

A Damascus Road Experience

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[0 : 00] Can you turn with me then please to the book of Acts in chapter 9. Acts chapter 9. Acts chapter 9 and reading again at verse 17.

Acts 9 verse 17 we read, So Ananias departed and entered the house, and laying his hands on him he said, Brother Saul, the Lord Jesus who appeared to you on the road by which you came has sent me so that you may regain your sight and be filled with the Holy Spirit.

For a few moments this evening I want us to focus on this most dramatic of conversions, the conversion of Saul who later became known as Paul on the road to Damascus.

And as we look at this passage together what we'll see is that we are confronted with a man who was so violently opposed to Jesus and opposed to the gospel and yet became the most influential Christian of all time with a love for Jesus that few could surpass.

That's what this passage shows us. How a man who was so violently opposed to Jesus and the gospel became the most influential Christian of all time with a love for Jesus that few would surpass.

[1 : 27] And this evening I really want to look at this conversion narrative under four headings. For those of you who may be taking notes, they're a deadly enemy, verses 1 and 2, a divine encounter, verses 3 to 6, a deflated ego, verses 7 to 9, and finally a disciple's encouragement in verses 10 to 19.

First we have a deadly enemy in verses 1 and 2. And we see in verses 1 and 2 that Saul is presented as a deadly enemy of the church of the risen Lord Jesus. Saul is presented as a deadly enemy of the church of the risen Lord Jesus.

Now we might consider Saul's past behaviour. In chapter 7 verse 58 he watched the stoning of Stephen. That wonderful, passionate, committed missionary for Jesus.

Saul watched him being put to death. But in chapter 8 verse 1 we're told that he gave approval to Stephen's death. He didn't simply watch it.

He encouraged it. He engaged in it. You can imagine him saying, here's the good hard stone boys, let's get him. And then in chapter 8 verse 3 we're told he began to destroy the church.

[2 : 43] That was Saul's past. But we might also consider Saul's present behaviour. Saul's not changed. He's still full of hatred, still full of hostility toward Jesus and his followers.

In verse 1 we're told that he is depicted as breathing out threats and murder. He has nothing positive to say to the followers of Jesus. Nothing positive to say about the followers of Jesus. Everything Saul says about Jesus' followers is spiteful, threatening, bitter, murderous. Saul is a man who hates Christians and he hates Christ.

And if he could put to death every gospel preacher and every gospel believer, he would. Saul is a man who wants to stamp out the name of Jesus.

And we're told in verses 1 and 2 that he has gone on a journey to seek and destroy the followers of Jesus in Damascus. He's heard there's followers of Jesus in the city which was on the borders of Syria.

[3 : 47] Now presumably these were Christians who had fled Jerusalem. They had fled as refugees. They wanted to get away from Saul and his threats. But they're not safe even in Damascus.

Because Saul is gone and he's asked permission from the religious leaders to go and arrest these Christians and bring them back to Jerusalem where he might imprison them and kill them.

And now Saul is on his way to Damascus. It's a 150 mile journey. It's a journey that will take about 6 days. But Saul doesn't care.

Every drop of his energy, every second of his time, everything at his disposal is being used to destroy, stamp out the name of Jesus.

This man Saul is a man who is hell bent and he is hell bound. He is a man who is later able to say with no exaggeration, I was a persecutor.

[4 : 45] I was a blasphemer. I was a violent man. He is a man who nobody ever dreamed would possibly, could possibly become a Christian.

So in verses 1 and 2, Saul is presented as the deadly enemy of the church of the risen Lord Jesus. And you know, as we look at Saul today, we can say with confidence, no one is too far gone to become a Christian.

No one is too far gone to become a follower of Jesus. Saul is the very last person on earth the early church ever thought would ever become a follower of Jesus.

And yet he became the most influential Christian of all time with that gospel fire burning in his bones where he simply said, I want to show the greatness of Jesus in my living or in my dying.

No one is too far gone to become a follower of Jesus. Think of the person who you might say would never or could never become a Christian.

[5 : 51] Think of the person who has that big sick wall of learning, that big sick wall of pride, that big sick wall of bitterness, that big sick wall of disappointment, that big sick wall of addiction, that big sick wall of indifference, that big sick wall of hedonism, that big sick wall of church tradition that is keeping them away from Jesus.

