

New Year - New You

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- [0 : 0 0] Enabling, if we could turn back to that portion of scripture that we read, the book of Acts, Acts chapter 9, and if we read again at verse 19, or halfway through 19, Acts chapter 9.
- For some days he was with the disciples at Damascus, and immediately he proclaimed Jesus in the synagogues, saying, He is the Son of God.
- And all who heard him, that is Saul, they were amazed and said, Is not this the man who made havoc in Jerusalem, of those who called upon this name? And has he not come here for this purpose, to bring them bound before the chief priests?
- But Saul increased all the more in strength, and confounded the Jews who lived in Damascus, by proving that Jesus was the Christ.
- At the start of a new year, we often want to make a few positive changes in our lives. We want to start the new year well, and I suppose many ways we want to start by eating less.
- [1 : 1 3] We've overindulged during the festive period, and now it's time to lose that extra bit of weight that we gained, or maybe a bit more on top. And so, some of us, well, we join the gym, or we take up walking, or we start running, or we drink less alcohol, or we give up smoking.
- We go on a diet. At the start of a new year, we realise that we need to make some physical changes that will help us live healthier and happier lives. And in relation to these necessary changes, well, there's no end to all the advertising that's on TV and social media to help us reach that goal of a healthier and happier life.
- Because, well, there are promotions. Promotions of low-calorie cookbooks, diet plans, exercise DVDs, gym memberships, books on positive thinking, giving up smoking, or how to just live a good life.
- And all these promotions and products, they promise that they'll change our lives for the better. And in many ways, doing these things probably would change our life for the better. But, you know, the other morning, it was Alison that was telling me about this.
- There was a doctor giving advice to people beginning the new year. And his advice for a healthier and happier life was look up. That was his advice.
- [2 : 3 1] He said, we spend our lives looking down. We look down at the TV. We look down at our phone. We look down at our tablet. We look down at our computer. We spend our lives looking down.
- And so the doctor suggested that our New Year's resolution should be that we look up. Look up. And, you know, my friend, is that not the New Year's resolution that the Bible gives to us?
- Not only at New Year, but every time we read it. That in our sin, our sickness, our sufferings, and our sorrows, we should stop looking down and start looking up.
- We're to look up and set our eyes upon Jesus and begin a new year with him as our Lord and Saviour. Because he's the only one who can bring about true, lasting change into our lives.

And, you know, since the 1st of January, you might have made some changes to your routine in order to improve your physical health. And that's good and helpful. But, you know, at the beginning of a new year, is it not time for you to start looking up to the only one who can improve your spiritual health and change your life forever?

[3 : 44] My friend, at the beginning of a new year, the truth is you need a new you. You need a new you. You need that change to take place in your life where you have an encounter with Jesus Christ and you experience life in him, forgiveness from him, peace with him, and even love towards him.

At the beginning of a new year, you need a new you. You need to look up to Jesus Christ because he alone can bring that life-giving and long-lasting change into your life.

And, you know, as we resume our study of the book of Acts today, I want us to consider the change that took place in Saul's life after he had an encounter with Jesus Christ on the road to Damascus.

Because the change, as you know, it was so remarkable. But so was the challenge that he faced when he became a Christian. And yet for all that happened to him, it was all for the good and growth of the church.

And there are headings this morning. The change, the challenge, and the church. The change, the challenge, and the church as we look at Acts chapter 9. So we look first of all at the change.

[5 : 02] Look at verse 20. We're told there, Now, we're familiar with the change that took place in Saul's life because I'm sure we're all familiar with the phrase that describes Saul's experience.

We call it a Damascus road experience. And we use that phrase, a Damascus road experience. We use it in almost everyday conversation. And we use it to describe a quick turnaround or this dramatic change where someone who reached a turning point in their life and they just made a complete U-turn.

And as we read earlier, that's what happened to Saul. Because he was dramatically converted on the road to Damascus. There was this sudden and surprising change that took place in Saul's life when the Lord met him and the Lord revealed himself to him and Saul became a Christian.

