

# Saul's Conversion

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[ 0 : 00 ] Would we please to the passage which we read in Acts chapter 9. I'd like to consider with you tonight the first nine verses of this chapter and the conversion of Saul. Perhaps we could just read the first three verses again. Then Saul, still breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord, went to the high priest and asked for letters from him to the synagogues of Damascus, so that if he found any who were of the way, that is who were professing Christians, whether men or women, he might bring them bound to Jerusalem. And as he journeyed he came near Damascus and suddenly a light shone around him from heaven.

Now if we don't believe that God can really change a person who by our reckoning is so hard and so set in their ways, then surely we have to think again as we consider this man Saul and his conversion in the famous account that we have here in the first nine verses of Acts chapter 9.

And scarcely I suppose has there been any more unexpected or perhaps any more significant or important conversion than the conversion of this man Saul. For it was in Saul that we find the key to the gospel going out to the Gentiles. And in a sense it's largely through the conversion of this man in God's plan and in God's purpose that we have the gospel here in Burghead also. Because here was a man in God's purpose who was raised for the specific task of taking the gospel to the Gentiles.

I suppose understandably this is how often Gentile Christians warm so much to the Apostle Paul. I don't know. But how did this all come about?

Well let's think of this man Saul for a moment. We've come across him before briefly in the Acts of the Apostles. We remember we read right at the end of chapter 7 how he was standing there as Stephen was stoned to death.

[ 2 : 42 ] But he wasn't just an interested or a disinterested spectator. Because we read that he consented to his death. That is the death of Stephen. He consented, he agreed with the stoning of Stephen. And then we read in chapter 8, the beginning of chapter 8 also, that he made havoc of the church entering every house and dragging off men and women, committing them to prison.

Those who were professing Jesus Christ. He was making havoc there in Jerusalem. And so I suppose this man, when you think of it, he would be something of an ogre to them, to the Christians.

He was a Christian hater. Here was a man who was wanting to root out Christianity. To exterminate it altogether. To stop it from spreading.

And he's enthusiastic about this. He makes no bones about it when he speaks in various autobiographical passages.

For example, in Philippians chapter 3, he says this, that he was circumcised the eighth day of the stock of Israel, the tribe of Benjamin. A Hebrew of the Hebrews, he says, concerning the law of Pharisees.

[ 4 : 05 ] And then he goes on, concerning zeal, persecuting the church. Zealous about it. Zealous about going round and trying to snuff out the expanding, the growing Christian witness.

And this is the song that we pick up as we begin chapter 9. And where we read that he is still breathing threats and murder against the church.

Our enemy of the Christian gospel. What would God, what could God do with a man like this? Well, we find out what he does in these verses, of course.

And in this chapter, in these verses that we read, Saul has a life-transforming experience. He has, in fact, throughout this chapter, four meetings.

And in some measure, they all change his life. But tonight, we're just going to be concerned with the first and most important of these meetings that Saul has.

[ 5 : 19 ] His meeting, his encounter with the risen Lord Jesus Christ. And as we look at these verses, I'd like us just to notice three things, quite simply.

First of all, notice the intended persecution. We find this in verses 1 and 2. And then notice the unexpected arrest.

Verses 3 to 5. And finally, in verses 6 to 9, the docile submission. So first of all, notice the intended persecution or prosecution.

Some people, alas, have no time and have no place for the Christian faith. And opposition to the Christian faith, as we know, takes various forms.

Some are more indifferent, or simply indifferent to it. Some are more positively opposed to it. I suppose it often depends where it hurts.

[ 6 : 26 ] If the Christian faith comes to you as something which cuts across, perhaps, your lifestyle, or cuts across some cherished notions that you have, then there will be more positive, possibly positive response or reaction to it.

And this Christian faith, you see, comes as something which challenges that lifestyle. It comes as something that challenges these notions.