Think of the person you would say would never, could never become a Christian. Maybe there's many people you can think of who would fall into that category.

Maybe there's even someone here tonight who might be thinking to themselves that they are too far gone to ever become a Christian. They are too far gone, too late in years, to ever be a follower of Jesus.

Well, Saul was a deadly enemy of the church, of the risen Lord Jesus. And his conversion shouts, no one is too far gone to become a Christian.

No one is too far gone to become a follower of Jesus, the deadly enemy. This brings us second to the divine encounter, verses 3 to 6.

[7 : 06] And we're told that Saul has a divine encounter with the risen Lord Jesus. Saul has a divine encounter with the risen Lord Jesus. In verses 3 and 4, we see what Saul experiences.

A light from heaven flashes around him. And this light symbolises the glory of God. It symbolises the magnificence of God. Saul finds himself in the presence of the glorified Jesus who said, I am the light of the world.

In the book of Revelation, John describes the glorified Jesus in this way. Among the lampstands was someone like the Son of Man, dressed in a robe, reaching down to his feet with a golden sash around his chest.

His head and hair were white like wool, as white as snow, and his eyes were like blazing fire. His feet were like bronze, glowing in a furnace, and his voice was like the sound of rushing waters. In his right hand he held seven stars, and out of his mouth came a sharp double-edged sword. His face was like the sun, shining in all its brilliance.

[8 : 13] Saul is confronted with the glorified Jesus on the Damascus road. And Saul responds to this light, this glorious Jesus, by falling to the ground.

You remember how Moses responded when confronted with the glory of God? He fell to the ground. You remember how Isaiah responded when confronted with the glory of God?

He fell to the ground. You remember how John, the beloved apostle, responded when confronted with the glory of Jesus? He fell to the ground. And here we have Saul, collapsing under the eternal weight of glory.

Saul faints and he falls to pieces in the presence of the glorified Lord Jesus Christ. But we can then consider what Saul hears, verses four and five.

Saul hears Jesus addressing by name, Saul, Saul. And the repeated use of Saul's name highlights the intensity and the urgency with which Jesus is addressing this man.

[9 : 17] And Saul then hears Jesus indict him for persecuting him and his people. Just note what Jesus doesn't say. He doesn't say, Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting the church?

He says, Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me? There is such a close relationship between Jesus and his bride, between Jesus and his people, between Jesus and the church, that when the

church is persecuted, Jesus himself is persecuted.

And you know, that is a wake-up call to every terrorist who makes it their aim to destroy the followers of Jesus. That is a wake-up call to every government that makes it their aim to stamp out the word witness of the church.

That is a wake-up call to every person who takes it upon themselves to speak badly of other Christians, regardless of what they know about them or don't know about them.

When someone persecutes, when someone speaks badly of, when someone runs down a follower of Jesus, they are not simply running down that follower, they are running down Jesus himself, persecuting Jesus himself, speaking badly of Jesus himself.

[10:39] And friends, he doesn't take it lightly. So Saul of Tarsus meets with and hears the risen Lord Jesus.

And that is what conversion always involves. That is what salvation always involves. It's not simply about being baptised. Not simply about taking communion.

Not simply about attending a prayer meeting. Not simply about joining the church. Not simply about reciting a creed. It is a personal encounter with the living, risen, victorious Jesus as he makes himself known through his word.

The crucified Jesus, the risen Jesus, the living Jesus, the reigning Jesus has been revealed to Saul through his word. Saul has been made aware of who Jesus is.

He's been made aware of the identity of Jesus, the glory of Jesus, the Messiahship of Jesus. And it's beginning to infiltrate and affect the inner recesses of his mind, his heart, and his soul.

[11:47] And Saul wasn't seeking any of this. This is sovereign grace. This is the direct, divine intervention of God into the life of Saul.

Jesus has dramatically, supernaturally, sovereignly intervened in Saul's life. Jesus has laid hold of this man, apprehended this man, seized this man, arrested this man who had been going to Damascus to seize, apprehend, arrest the followers of Jesus.

What a contrast. This is a sudden, supernatural, sovereign act of God in the life of Saul. Saul has a divine encounter with the risen Lord Jesus.

