been doing. Is acting like the people.

Who nailed me to the cross. And said. Crucify him. Crucify him. That's what your life has been like. As long as you've been trusting in yourself.

[12:11] So Paul has had to learn. A distrust. In himself. And it has had to be replaced. With a trust in Jesus Christ.

And prayer. Is the evidence of that. And that's what being converted. That's what being a Christian. Is essentially about. Distrusting ourselves. And our own ability.

To please God. And to get to heaven. And trusting only in Jesus. And his power.

And what he has done. And what he has done. On the cross for us. In paying the price. For a forgiveness for us. And a reconciliation.

[13:11] With God. For us. Christian conversion. Is not a superficial work. We have to be careful of that.

Because we are living. In a superficial age. I think probably television. Has done this for us. More than anything else.

In our age. That it has gathered. Great momentum. And people are not interested. In thinking deeply. And are not interested. In a deep changing work.

Being done in their hearts. It's all to do. With the superficial. We live on soundbite. And this present election process. Is making that abundantly clear.

Politicians recognize. That the general public. Is unwilling to take very little in. Is unwilling to spend much real time.

[14:13] Considering deeply. What is best for us. They wanted. To be made easy.

And we are amongst them. So that we can put our cross down. On May the 1st. Without very little. Real thought. And real prayer.

And if that's our way. Then we'll get what we deserve. The Bible is telling us.

That life is much more serious. And we have to face up. To the consequences. The eternal consequences. Of a spiritual life.

No matter how good. How moral it may be. That is a life. Without Jesus Christ. At the centre. The person who is converted.

[15:15] Is the person who is willing. To learn more and more. That he needs the spirit of God. To search his heart. Ever more deeply. That he may have to expose to him.

Or she may have exposed to her. The depths of the sinfulness. And the ways in which we go. Contrary to God's way. That we may learn. To trust in Jesus only. For the greatest needs.

For the greatest needs. Of our lives. That we may be right. With God. At the end of our lives. Now I ask you.

If you are converted. I don't ask you. If you have had some dramatic experience. Of God entering into your life.

I don't ask you that. There will be some converted people here this morning. Maybe myself included. Who have had such an experience. But there will be others.

[16:22] Just as converted. Who have not had such an experience. I ask you. Are you converted?

I ask you. Is there a change? Change. And so I ask you. Have you been weakened. Like the Apostle Paul? Have you recognized.

Your great spiritual need. Before Almighty God. And that you cannot. Sort out your life. In your own strength. And by your own efforts. And that you need.

Desperately. Jesus Christ. And are you showing. Your trust in him. By your daily prayers. To him. That he will save you daily.

That he will keep you. That he will enable you. To trust in him. And to go his way. Little by little. More and more. I ask you. Are you converted?

[17:23] Are you so convinced. Of your weakness? I'm not asking you. Are you as convinced. Of your weakness. As you ought to be. I am not asking you. Have you that.

Deep sense of. Spiritual weakness. So that it's as deep. As it may yet become. But I'm asking you. Have you such a sense.

Of your own weakness. As Paul had. That he turned. From resisting Christ. To trusting in him. To trusting in him. And to asking him. Constantly. To be a savior. To be a shepherd. To be his guide. Are you converted?

Because without being converted. You cannot. You cannot. Enter. Heaven. And then there's another evidence.

[18 : 26] Of Paul's weakness. Not only through his prayers. Is there this evidence. That conversion brought weakness. But the fact that he needed Ananias.

Is another. Evidence of the great change. That had taken place in Paul. And that he had become weak. In a new way.

Because he was converted. Can you imagine Paul. For one moment. The day he left Jerusalem. For Damascus. Believing. That he would need. One of those folks. Those despised folks. Who called themselves Christians. That he would need him.

Can you imagine Paul. Thinking like that. That he's been converted. And he sees the church.

[19 : 28] In a new way. And he sees his dependence. On the church. In a new way. Paul came to Damascus.

To seek those people out. In a display of his strength. That he was converted. And they came. To seek him out. In a display of his weakness. You see Jesus had said to Paul.