Well, the challenge of Christ certainly got through to Saul. He's brought up, as we read there in Philippians 3, and as he says in Acts 26, when he gives his testimony, he was brought up strictly as a Pharisee, strictly as a Jew.

He was taught in the law, particularly as it was expounded by one of his greatest expositors, Gamaliel.

He is, by his own way, zealous towards God, according to all the rules and the regulations of the Pharisaical tradition and the Pharisaical law. And zealous also in the persecution of the Christian church.

[ 7 : 49 ] Threats and murderers against the disciples of the Lord. That is this man. This is his intention as he sets off from Jerusalem and as he goes towards Damascus.

His intention to persecute. His intention to eradicate the Christian faith altogether. His intention to oppress it and suppress it.

It was contrary to his cherished views, to his cherished notions. And yet, I suppose, he might even have thought he was doing God's work.

You see, he might have said something like this. He might have said, this Jesus is dead. How can he be the promised saviour? See how he died?

He died upon a cross. And don't we read in the law that everyone who dies on a cross or who hangs on a cross is cursed? Can't be the Messiah if he died upon a cross, surely.

[ 8 : 55 ] He might have said something like that. But, here he finds that the followers of this Jesus are proclaiming, are affirming that he is alive. That he has risen from the dead.

And so, Saul would react. Surely this must be of Satan. It must be rejected. Now, why do people reject Jesus Christ today?

Well, they might say something like this. They might say, you can't believe in someone dying on a cross for sins or for sinners. You can't believe in the coming alive again of somebody from the dead.

It is against rational thought. It is against our scientific faith. It must be rejected. It's dangerous. But we have to say that today, yes, people too are hardened in this way towards Jesus.

React against him. Don't like this talk of a supernatural religion. Rejecting Jesus.

[ 10 : 08 ] Not just the communists. Modern, sophisticated man alike. Here is Saul, persecuting the church. And what Christian doesn't feel it?

What Christian doesn't feel this spirit of oppression almost? Even in our own day, in our own situation.

And where is the Lord in this? Oh, from the church's point of view, there is oppression. There is persecution to endure.

Even if it is just of a negative sort. Even if it is just perhaps indifference or apathy towards Jesus Christ. Even if it is just something negative.

That negative feeling towards it all. It is often very hard. When you come against this resistance to the gospel.

[ 11 : 08 ] Resistance to the appeal of the gospel. Resistance to the appeal of Jesus Christ. It even arises from the desire of people that Jesus, the name, shouldn't be erased in conversation.

And we ask. Can this change? Well, if people need converting. One thing is certain.

They can scarcely be harder than Saul was. They can scarcely be more resistant than this man was. This man who came towards Damascus.

Breathing out threatenings and slaughter. Breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord. Scarcely could anybody be harder than this.

Can there be change? Oh yes. See what God can do. See what God did do for this man and in this man.

[ 12 : 14 ] An intended persecution, yes. But notice. In the second place. The unexpected arrest. As he journeyed.

He came near Damascus. And suddenly a light shone around him from heaven. Oh friends, how great God is.

After all, it wasn't Saul who was calling the tune here. It wasn't Saul who was going to make the arrests here.

Spurgeon once said that Saul, or Paul, was a great man. And I have no doubt that on the way to Damascus, he rode a very high horse. But a few seconds sufficed to alter the man.

How soon God brought him down. And we do well to remember, don't we? It's only a few seconds.

[ 13 : 20 ] It's only the twinkling of an eye for the Lord to convert a man or a woman or a boy or a girl or a young person or anybody. And if you are here tonight and you're not professing as a Christian, as a follower of Jesus Christ, he can change you right now.

He can change you right in the service. Turn you around, convert you just as surely as in the twinkling of an eye. He could change this hardened anti-Christian Saul.

Just come to him and say, well, say what? Say just what Saul says. Just what Saul says here.

This was his Damascus road experience. The Lord steps in, you see, and he says, hold on, Saul. You're going to be on my side from now on.