And you know, as we look at Saul's divine encounter with Jesus, we can say, nobody ever became a Christian without an encounter with the risen Jesus.

Nobody ever became a Christian without an encounter with the risen Jesus. Now, maybe you're tempted to say, but I've never heard him speak to me. Maybe you're tempted to say, I've never heard or had a bright light shining experience.

[13:02] maybe you're tempted to say, well, I've never been on that Damascus road, but maybe you have. Perhaps you heard him speak to you through the words of a friend.

Perhaps you heard him speak to you through the witnessing of a spouse. Perhaps you heard him speak to you through the prayers of your parents. Perhaps you heard him speak to you through the preaching of the minister.

Perhaps you heard him speak to you through the verses of a psalm. Perhaps you heard him speak to you through the reading of his word and as you heard him you encountered the truth of Jesus and you encountered the rebuke of Jesus and you encountered the love of Jesus and you encountered the forgiveness of Jesus and you encountered the lordship of Jesus and you encountered the friendship of Jesus and you encountered the hope of Jesus and you encountered the invitation of Jesus to come unto me, you who are wearied and heavy laden and I will give you rest. Christian conversion always involves an encounter with Jesus and I want to ask every one of you tonight, have you encountered him? Have you encountered the risen Jesus through his word? This brings us third to a deflated ego, a deflated ego, verses 7 to 9 and we see that Saul's ego is deflated following his encounter with the risen Lord Jesus.

Saul's ego is deflated following his encounter with the risen Lord Jesus. Verses 7 and 8 we read about the remainder of the journey. Saul is grovelling on the ground. This man had been so full of pride, full of pomp, full of prestige and now he's face down in the dirt. For the young people here, I'll never forget the time when I was running down a hill in Inverness and I was trying to look cool and athletic and you might not think I look very cool or very athletic but I was trying to anyway and I slipped and I fell right down this bank in Inverness. Now I wasn't hurt but my pride was massively hurt and so is Saul's pride hurt as he grovels in the dirt and we're told Saul is blind. He opens his eyes and he can see nothing. This was the man who had boasted of his insight into God's word. He had boasted of his knowledge of his knowledge of God's word and now Saul can't see and you

remember that whenever the

Bible speaks of physical blindness it is using it as a picture of spiritual blindness and Saul isn't simply blind. We're told he is led by the hand. This man had been so self-assured, so self-confident, so independent, so strong-willed, so self-righteous and now this man needs help with every step that he takes. He is led by the hand like a little helpless child. And then in verse 9 we're brought to the conclusion of the journey. Saul had gone to Damascus to do what? Round up and destroy the Christians living there. And when Saul arrives in Damascus all he can do is lock himself away in a room and refuse to eat or drink. He is traumatised by this event, traumatised by his encounter with the risen Jesus. And all he can do is pray that this Jesus would forgive all his sins. All he can do is pray that this Jesus would forgive all his self-righteousness and self-confidence. All he can do is pray that this

[16:45] Jesus would forgive his cruel persecution of him and his followers. That's all he can do. All he can do is say, Lord be merciful to me as sinner. It is a remarkable turnaround for a man who has been so aggressively opposed to the Lord Jesus. The roaring lion has been turned into a bleating lamb. He's changed.

He's transformed. Saul's ego is deflated following his encounter with the risen Lord Jesus. And you know as we look at the deflation of Saul's ego there is such an encouragement for us tonight. You see there might be people that you're despairing over. They may be dear friends. They may be close family. And you've witnessed to them for years. And you've prayed for them for years. And you're beginning now to despair that they will ever come to Jesus in faith. They might be sympathetic to the gospel. But they might also be hostile toward the gospel. And now you're on the verge of just giving up witnessing to them. Giving up inviting them to the church. Giving up praying for them. Saul was the kind of person that those early Christians would have despaired over and thought he'll never become a Christian. He'll never become a follower of Jesus. He'll never be converted.

And look at what God did. Marvel at what God did. All of a sudden God intervened. All of a sudden God stepped into Saul's life and turned that life around. And God can step in again. God hasn't lost any of the power that we read of him to explain in the Olds and New Testaments. Just stop for a minute.

[18:38] Do you ever think that maybe God was more powerful in the biblical period but not as powerful as he is as today? He has not lost any of that power. And you can step into any context in your family.