On the road to Damascus. You're persecuting me. As you go to Damascus. To persecute the church. If in persecuting the church. Paul was persecuting Christ.

Then. Then. In being reconciled to Christ. Paul had to be reconciled.

[20 : 31] To the church. To the people of Christ. Dependence on Christ.

And dependence on the people of God. Go hand in hand. Love for Christ.

And love for his people. Sinners though they are. Go hand in hand. If you're converted.

You will have changed your views. On the people of God. The apostle John makes this abundantly clear. In his first epistle.

When he says. By this shall you know. That you have turned from death unto life. Because you love the brethren. That change was evident.

[21 : 30] In Paul. What comfort he must have felt. When he heard Ananias. Speaking into his blind condition. And saying.

Brother. Saul. Saul. This is God's way. It's God's way of testing.

That we're depending on him. If we will depend on him. We will depend on his ways. And at the center of his ways. Is the fellowship.

And the integration. Of the church of Christ. In this earth. Imperfect though it is. And we're faced with that sort of challenge.

When we come up to a communion season. You see. At a communion time. The people who are willing to profess Christ.

[22 : 31] As their savior. They stand out. They're separated. And I wonder sometimes.

If there are those. Who are unwilling to face up to that challenge. How many of you here this morning.

Plan. Not to be at the service. Next Sunday morning. Why is it that so many of you.

Stay away. On communion Sunday morning. Is it that you are not willing.

To face up to the challenge. That to be united to Christ. Christ. You must be united. To his imperfect.

[23 : 32] And despised people. Why is it that there are those. Who want to stay on the fringe. Are you trusting in Christ.

Or are you not. If you are. Why will you not take your place. With all its responsibilities of membership.

With all its burdens of membership. Yes. With the need to become more integrated. To come closer into involvement. And into the organization of the people of God.

The two go together. And if you will constantly. Resist commitment to the one.

Be careful. Lest you lose out on commitment. To the other. We need to be willing.

[24 : 37] To profess. That we are so weak. As converted people. That we need to be intimately involved. With the people of God. And receive the strength.

And the sharing. And the communion. That is God's means. Of strengthening. His people. Paul was weakened.

But you see. At the very time. That Paul was weakened. Paul is strengthened. In the very experience. Of a new weakness.

The weakness. That shows itself. In dependence. That is part of being converted. At the very experience. In the very experience. Of this new weakness. There is an experience. Of new

strength.

There is this early evidence. That Paul is receiving strength. That he didn't have before. He is weakened. By being converted. But at the same time.

[25 : 37] He is strengthened. Most obviously. He is strengthened. By the fellowship. Of the people of God. People whose blessing.

He could never have shared. In the past. Come to him. And they are an immediate blessing. To him. By that introduction. Of Ananias.

Brother. Saul. Paul is made aware. Right at the beginning. That he has become part. Of a communion. Of a family. That are for one another.

That can know great blessing together. As they share. Christ. Together. Being part. Of the family of God.

Is one of the greatest blessings. Of being a Christian. We have been finding that out. Recently. In our prayer meetings. As we have been going through.

[26 : 37] John chapter 17. Perhaps you could go through it. For yourself today. Especially the earlier part of it. And see the way.

That Jesus describes. His disciples. The people of God. Now Jesus knew very well. That they were far from perfect.

There were many weaknesses. Many sins. Still most evident. In their lives. See the way he describes. Their privileges. Their blessings.

Paul was strengthened. By fellowship. With the Lord's people. Now again. The obvious application. Is the communion service.

That we look forward. To this coming Sunday. It's a service. Of fellowship. It's a service. That gives the people of God.

[27 : 34] The opportunity. To share Christ. Together. In a way that Christ. Has uniquely. Promised. To bless. Anyone here this morning.

Who is converted. Maybe not suddenly converted. But trusting. Only in Christ.

Because of a recognition. Of your deep. Spiritual weakness. Do you see. What you do. When you resist.

Coming to the communion. Do you see. That you resist. A blessing. The blessing. Of fellowship. The blessing. Of sharing Christ.

That is at the heart. Of being strengthened. As a converted person. You must resist.

[28 : 38] That resistance. And do only. What pleases Christ. Then he was strengthened.

