

Have You Been Converted?

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[0 : 00] Our reading this morning is from Acts chapter 9, Saul's conversion, reading to the end of verse 19. Meanwhile Saul was still breathing out murderous threats against the Lord's disciples.

He went to the high priest and asked him for letters to the synagogues in Damascus so that if he found any there who belonged to the way, whether men or women, he might take them as prisoners to Jerusalem.

As he neared Damascus on his journey, suddenly a light from heaven flashed around him. He fell to the ground and heard a voice say to him, Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?

Who are you, Lord? Saul asked. I am Jesus whom you are persecuting, he replied. Now get up and go into the city and you will be told what you must do. The men traveling with Saul stood there speechless.

They heard the sound but did not see anyone. Saul got up from the ground but when he opened his eyes he could see nothing. So they led him by the hand into Damascus. For three days he was blind and did not eat or drink anything.

[1 : 15] In Damascus there was a disciple named Ananias. The Lord called to him in a vision, Ananias. Yes, Lord, he answered.

The Lord told him, go to the house of Judas on Straight Street and ask for a man from Tarsus named Saul for he is praying. In a vision he has seen a man named Ananias come and place his hands on him to restore his sight.

Lord, Ananias answered, I have heard many reports about this man and all the harm he has done to your holy people in Jerusalem. And he has come here with authority from the chief priests to arrest all who call on your name.

But the Lord said to Ananias, go. This man is my chosen instrument to proclaim my name to the Gentiles and their kings and to the people of Israel. I will show him how much he must suffer for my name.

Then Ananias went to the house and entered it. 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.

[2 : 21] Immediately something like scales fell from Saul's eyes and he could see again. He got up and was baptized and as taking some food, he regained his strength. Going on to verse 31.

Saul spent several days with the disciples in Damascus. At once he began to preach in the synagogues that Jesus is the Son of God. All those who heard him were astonished and asked, Isn't he the man who caused havoc in Jerusalem among those who call on his name?

And hasn't he come here to take them as prisoners to the chief priests? Yet Saul grew more and more powerful and baffled the Jews living in Damascus by proving that Jesus is the Messiah.

After many days had gone by, there was a conspiracy among the Jews to kill him. But Saul learned of their plan. Day and night they kept close watch on the city gates in order to kill him.

But his followers took him by night and lowered him in a basket through an opening in the wall. When he came to Jerusalem, he tried to join the disciples. But they were all afraid of him, not believing that he really was a disciple.

[3 : 27] But Barnabas took him and brought him to the apostles. He told them how Saul on his journey had seen the Lord and that the Lord had spoken to him. And how in Damascus he had preached fearlessly in the name of Jesus.

So Saul stayed with them and moved about freely in Jerusalem, speaking boldly in the name of the Lord. He talked and debated with the Hellenistic Jews, but they tried to kill him.

When the believers learned of this, they took him down to Caesarea and sent him off to Tarsus. Then the church throughout Judea, Galilee and Samaria enjoyed a time of peace and was strengthened.

Living in the fear of the Lord and encouraged by the Holy Spirit, it increased in numbers. This is the word of the Lord. Thanks, Katrina, for reading.

If you could keep your Bibles open at Acts chapter 9, that would be a great help. It's page 1102 in the church Bibles, as Katrina said. And in the notice sheet, there is space for an outline.

[4 : 28] I've actually changed the points since we went to print. So if you are a note taker, sorry, you'll have to cross those out. And if you're a doodle drawer, it will make no difference. But let's pray. Let's ask for God's help.

Heavenly Father, Jesus, our Redeemer and Lord and Holy Spirit of truth and life, we ask that you'll be with us now as we spend time in your word, that you will act in grace and mercy, speaking to each one of us, comforting us, reassuring us, reshaping our hearts, that we would know you better and love you more.

For we ask in Jesus' name and for your glory. Amen. So we're thinking about a conversion story this morning, and not just any, probably the most famous conversion story in history.

In today's culture, people around us know almost nothing about Jesus. Lots of people that we meet have heard nothing about Jesus at school, from family, from friends.

But the phrase, a road to Damascus moment, still comes up. It crops up in the papers when we hear of someone who radically has a change of mind, having their eyes opened, changing direction in life.