In your friendship group. In your workplace. In this church. In this community. In this country. In this world. And turn people around.

And bring them to himself. God can step in. In the twinkling of an eye. God brings Saul down from all his pride. All his arrogance. All his defiance. All his hatred.

To all things relating to Jesus. God did this. Salvation is of the Lord. God took hold of Saul's life. And God turned that life upside down. Completely around. And God can do the same today. As we look at the deflation of Saul's ego.

[19:40] Let's be encouraged that God can work on any person. At any place. At any time. Through any means. He is the all knowing God.

He is the all powerful God. He is the all present God. And so friends. Let's not give up calling on him. To work in the lives of others.

There is a lovely story told about George Muller. George Muller was responsible for building a number of orphanages. In the 19th century. And he saw many great answers to prayer. And he said. In November 1844. I began to pray for the conversion of five individuals. I prayed every day. Without a single intermission.

Eighteen months passed before the first was saved. Five years lapsed. Then the second was converted. Six years passed before the third was converted. And the last two remained unconverted.

[20:39] Pastor Charles Parsons. In an hour interview with George Muller. Toward the close of his life. Asked him. If he spent much time on his knees. And Muller replied. I've been praying every day for 52 years.

Did you hear that? I've been praying every day for 52 years. For two men. Sons of a friend of my youth. They're not converted yet.

But they will be. How can it be otherwise? Mr Muller went to heaven. Praying firmly in faith. Thanking God in advance. For the salvation. Of those whom he was praying. And within months of his passing. The last friend on his prayer list. Was converted. And friend. I want to assure you today. That your prayers do not go unheard. Your prayers are not wasted. We simply cry out to God. On behalf of people. And we allow him. To do the rest.

[21 : 38] This brings us finally. To a disciple's encouragement. A disciple's encouragement. Verses 10 to 19. And here Saul receives encouragement.

From a disciple of the risen Lord Jesus. Saul receives encouragement. From a disciple of the risen Lord Jesus. The command is given to Ananias. In verses 10 to 16.

Now we don't know anything about this man. Ananias. Apart from that he was a disciple. Of the Lord Jesus. This is a man who is willing to go anywhere. At any time. And pay any price. For the glory of Jesus. And the Lord gives Ananias a command. Listen to the command. The Lord says Ananias. And he says yes Lord. The Lord says go to Straight Street.

And he says yes Lord. The Lord says go to the house of Judas. And he says yes Lord. The Lord says ask for a man from Tarsus. And he says yes Lord. The Lord says the man is called Saul.

[22 : 36] And look at what Ananias says. Verse 13. I have heard from many about this man. How much evil he has done to your saints at Jerusalem. And here he has authority from the chief priests.

To bind all who call on your name. You know this would be like being told. That the Islamic State terrorist. Was living in Glasgow. And you were to go and witness to them.

Would you? Could you? What would they do to you? Or this would be like. Maybe let's make it a little more personal. This would be like.

Someone with a terrible reputation. Living in part of this district. And they wanted to find out more about Jesus. And you were to go to them.

Would you? Could you? Because what would everyone in the community say about you. If they saw you going into that person's home. And the Lord explains to Ananias.

[23 : 33] His purpose for Saul. In verses 15 and 16. The Lord says. Go for he is a chosen instrument of mine. To carry my name before the Gentiles. And kings and the children of Israel.

For I will show him how much he must suffer. For the sake of my name. Saul's life has been mapped out by God. He is to bear the name of Jesus. And that is the calling of every single one of us.

Whether you are young. Whether you are old. Whether you are rich. Whether you are poor. Whether you are single. Whether you are married. Whether you are divorced. Whether you are widowed. Whether you are healthy.

Whether you are sick. You are to go and bear the name of Jesus. You are to go and show the greatness of Jesus. Within your community. And Saul's life we are told.

Will involve him going from being the greatest persecutor. To suffering the greatest persecution for Jesus. Saul must suffer.

[24 : 32] It is not an option. It is a sovereign must. Saul will have a difficult life. And the Lord says through that difficult life. The gospel will spread.

Your difficulties friends. Are never wasted. And this brings us in verses 17 to 19. To the behaviour demonstrated by Ananias.