Now, for many unconverted people, they want a Damascus road experience. Because they say that, well, if a change is going to take place in my life and if I'm going to be converted at all, I want a Damascus road experience.

Now, maybe for you, my unconverted friend, you haven't yet committed your life to Jesus Christ because you're still waiting for that change.

[6 : 40] You're still waiting for Jesus to stop you in your sin. You're still waiting for the bright light to shine into your dark soul. And you're still waiting for the voice from heaven to audibly speak to you.

You're still waiting for this dramatic conversion. But my unconverted friend, I want to say to you today that if you're still waiting for a Damascus road experience, then you're probably going to be disappointed.

Because the reality is dramatic conversions are few and far between. They're just like deathbed conversions.

They don't happen often. Of course, Saul's dramatic conversion here in Acts 9 and even the deathbed conversion of the thief on the cross in Luke 23, They're given to us in the Bible to prove that they do happen, but they don't happen often.

Which is why you shouldn't be waiting for this dramatic experience. You need to commit your life to Jesus Christ today.

[7 : 49] Because, my friend, it's when you commit your life to Jesus Christ, it's then that the change will take place. You have to understand this, that you don't change yourself before you come to Jesus Christ.

You don't try and change your attitude. You don't try and change your lifestyle. You don't try and change your behavior before you come and commit your life to Jesus Christ.

No, you don't make yourself a better person before you come to Jesus. No, the Bible says, come as you are today. Come in your sin today.

Come the way you are, right here, right now. And come and commit your life to Jesus Christ today. Because it's when you commit your life to Jesus Christ, He promises to change you.

That's His promise. He who began a good work in you. Will bring it on to completion. And the change in your life, it may not be dramatic like it was for Saul. But when you commit your life to Jesus Christ, the change will be decisive.

[9 : 00] It will be decisive. It may not be dramatic, but it will be decisive. My friend, the change that will take place when you confess your sin and commit your life to Jesus Christ.

It will be from darkness to light. It will be from darkness to light. From death to life. From the dungeon to liberty. And whether the change in your life is dramatic or even drawn out over many years, it will be decisive.

It will be decisive. It will be decisive. And that's certainly what we see in the life of Saul. There was this decisive change that took place in his life.

Because as you know, and as we were reading, prior to his dramatic and decisive conversion, Saul was this fierce persecutor of the church of Jesus Christ.

He stood by in Acts chapter 7, watching and approving as the Jewish authorities stoned Stephen to death. And it was after the death of Stephen that Saul began this campaign of persecution against the church.

[10 : 06] Where we're told that Saul, he caused havoc. He broke down doors. He entered every Christian home in Jerusalem, dragging out men and women and throwing them into prison.

And you know, for fear of their lives, many of the Christians in Jerusalem, they scattered. They ran away from the city of Jerusalem into all the regions of Judea and Samaria and even beyond.

But that didn't stop Saul. Saul was so determined in his dedication to destroy the church, that he pursued all these persecuted Christians all the way to Damascus.

That's why we were reading in the opening verse, of the chapter, it said that Saul was still breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord.

Even though most of the Christians had abandoned Jerusalem, that wasn't good enough for Saul. Saul was determined to eradicate Christianity altogether, to the point that he's now travelling 150 miles.

[11 : 10] He's going north towards Damascus. And Saul's intention is to arrest any Christian he finds and bring them all the way back to Jerusalem and put them in chains, have them tried and then put them to death.

That was Saul's intention. But when you read Acts 9, that wasn't the Lord's intention. Because as we know, the Lord met with Saul on the road to Damascus.

And he called Saul to come. Come and confess your sin. Come and commit your life to Jesus Christ. And the change that took place in Saul's life was that he went from being a persecutor of the gospel to a preacher of the gospel.

And the change that took place in his life was so dramatic and so decisive that the Christians in Damascus, they were terrified of Saul. That's what we read.

Verse 20. He proclaimed Jesus in the synagogue, saying, He is the Son of God. And all who heard him were amazed and said, Is not this the man who made havoc in Jerusalem of those who called upon his name?