But the Lord steps in with power. Unsuspecting. Unsuspecting, perhaps.

[ 14 : 32 ] And yet, I wonder what was in Saul's heart as he rode there on the road to Damascus. I wonder what he was thinking about.

I wonder what was going on there as he was going in this task that he was set on. Was he reflecting, perhaps, just for a moment, perhaps, he was reflecting on what Stephen had said those years back as he stood by.

Maybe he thought of Stephen looking into heaven, having that appearance of an angel. It must have left some impression on him. As it leaves an impression sometimes on the hardened sinner when they think of some great saint of old whom they knew, perhaps, near to the end of their life.

And that appearance of nearness to God. Or perhaps it was a reflection of Isaiah chapter 53, and the suffering saviour who's spoken about there.

That chapter which so affected the Ethiopian unit. Was he perhaps reflecting on the marvellous accounts of conversions in Samaria and in Damascus itself?

[ 15 : 50 ] But anyway, suddenly, a light from heaven shines. And he falls to the ground, he hears this voice, Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?

It wasn't heat stroke. It wasn't epilepsy. What we have here is a personal meeting with the risen Lord Jesus Christ.

A condescension, a special condescension, albeit on the part of the Lord Jesus to this man who would be an apostle born out of season. It was a personal meeting with him.

We can perhaps understand all that happened here. It was dramatic, and it was sudden. The light clearly was seen by his companions.

They must have heard a voice, but they didn't see anyone. They were speechless. So that was Saul's experience. But what do we make of it?

[ 16 : 57 ] It was, as we've said, an appearance of the risen Christ. An appearance to him because he was going to be God's man for his purpose in discipling the nations.

But for Saul, the great discovery of that moment was this. The great realization of that moment was this. That the Jesus, whom all these Christians believed in, and whom they had said he was risen from the dead, was really, and was truly, risen from the dead.

What a lie! Saul had refused to believe this, but now he could not but believe it.

you see, if he had had to accept it before, he would have had to change his mind completely about Jesus and about the message of Jesus.

But now he had come to that point. So he had discovered that this Jesus, whom the Christians were talking about and believing in, was a lie.

[ 18 : 01 ] But he also discovered something else at that moment. Not only that Jesus was alive, something else he discovered. Perhaps, well, for the first time in a really meaningful deep sense, that he was a lost sinner.

Why do I say that? Hear the word of Jesus. He says to him, I am Jesus, whom you are persecuted. I am Jesus, whom you are persecuted.

This was his sin, Saul's sin. And there is nothing more calculated to awaken a sinner than to see his sin as a sin against Jesus Christ.

And unbelief included. That is a sin against Jesus Christ. An affront to him and grievous to him. It is a sin, you see, to reject the Lord Jesus Christ and to persecute him and to persecute his church.

To shut him out of your life. And this was made known to Saul. This was, this also was Saul's great discovery.

[ 19 : 14 ] That it was Jesus he was persecuting. He had shut him out of his life. And this was a great sin. Now, it has to be said that there are different ways in which people come to know the Lord.

We've mentioned earlier that this was Paul's Damascus Road experience and sometimes we speak of Christian experiences as being of this sort. Like a flash of light.

All of a sudden. Dramatic. And some are like that. Dramatic. and immediate. Like a flash of light. But some perhaps are more gradual.

Like the dawning of a new day and particularly with those who are brought up within the framework of a Christian home. Very often this is the experience with them. And we see even how the experience of the Ethiopian eunuch was different from the experience of Saul in these two chapters, chapters 8 and 9.

We cannot limit the way in which the Lord may bring us or may bring our families to himself. But the common factor and there is a common factor must be this.

[ 20 : 30 ] That whatever the experience in detail it is always and it is invariably and it is necessarily life transforming.

it is always life changing. And Paul later on reflects this in his experience I think when he says before King Agrippa that he was not disobedient to the heavenly vision.

He had a life changing experience. He had a new direction to his life. But the great discovery was this.