Verse 17 is one of the most remarkable verses in the Bible. Ananias gets up. Goes to Strait Street. Goes to the house of Judas.

And he asks for a man from Tarsus named Saul. And he goes up to Saul. And instead of throttling Saul. Which he had the perfect reason and opportunity and motive to do.

He places his hands on Saul. Assuring him of his presence and his love. And he says. Brother Saul. Ananias knows all about Saul's past.

[25 : 29] He knows the very worst about Saul. And despite all this he says. Brother Saul. Is there a better example. Of a Christian welcoming the prodigal home.

In all the Bible. And the story concludes in verses 18 and 19. Where we read. Immediately something like. Scales fell from Saul's eyes.

And he regained his sight. Then he rose and was baptized. And taking food. He was strengthened. So Saul receives encouragement. From a disciple of the risen Lord Jesus.

Saul receives encouragement. From a disciple of the risen Lord Jesus. Now there is so much that we could draw out from this encounter. This encouragement that Saul received from Ananias. But there is really one main thing I want to draw out. And which Luke seems to be drawing out. Luke is asking us. And God is asking us through his word. Are we ready?

[26 : 30] Are we ready? You see we can pray for revival and awakening within the church. And that is good. We can pray that the gospel would explode in people's minds.

In their hearts. In their souls. In their lives. And that is good. We can pray that our church would grow. And that is good. The moment that we are happy for our church to remain static. And as it is. We have no right to exist as a church. If we are content simply with keeping the status quo. We should close the doors. But are we ready for people like Saul.

To come into church. Are we ready for people maybe with issues. To come into our lives. Into our church. Into our homes.

Are we ready to engage with people. And love people. Who may once have been very hostile toward us. And say very unkind things about us.

[27 : 31] Are we ready for the gospel to work. Not in the ways that we want the gospel to work. But the ways God wants the gospel to work. Are we ready to go up to people.

Who may come into this church. And whatever we may know about them. And whatever they may know about us. We approach them like Ananias approached Saul. And call them brother. Sister. Friends let's be disciples. Let's be followers of the risen Lord Jesus. Who are encouraging and building up those. Who like Saul.

Have had an encounter. With the same. Risen Jesus. Amen. We will close this time of worship. By singing to God's praise. In the words of Psalm 130. Psalm 130. The Scottish Psalter version. On page 421. Lord from the depths to the eye cried.

[28 : 33] My voice Lord do thou hear. And to my supplications voice. Give an attentive ear. Lord who shall stand. If thou Lord should mark iniquity. But yet with thee forgiveness is.

That feared thou mayest be. Wonderful Psalm. That has a believer's testimony contained within it. And we'll stand to sing. The whole Psalm. To God's praise. Lord from the depths to thee I cry.

My voice Lord do thou hear. O'er to my soul. How to myself day■■■ ■?

Give iets against words. A content in here. Nor hearst thou sound if thou, O Lord, shifts mark in equity.

But yet with thee forgiveness is the fear thou mayest be.

[30 : 05] I wait for God, my soul does wait, my hope is in which word.

For God, and they that our morning watch, my soul is for the Lord.

I say, Lord, that they that to watch, the morning white to see.

Let Israel open the Lord, for with him mercies be.

Atlantius' redemption is ever found with him.

[31 : 37] And from all his equities, he Israel shall redeem.

Let's pray. Our Father, we do thank you and praise you for the way that you worked in Saul's life. That you turned this man around. That this man who was so aggressively opposed to Jesus was brought to the place of saying, I desire to magnify Christ with my body by living or by dying.

Because for me to live is Christ and to die is gain. We do thank you that you are a God who can work so powerfully. And we do pray that every one of us gathered here tonight would have encountered the same Jesus or would encounter him through his word.

And that we would see the joy of friends and family and loved ones likewise encountering him. May we not despair. May we not give up.

But may we earnestly witness and earnestly pray that your gospel would do a great work. And we do pray that you would ready us and equip us to receive those who are being brought into the kingdom with joy, with love, with acceptance.

[33 : 08] Because they have been purchased with the same blood of Jesus that we have been purchased with. Forgive us, we pray. Look upon us with your favour and grace.

And turn your face toward us as we pray. In Jesus' name. Amen.