[12 : 17] And has he not come here for this purpose to bring them bound before the chief priests? You know, as the church met together to worship, they questioned the man in the pulpit.

They questioned their itinerant preacher, saying, Is this really Saul of Tarshish? They said, Is it really him? It looks like him. It sounds like him. It seems to be him.

Is this really the man who made havoc in Jerusalem for all those people who were Christians and called upon the name of Jesus? Isn't this not the same man who travelled 150 miles north to our city to take people bound back to Jerusalem?

And yet here he is preaching that Jesus is the Son of God. You know, and that was something Paul had disagreed with and denied in the past. And yet now he's there, standing in the pulpit, preaching the very gospel he tried to destroy.

But you know, my friend, that's the power of the gospel. It's able to change a fierce persecutor of the gospel to a fiery preacher of the gospel.

[13 : 31] That's what the Bible says. The gospel is the power of God unto salvation. And you know, my Christian friend, I think sometimes we have lost sight of the power of the gospel.

We've lost sight that this gospel is able to change hearts and transform lives. We think we can try everything else to save people.

But you know, it's the power, the gospel alone is the power of God unto salvation. But you know what I love about this passage is what we're told in verse 22.

Saul increased all the more in strength and confounded the Jews who lived in Damascus by proving that Jesus was the Christ. You know, when Saul was dramatically and decisively converted, he had passion to see people saved.

He had so much passion that we're told that he repeatedly spoke to the Jews, his own people. He repeatedly spoke to them, trying to convince them that Jesus was the Christ.

[14 : 41] A great reminder that we should never give up on people. We should keep speaking to them, trying to convince them that Jesus is the Christ. But you know, if we were there in that church in Damascus, we might have just dismissed Saul's passion and put it down to the fact, well, he's newly converted.

That's what you'd expect from someone who's a new Christian. Because when you're first converted, you have this passionate pursuit to see everyone around you saved. But as we know from Saul's life, or Paul's life, that passion, it didn't decrease and it didn't diminish.

If anything, he became more and more passionate in his pursuit for lost souls. And my Christian friend, you know, why is it? Why is it that as we go on in our Christian life, that we lose that zeal?

And we lose that passion? And we lose that enthusiasm for the gospel? Why is it that we lose the zeal for people to be saved? The passion to hear the gospel?

And this enthusiasm to reach out? Why do we lose sight? Is it because we lose sight of our priority? Which is what? To seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, knowing then that all other things will be added unto us.

[16 : 07] And you know, my friend, we need to nourish and nurture our zeal and our passion and our enthusiasm for the gospel. Because if we don't, if the Christians in this community don't have zeal, and if we don't have passion, and if we don't have enthusiasm for the gospel, then the church in our community will die.

It will die. You know, when Saul was dramatically and decisively converted, he was doing the very last thing he thought he would ever do.

He was preaching the gospel of Jesus Christ. You know, that's what happens when the Lord changes your life. He takes you out of your comfort zone.

He puts you in places that you never thought possible. And my Christian friend, if the Lord has changed your life, then we need to get out of our comfort zone.

We need to have this zeal and passion and enthusiasm for the gospel. Because why? The gospel is the power of God unto salvation, to them who believe.

[17 : 20] And you know, that's what Saul discovered. He knew the gospel had power in it. But he also knew that it wasn't going to be easy. The change that the gospel brought into his life, it also brought with it challenges.

And that's what we see secondly. The challenge. The change and the challenge. Now look at verse 23.

We're told there that when many days had passed, the Jews plotted to kill him. But their plot became known to Saul. They were watching the gates day and night in order to kill him.

But his disciples took him by night and let him down through an opening in the wall, lowering him in a basket. And when he had come to Jerusalem, he attempted to join the disciples.

And they were all afraid of him, for they did not believe that he was a disciple. I'm sure we've all heard of the phrase, what goes around comes around.

[18 : 22] And we often use that phrase to describe the inevitable reality that someone who treats others badly will eventually be treated the same way themselves. What goes around comes around.