[5 : 52] The road to Damascus moment. And that's because of the journey to Damascus by this man, the conversion of Saul. Later in Acts, Luke calls him Paul, and he goes by that name.

It's most likely Saul was his Jewish name that he always had and kept, and Paul was his Greek name that he'd always had. So when he goes out to share the message about Jesus, he goes by the Greek name that would have been better understood.

At this point, we know of him as Saul, and what we know of him has not been good at all. So far in Acts, just a reminder, the risen Jesus has ascended into heaven.

He commissioned his disciples to go and make disciples of all nations. He sent his spirit down at Pentecost to equip his people and empower them to make him known.

And as the churches bravely proclaim God's word in the power of the Spirit, the church is growing phenomenally. 20,000 believers. But so has opposition.

[6 : 52] Peter and Paul were locked up. We saw that. Then the 12 apostles were locked up. They were flogged, and they were threatened. And in chapter 7, which we looked at last week, Stephen was stoned to death, the first Christian martyr.

And as that opposition escalates, if there's one man that you could look at and associate with it, the most passionate persecutor of God's people, it's Saul.

Stephen was killed at the end of chapter 7, and if we just glance back to the beginning of chapter 8, we read this, And Saul approved of their killing him.

On that day, great persecution broke out against the church in Jerusalem, and all except the apostles were scattered throughout Judea and Samaria. People leaving their homes as refugees for believing in Jesus.

Verse 2, So that's the background to the vitriolic language in chapter 9 at the beginning, verse 1.

[8 : 09] Saul breathing out murderous threats. And he goes to the high priest in Jerusalem, and he asks for a letter of permission to the synagogues in Damascus.

That's where he wants to go next, so that he can round up the believers in Jesus, who were in the synagogue, and lock them away in Jerusalem. So Saul is as far away from Jesus as anybody could ever be.

But we see him get contradicted and converted and then commissioned. And as we see those things happen to him in a unique way, I hope we'll also see that these are things that have to happen to every one of us, and to everyone we know.

It's the most important thing in your life. So we're going to look at four points, and the first one is the need for Saul's conversion. He needs it, and it's good for us to remember that, because in our culture we get very nervous about someone saying, I think you're wrong.

And for a lot of people, their view of Christians is something like this. It's I've got nothing against Christians, except the ones that try and convert people. I remember at university, as a non-Christian, that it was the mission week, it was the events week, when the posters went up, that the real slagging off of Christians happened.

[9 : 25] They're always trying to convert people. But when you look at Saul, what we see is that we all need to be converted. We need a God who contradicts us.

And it's worth asking, what was it that Saul had so wrong, that meant he needed a conversion? Why did he need God to contradict him? Was it because he didn't believe in God?

No, it wasn't that. He very firmly believed in God. And not just any God, he believed in the God of Abraham, the God of Exodus, the God of the Old Testament Scriptures. That was the God he believed in.

Was he sincere? Yes. Passionate and sincere in his beliefs. Could you get more zealous than he was? Was he unhappy? I've got no reason to think he was unhappy in himself at this point in his life.

Was it because he needed to gain something in his life? Well, no. To get Jesus, as we read Paul's letters, we realize, to get Jesus, he lost everything.

[10 : 32] Saul was a very powerful man in a very powerful religious community. He's got unrivaled credentials. He's got access to the high priest. You can have all of those things and be in terrible danger.

So we pick up the story in verse 3. As he neared Damascus on his journey, suddenly a light from heaven flashed around him. He fell to the ground and heard a voice say to him, Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?

Who are you, Lord? Saul asked. I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting, he replied. Now get up and go into the city and you will be told what you must do.

So Saul comes face to face with the reality that Jesus Christ is the center of the universe. That God has raised Jesus and he now reigns in heaven in glorious majesty.

Saul is capable, he's respected, he's powerful, but he realizes that he's living out of kilter with the central fact of human history. That God raised Jesus from the dead.

[11 : 41] That he smashed death to bits. And that puts everyone who hasn't turned to Jesus on a collision course with him. I was away last week on a conference and the speaker said this, he said, the relationship between Jesus' resurrection, him being brought to life again, and his returning glory that he promised is like watching a demolition.

You know when you watch a demolition on the TV, when you watch a building being demolished, what happens is there's a countdown and then they push a button and you hear a bang and there's this pause, isn't there?