Jesus is alive. What is Jesus to you before you become a Christian? Well before you become a Christian you may be filled with admiration for Jesus.

But likely you will think of Jesus as just some sort of good man who lived many years ago a dead man. But when one becomes a Christian this all changes you realize that Jesus is alive he has risen from the dead.

[ 21 : 46 ] You see a dead man poses no threats but the risen Christ here is one who has claims here is one who makes demands.

Saul didn't like the claim that Jesus was alive but now he's come to see on this Damascus road that he is actually alive. What is he to you tonight?

Jesus is he alive? Is he dead? Have you come to a living saviour? We meet him in these pages in the pages of the new testimony in the testimony of holy scripture we meet him there as surely as Saul met with Jesus on the Damascus road?

His call is the same it is a call to faith and the question for sinners is and it always is have you heeded that call yet?

Yes and so there is here an unexpected arrest but there is in the third place notice a docile submission in verse 6 we read he that is Saul this man who was breathing threatenings and murder look at him now in verse 6 he trembling and astonished said Lord what do you want me to do?

[ 23 : 32 ] He is now humble this arch persecutor of the church breathing threat and murder now he is humbled now he is brought low now we see the sinner humbly docile in the presence of the sovereign Lord now he trembles and is astonished who wouldn't be who had experienced what Saul experienced there and he says what do you want me to do?

this is docile submission he now knows you see who this Jesus is he now knows what his former sin against Jesus actually was he now realizes that Jesus is Lord and the Lord tells him what he must do now later on as we mentioned earlier when Saul is giving his testimony before King Agrippa he says to him I was not disobedient to the heavenly vision we've just touched on this but you see what it teaches us is this that Christian faith is not simply assent it isn't simply saying yes Christian faith is life changing and we see it in Paul we see it in his life he was not disobedient he had persecuted before he had kicked against the fricks before and there are many like this no doubt today opposed kicking against

God kicking against the truth as it is in Jesus Christ many perhaps even in our congregation but praise be to God that we have this conversion given to us and described for us so vividly here we might not be blinded by light from heaven we might not hear a heavenly voice but we have this encouragement think of it what an encouragement for any lost sinner if the chief of sinners could be saved if this persecuting Saul could be saved anybody can be saved and if he could be saved in a moment in the twinkling of an eye anybody can be saved just in that way in a moment right now and what encouragement we have in this too this salvation you see brings submission submission to the will of

Jesus Christ not something which is unthinking not as though henceforth you go on blindly not like that at all but it is faith directed towards the service of Jesus Christ not as was the case before directed along the line of the service of the enemy of souls no doubt we'll have opportunity if the Lord wills to reflect on just how significant this obedience of Paul's was for the church as we go on through Acts but even here we see the beginning of his life of Christian service I was not disobedient to the heavenly vision Lord what do you want me to do what do you want me to do now what about yourselves tonight what about yourselves if you are saved then surely you have had a marvellous religious experience a saving experience a saving encounter with the

Lord Jesus Christ and that is a wonderful thing how life transforming has that experience been how obedient to the call of Jesus to a life of devotion to him same principle as it was with Saul he was now begun he had now started on a life of Christian usefulness have you tonight are you along that road of Christian usefulness oh it is wonderful to be saved it is wonderful to be a Christian there is nothing in this world more wonderful than to know the Lord Jesus Christ and of course there cannot be anything more wonderful through the endless ages of eternity than to know the

[ 28 : 37 ] Lord Jesus Christ to be saved and to be converted but it is equally wonderful dear friends to be humbly submissive to the Lord's will how clear a lesson this is for us in verse 6 Jesus dealings with song Lord he says what would you have me to do his first reaction in meeting the risen Lord now I just want to say a word in conclusion this is a wonderful account and no doubt it's quite well known to all of you a wonderful account of this man's conversion how it shows the transformation that can take place in a sinner's life how it reflects a move as it does in Saul's case from darkness to light from persecution of the church to service within the church how it reflects what it means when the