And you know, in many ways, that's what Saul faced after his own conversion. Because when that dramatic and decisive change took place in his life, those who were once friends and allies, allies of Saul in their pursuit to persecute the church, well, they were now his enemies.

Alongside the Jews, Saul had been this trailblazer in his passionate pursuit of Christians. But now he's their target. And the change in Saul's life was so dramatic and so decisive that he went from being determined and dedicated in his persecution of Christians to being determined and dedicated in his protection of Christians and his proclamation of the gospel.

And I'm sure that many of the Jews, especially the chief priests, they would have thought that Saul, he was a traitor, a turncoat, a deserter of their cause. Which is why the Jewish leaders here, they're plotting to kill him.

Of course, you would have thought that the Jewish leaders would realize that there must be something about this Jesus when their greatest friend and ally has joined the other side and is now following them.

[19 : 52] You would have thought that the Jewish leaders would question their motives and even consider what the gospel says when they heard Saul's testimony. You would have thought that witnessing a change in this man's life, a dramatic and decisive change.

You would have thought that witnessing the change in Saul's life would have softened their heart and made them think. But no. They became more dedicated and determined in their own way and they continued to persecute the church and eradicate Christianity altogether.

And you know my unconverted friend, in a similar way, I would have thought I would have thought that witnessing the change in the life of your husband or your wife or your children, your mother, your father, a friend or a neighbour, I would have thought that their testimony would make you think more about the gospel.

I would have thought that it would have softened your heart and make you realise that there must be something about this Jesus that you'd start following him.

I would have thought that by now their witness in your home or in your family or in your community these things would have spoken to you but no. Seems that nothing has changed.

[21 : 22] That's for them. I'm going my own way. You're still in the same lost condition you've always been in despite the fact that those around you in your home and in your family and in your community they've started following Jesus.

They've made a stand but you're still rejecting him. You're still refusing to follow him. But you know is it not about time that you stopped wasting your life and started following Jesus because you know if you've learnt anything by attending all these wakes and funerals in the past few days surely you have learnt that time is short.

That's what I've been reminded anyway. Time is short. Time waits for no man. Surely it's about time you stopped rejecting him and started following him.

You know even though Saul discovered the Christian life to be a challenge with the Jewish leaders plotting to kill him Saul loved Jesus. This was the change in his life.

Saul loved Jesus and he was assured of the promise that even if the world hates you says Jesus know that it hated me before it ever hated you.

[22 : 49] Saul knew the call of discipleship but where Jesus said if anyone comes after me let him deny himself take up his cross and follow me and as challenging as it was that's what Saul was doing.

Saul was denying himself taking up his cross and following Jesus regardless of the fact that many people were plotting to kill him he was still denying himself taking up his cross and following Jesus.

That's what Saul was doing. But the question for us is is that what we're doing? Are we denying self daily? Are we taking up our cross daily?

Are we following Jesus daily? Because as we read Saul's daily challenge was that the Jewish leaders were plotting to kill him. And when Saul got wind of this the disciples in Damascus they help him escape by lowering him in a basket outside the city walls and he's able to run away.

But you know what's remarkable about this chapter in Saul's life is that Saul ran from one challenge into another. But the second challenge that Saul faced it wasn't from outside the church it was from inside the church.

[24 : 06] Because as we read in verse 26 when he had come to Jerusalem Saul attempted to join the disciples and they were all afraid of him for they did not believe that he was a disciple.

You know for Saul it was a challenge to be persecuted by his former companions. Those whom he tried to persecute the church with he was now being persecuted by them.

That was a challenge but it was even a greater challenge to be persecuted by the Christian. Because even though the Christians in Jerusalem they'd heard about this dramatic and decisive change in Saul's life even though they'd heard about it they didn't believe it.

They didn't believe Saul's testimony. They didn't believe that he had this genuine conversion. And in many ways reading it you can appreciate that the Christians were sceptical about Saul.

Because Saul had gone to Damascus he'd travelled all that way to persecute and punish Christians. And yet he comes back seeking to protect and proclaim the gospel.