And nothing happens and then the whole thing comes down. And when we think about human history, the times we live in are that gap, that pause.

The big bang was the resurrection. God has raised Jesus to be the judge of everyone. Pause. And one day, imminently, the whole thing is going to come crashing down and every one of us will meet Jesus and we'll give an account for the way we've treated him in our life that he gave us.

And we're with people all around us who lots of them would say they believe in God, wouldn't they? Maybe we see a friend or a family member who fears God, who goes to church, who tries to be a good person and we think, well, they're okay.

[13 : 06] Or we speak to a colleague or a classmate and they say, oh yeah, I do believe in God, I just don't go to church, but I believe in God. But the key question is, what do you make of Jesus Christ?

Who do you say he is? And Saul has to let the God he believes in contradict him about that. He's blinded by the light from heaven and he says, he says, as he realizes he's seeing God, he says, Lord, who are you?

And all around us, people would answer that question in different ways, wouldn't they? They'd attach all kinds of descriptions to the God of heaven. We shape and fashion him into our likeness. We're like a craftsman working on God. I like to think of God like this. I like to think of him like that. Chip, chip, chip. Like we've got a hammer and chisel. But Saul gets this answer that rocks his whole world.

Lord, who are you? I am Jesus. Everything Saul felt about God, everything he'd been taught about God, everything he's experienced about God is contradicted.

[14:14] And it's not what Saul wants. He's got everything to lose. So it's a great moment as we look at that for us all to ask ourselves, do you believe the God that you want to believe in?

Or do you believe in the God of the Bible? Do you have a God who contradicts you? For those of us who've been Christians for some time, it's good to ask, when was the last time that God profoundly disagreed with you?

When has he confronted you in his word, in the scriptures, challenging something that you thought about something, your moral framework, told you something that you wouldn't have thought yourself?

And folks, this is what we all need. It's scary to have a God like that. We want a God who, well I want, a God who agrees with me, who affirms me.

But until you have a God like this, your God isn't the real God. The God of the Bible, whose word challenges every culture and every time. So of course, he challenges us, whoever we are.

[15:20] And it's only when we have the real God, the God who's not just a product of our minds, but rather is the central reality of the universe who confronts and challenges us with his word.

It's when we have the real God that he can really change us. He's actually the God that we need because he wants to make us into the people that he made us to be and who he loves us enough to have redeemed us to be.

We can trust a God like that. Lord, who are you? I am Jesus. So that was the need for Saul's conversion.

But what can Jesus do when people stand against him as viciously as Saul did? That's our second point, the God of Saul's conversion. The God of Saul's conversion. I take it Jesus could have just struck Saul down in the road never to be seen again.

But instead, at the end of verse 8, Saul gets led by the hand into Damascus and the Lord has appeared to this man Ananias in a vision.

[16:22] We pick things up at verse 11. The Lord told him, Ananias, go to the house of Judas on Straight Street and ask for a man from Tarsus named Saul for he is praying.

In a vision, he's seen a man named Ananias come and place his hands on him to restore his sight. And Ananias protests because he knows the old Saul. Verse 13, Lord, I've heard many reports about this man and all the harm he's done to your holy people in Jerusalem.

And he's come here with authority from the chief priests to arrest all who call on your name. And Jesus tells him about the future, Paul. Verse 15, go, this man is my chosen instrument to proclaim my name to the Gentiles and their kings and to the people of Israel.

I will show him how much he must suffer for my name. It's the most extraordinary reversal, isn't it? Saul sets off on the road to Damascus as the most savage wolf and Jesus chooses him to be his greatest shepherd.

He takes the worst enemy of the gospel and makes him the greatest evangelist the world has ever seen. It's a bit like, I mean, obviously, it's not quite like this at all, but it's a bit like, you know, Richard Dawkins who wrote *The God Delusion* who wanted to convert people to atheism and Stephen Fry announcing together today that they've got everything wrong about Jesus and they're about to go to India as missionaries.

[17:53] It's that kind of seismic shift. And I don't know what you think about that, but I think it is thrilling to see what God is like as we hear about this event. These remarkable reversals.

Just look at how the reading Katrina gave us starts and ends. Chapter 9, verse 1. Saul was breathing out murderous threats against the Lord's disciples. Then look at verse 31.