Lord Jesus Christ makes a person a new creature in himself and let us not minimise in our own day the power of grace you know I think we can do so perhaps if we see so little of the Lord at work maybe in our own lives but also in the lives of others so little response perhaps apparently to the gospel let us not minimise the power of grace for you for the person who lives next door to you for the person up the street for the person that you go to school with in the morning the person you see around the streets the power of grace for your sons for your daughters for those for whom you have a concern that they're not yet in Christ all the power of grace can change that it changes all it can change any of those for whom you have a burden and if you're not yet saved then you need to meet

Jesus for yourself then you need to recognize the threat of judgment to come then you need to respond to this call of the risen Jesus who is Lord as we were saying this morning need to repent and believe in the gospel but if you are saved tonight then go out in obedience go out in humble submission to the revealed will of the Lord press on in a life of faith and of obedience you see things don't stop when you're saved things ought to stagnate when you're saved there is a whole new life ahead a whole new direction given by the Lord Jesus Christ that's Christian life that's life transforming life that's life lived out in obedient service to the one who has called you from darkness to life that's what a sinner is saved for

Lord what would you have me to do if you're saved tonight praise the Lord if you're saved tonight this is why he saved you not for safety not for security simply but for service and willing submission let's not be pessimistic about how people can't change because people can change or people can be changed by the power of God because the Jesus who was alive when he appeared to Saul after his death is alive just as surely today no sinners that you know no sinners that you know are harder than the apostle Paul or what he was and nor are you because before the

Lord Jesus Christ even the hardest sinner can be turned around so let us pray that this would happen that it would happen with us that it would happen in our community that it would happen in our families in our town in our country let us pray for it dear friends and let us pray for it urgently and let us pray for it believing that Jesus in his power would be manifest in our day that many souls would be turned to him from a life lived out of him to a life which is lived in in the glorious service of a glorious risen Lord may he bless these thoughts upon his word let us pray he may he him or mean so he this record that we have of the conversion of Saul of Tarsus. We thank thee, Lord, that thy power is no less today, that thy power is not limited. And we pray thee, Lord, we beseech thee that thou wouldst come in mighty power, and encourage us, and quicken us, and enable us to lay hold upon thee and upon thy promises, for ourselves, O Lord, and for our families, and for our friends, and for our neighbours, that there would be a great moving, O Lord, of thy Holy Spirit amongst us, and that there would be great rejoicing and encouragement within the church. O graciously bless us, Lord, in this week which we have now entered. Guide us in all that we do. Bless us now from the youngest here to the oldest.

[ 35 : 13 ] O Lord, receive our praise and thanksgiving, and forgive our sins. In Jesus' name. Amen. Now let us sing in conclusion some verses of Psalm 146. Verses 5 to 8. Verses 5 to 8.

O happy is that man and blessed, O happy is that man and blessed, whom Jacob's God doth aid, whose hope upon the Lord doth rest, and on his God is stayed, who made the earth and heavens high, who made the swelling deep, and all that is within the same, who truth doth ever keep.

Down to verse 8, Psalm 146 from verse 5, rising to sing, O happy is that man and blessed. O happy is that man and blessed, who gave the joy of God, and blessed, who gave the joy of God, and blessed.

Here the plan is to give up the way.

To the Lord, the Lord and the Lord, and the Lord is the King.

[ 36 : 48 ] To the Lord, the Lord is the King.

To the Lord, the Lord is the King. And the Lord, the King, within the sea, To the Lord, the Lord is the King.

For the Lord, the King, within the sea, The King, within the sea, The King, within the sea, The King, within the sea, The King, within the sea, The King, within the sea,

The King, within the sea, The King, within the sea, The King, within the sea, The King, within the sea, Now may the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, The love of God the Father, And the communion and fellowship of the Holy Spirit, The Comforter, be with you all and remain with you, Now and for evermore. Amen.

Amen.