With light. He received his sight. He was left. For a time. In darkness. Surely to learn.

Of his need. To depend. And then the light. Came back again. Really I suppose. The same light. As he had seen. On the Damascus road.

Shining from Christ. The scriptures. Tell us that. It came. This new light. This new sight. It came.

With the coming. Of the Holy Spirit. A new power to him.

A new filling. To him. And so it was. A picture to Paul. Of the way. That he was now. As a converted person. Dependent. On the Holy Spirit.

[29 : 34] Or the spirit. Of holiness. The spirit. Who takes the word. Of God. And enlightens us. And enables us. To. To find.

And to know. And to walk in. The ways. Of God's holiness. The ways. That are according. To his law. All. That's what we've been singing about. In Psalm 119.

It's the song. Of a converted man. Who has found. That God's word. Is a lamp. To his feet. And a light. To his path. That as long.

As he stays. With the word of God. He receives strength. For every eventuality. In his life. Those who are converted.

This morning. You may still. Have many doubts. And fears. You may have doubts. As a Christian. Just because you feel. That you have lacked.

[30 : 31] Some sudden. Dramatic. Damascus road experience. But you know. That you depend. On God's word.

You know. That you are at your best. You know. That life is. Most enjoyable.

For you. The more you are able. To understand. God's word. And to do it. These are the ways.

You love. These are the ways. You want. They are giving you strength. Little by little by little. Oh not as much as you want. But little by little by little.

You are learning. That your strength. Comes only from Christ. Through his word. And through obedience. To that word. You are converted.

[31 : 31] And part of that word. Is a command. Concerning the Lord's table. That says to you.

If you are a Christian. Yes. A doubting Christian. A fearful Christian. But a Christian. Converted. And that same word.

Says to you. Commands you. This. Do. In remembrance of me. And then the final thing is.

That Paul was strengthened. By a conviction. Of the resurrected Christ. That's what Paul got back to.

He had been convinced of the resurrected Christ. On the Damascus road. The story of what happened in Damascus. Shows that that's where Paul's converted life.

[32 : 39] Now centered. He was so convinced of the resurrected Christ. That he began to preach that Christ. To the people in Damascus. And although they objected.

And resisted. We read at verse 22. But Paul increased them more in strength. And confounded the Jews which dwelt at Damascus. Proving that this is very Christ.

That was the thing that kept him going. And when there was resistance. When there was difficulty. When there was problem. That's what enabled him to get new strength. To keep on the converted way.

It was the assurance that Jesus Christ. Was living. Alive. Risen from the dead. And God sang. To those of you who are already converted.

And who find that still all sorts of doubts. And fears come into your life. I encourage you. And I try to make this my own practice.

[33 : 44] Because I found it works. I encourage you to get back. To the story of Jesus. In the gospel. If you have intellectual doubts.

If you have doubts. Because of the circumstances. That you find yourself in today. And you wonder if God is really good. Oh yes. The evil one can put that sort of doubt.

Into the heart of a truly converted person. Is God my. Who I thought was my father in heaven. Is he really good. When he is sending me this difficulty today.

I encourage you to go back. To the story of Jesus. In the Bible. Is he really.

The son of God. His resurrection proves that. Therefore. As the son of God.

[34 : 43] He died for sinners. He is good. And I will keep trusting him. Because he has converted me.

And he is Lord. And Savior. Though he slay me. Yet will I trust him. But is there somebody still here. And converted. Resisting. And doubting. Will the conversion.

Of the apostle Paul. Not convince you. Who was in a better position than Paul. A position of great authority.

Who was in a better position than him. To disprove. The resurrection of Jesus. Who was in a better position than him.

[35 : 46] To find ways of showing. That Jesus Christ was a sham. A lie. And all that was said was untrue. Who was of better intellectual capabilities.

To disprove. These ordinary. Simple. Unintellectual disciples. Many of them. But he could not.

Because the risen living Jesus was amongst them. And all that Paul could do was turn.

And join them. In your resistance. This morning. Will you not understand and believe.

That the only way of truth. Is to turn. And to be converted.

[36 : 49] And to believe. Jesus Christ. Amen.