Then the church throughout Judea, Galilee, and Samaria enjoyed a time of peace and was strengthened, living in the fear of the Lord and encouraged by the Holy Spirit. It increased in numbers.

What caused that massive reversal? Simple. Simply that it's what Jesus wanted to do. And Jesus can do whatever he wants.

What a valuable message for us when we're afraid. Whenever we're afraid. It must be very frightening to be a Christian in North Korea. I met a pastor from North Korea not so long ago who said that at the schools, when the children go into school, the teachers ask the children questions to try and flush out whose parents are Christians.

[19 : 05] They try and find out have you ever seen your mum or your dad talking as though there's nobody else in the room? Have you ever seen them hiding away a little book anywhere? It must be very frightening.

And maybe here our situation is completely different to that but there are times when we're afraid. When we fear the people around us who would pour scorn on us for being Christians we fear the cost to our lives for obeying Jesus.

We fear unpopularity. We fear disdain. We fear for the future of the church. Maybe we fear for our kids and we think the way things are going the church in Scotland is just going to be irrelevant, obsolete.

Well let's fix our eyes on the Jesus of Acts chapter 9 who converted Saul. Jesus has got the power to take what at this moment was the single biggest obstacle to God's word and make him into the martyr who wrote 13 books of the Bible.

That's what Jesus can do. How does it happen? How does it happen to anyone? Well, we've heard the story already but briefly our third point the marks of Saul's conversion because it's worth thinking has this happened to me?

[20 : 22] First of all, he recognizes Jesus. I'm not saying that we're all going to have this experience. It was quite unique. But the remarks here of conversion that every Christian has.

The first is he recognizes Jesus. I am Jesus whom you're persecuting. Secondly, he's confronted by Jesus. Why do you persecute me?

He realizes from that word from Jesus that he's living his life in the wrong direction. It's a conviction of sin moment. I'm in rebellion against Jesus and Jesus is on the throne.

Thirdly, he surrenders to Jesus. Jesus says, now get up and go into the city and you will be told what you must do. And Saul is humble. He's humbled by seeing Jesus.

So he lets himself be led to this place in Damascus where Jesus wanted him to go. And that humility means he can receive mercy. It's the mercy that changes his life.

[21 : 26] Verse 16, Jesus' words, I will show him how much he must suffer for my name. So he goes to Damascus in power with a band of followers to make arrests.

By verse 23, the Jews in Damascus want him dead and they're watching the city gates so that he can't get out and his friends have to lower him in a basket through the wall.

It's humiliating what happens to him. It's shame and disgrace from now on for Saul. But he's humble enough to follow Jesus' instructions and receive his mercy.

And however different it looks in our case, in our lives, each of us needs to go through what Saul went through on the Damascus road. Do you recognize Jesus?

Have you seen who he is? Are you confronted by Jesus? Have you seen that you need mercy from him? Will you surrender to Jesus so that you can receive the Holy Spirit and forgiveness from him?

[22 : 31] If you're still just looking into the Christian faith, I know that some of you are. And I hope that Saul's conversion here is a terrific encouragement that you mustn't ever think, I couldn't ask Jesus to be my saviour because of something I've done or something I've become.

If you think you've done something that God couldn't forgive, then I would love to talk to you afterwards about how you could be worse than Saul. A God who can have mercy on Saul can even have mercy on me and even have mercy on you.

That's the reality. Let's not think anyone at all is beyond Jesus' power to save and his willingness to save, to show mercy. And how can he do that?

He can do it because his death on the cross was sufficient. That when he died for you and me, he really did pay the penalty for our sins. Even Saul's sins.

Even yours and even mine. So that if we recognize him today and if we're humble, if we can get our pride out of the way so that it doesn't block his mercy, then we can be converted.

[23 : 42] It's only our pride that could block the mercy on offer from the risen Jesus. And that mercy is what transforms Saul. So we turn to our fourth point, having seen the marks of Saul's conversion, the effects of Saul's conversion.

The principal effect in this chapter of Saul's conversion is that he immediately joins the church. Did you notice that? Ananias finds him and if we just pick things up at verse 19, at the end there, Saul spent several days with the disciples in Damascus.

Then he goes back to Jerusalem in verse 26. When he came to Jerusalem, he tried to join the disciples, but they were all afraid of him, not believing that he really was a disciple. But Barnabas

took him and brought him to the apostles so that by verse 28, he stays with them. Even Saul, a great missionary, wasn't a lone ranger. When you become a Christian, you become part of his church. You join Jesus' church. It's reinforcing what Jesus himself said in verse 4. Saul had been persecuting Christians, hadn't he? But Saul, Jesus says to him, Saul, why do you persecute me? Jesus is at one with his people and when his people suffer, when you and I suffer, Jesus suffers.

[25 : 11] That's how lined up he is with us. And maybe for some of us there, there's a challenge to get involved in your church, to get involved here, not just as a visitor, but to join in.

It's like we say about growth groups, midweek. Don't just see them as a commitment to a weekly meeting. We would love you to see your growth group as a commitment to a group of people because Jesus is present with his people and when we belong to Jesus, we belong to his people. If Jesus is present with them, then you and I need to be present with them. And maybe for some of us, there's an encouragement. Is God inviting us to be like Ananias or Barnabas to somebody, taking a new believer and helping them connect to the church family.

Maybe it's worth thinking, who do I know at St. Silas? Who have I met at St. Silas who at the moment is just visiting and how could I sacrifice things to help them get established here? Who could I bring to church? Verse 17 is just such a wonderful moment in the chapter. If you look at verse 17, Ananias heads to Straight Street, probably terrified.

[26 : 25] He asks for Saul of Tarsus, the greatest enemy of the church, and he's brought in. And look at verse 17. Ananias went to the house and entered it. Placing his hands on Saul, he said, Brother Saul.

He's joined the family of God's people. That's the first effect of Saul's conversion. The second is that Jesus is proclaimed.

The Lord said to Ananias, Go, this man, Paul, is my chosen instrument to proclaim my name to the Gentiles and their kings and to the people of Israel. So we're at this key hinge point in the history of the church and here in the book of Acts.

The Jewish community at this point is like a pressure cooker because people in the Jewish community have received the gospel that Jesus is the Messiah and it's about to burst out to explode to the world.

And Jesus chooses to radically change Saul so that he can use him as his instrument to take the gospel to the world. So we see Saul doing that. Verse 20.

[27 : 30] Once he began to preach in the synagogues that Jesus is the Son of God. And then he goes to Jerusalem. Verse 28. Saul stayed with them, that's the church, and moved about freely in Jerusalem speaking boldly in the name of the Lord.

Now that was a unique role for Saul, the apostle. But it's still the big thing that Jesus is doing in the world today. Empowering by his spirit, his people, to be his witnesses.

God's ambition is that no one would perish, that everyone would have eternal life. And all of us as believers have been given the Holy Spirit to equip us and empower us to be his witnesses.

Maybe we could ask ourselves, as you came into church this morning, how many people live in homes that you passed on your journey to St. Silas today who are as lost as Saul was, perishing without Christ?

And the people of Glasgow are all going to meet Jesus, every one of them. We live in that pause between the big bang of the resurrection and his return.

[28 : 46] And today, it's his people together who are his chosen instrument to be his witnesses. So that's why we reach out. It's an encouragement for us that we have this weekend coming up, 20th to the 22nd of March.

Events we can put on together, invite together, bring together, serve together, so that we line up behind the big thing that God is doing in the world in 2020.

Because we've seen the need for Saul's conversion, a need every one of us has. We trust in the God of Saul's conversion, so we know there's nobody who is beyond Jesus' power to save.

He can save anyone he wants, and he holds out his mercy to anyone. And we live with the effects of Saul's conversion for each one of us, that he saved us to join with his people, and that through his people, the world will hear that Jesus has risen, and we'll come to him for life.

So let's pray. Let's pray together. Let's pray together. Lord Jesus, we praise you, Lord Jesus, that you reign in heaven.

[29 : 59] We praise you that you are good and merciful, that your plan is a saving plan, a plan to gather the scattered, to mend the broken, to give us eternal life.

Lord Jesus, we pray that you would help each one of us to recognize you and to receive your mercy, to surrender to you.

As we respond to your word this morning, together as a church, and as we go out wherever you call us this week, encourage us by your spirit to line up our words, our actions, and our lives behind your ambition to make disciples.

In your name we ask. Amen.