[25 : 10] And yet the Christians in Jerusalem they're having none of it. They reject Saul. They don't want to know him. And you know what Saul was taught as even a young Christian when he was rejected by the Christians in Jerusalem.

What Saul was taught as a young Christian it reminds me of what I was taught when I was a young Christian. And sadly it has been the truest statement I've ever heard.

The world will respect you but the Christian will hurt you. The world will respect you but the Christian will hurt you.

And needless to say these things ought not to be because as Jesus has taught us you're to love one another love one another as I have loved you and by this all men will know that you are my disciples if you have love towards one another and yet as Saul discovered he flees to Jerusalem seeking help and refuge and yet he's rejected by the Christians there.

Saul discovered the reality and as what many Christians have discovered since the world will respect you but the Christian will hurt you. The world will respect you but the Christian will hurt you.

[26 : 32] But you know my friend it's sad that it has to be said we're not to be a bully we're to be a Barnabas we're not to be a bully we're to be a Barnabas because we're told we're told in verses 26 and 27 that when he had come to Jerusalem he attempted to join the disciples and they were afraid of him for they did not believe that he was a disciple but Barnabas took him and brought him to the apostles and declared to them how on the road he had seen the Lord who spoke to him and how at Damascus he had preached boldly in the name of Jesus despite the fact that the Christians in Jerusalem discarded Saul there was Barnabas who defended Saul and he defended him by bringing him to the apostles and affirming to the apostles that Saul had indeed been dramatically and decisively converted on the road to Damascus and you know I love the character of Barnabas he was actually a man called

Joseph that was his real name but he had been given this nickname Barnabas because he was such an encourager he was Barnabas the encourager that's what the name Barnabas means son of encouragement son of encouragement and Barnabas was an encourager in the church by the way in which he got alongside people even Saul he got alongside people and spoke to them and you know my Christian friend will do well to follow the example of Barnabas because you know far too often the Christian has a reputation and is known for being sons and daughters of discouragement and disunity and disloyalty and to be honest it's a disgrace sometimes the way the Christian behaves is a disgrace and yet when we meet this man on the pages of scripture we've been we've been reminded we're not to be a bully we're to be a Barnabas we're to be a

Barnabas we're to get alongside one another we're to help one another we're to encourage one another we're to love one another and how are we to love one another says Jesus as much as I have loved you you know that's what our congregation needs it doesn't need people to act like bullies it needs people to act like Barnabas that's what every congregation needs doesn't need a bully needs a Barnabas we need to be sons and daughters of encouragement we need to be encouragers and you know I'll say this remember that your minister needs encouragement too you might have a concern about the minister's pride or arrogance or having a big head but believe me the devil manages to keep me well grounded almost to the point where you want to give up and walk away from it all the devil constantly reminds a minister how useless pointless and worthless their job is so encourage the minister by making every effort to be in church encourage the minister by your presence on the lord's day and midweek encourage your minister by your willingness and your desire and your zeal and your passion to serve this lost community with the gospel because as the bible reminds us it is the power of god unto salvation we're not to be a bully we're to be a barnabas we're to be sons and daughters of encouragement that's the challenge that's the challenge that

Saul had that's the challenge that we have but we also see in this passage the church there was the change in Saul's life the challenge Saul faced and it was all for the good and the growth of the church that's what I want us just to consider lastly and briefly the church the change the challenge and the church we'll look at verse 29 we're told there he spoke and disputed against the hellenists but they were seeking to kill him and when the brothers learned this they brought him down to Sicily and sent him off to Tarshish so the church throughout all Judea and Galilee and Samaria had peace and was being built up and walking in the fear of the Lord and in the comfort of the Holy Spirit it multiplied you know in these verses these few verses here Luke who is the author of the book of Acts he reminds us that there are only ever two responses to the preaching of the gospel there are those who love it those who drink it in those who embrace it those who seek to follow and serve the

Lord Jesus Christ and there are those who reject it there are those who fight against it and my unconverted friend you might not want to plot to kill your minister I hope you don't I hope you don't want to kill your minister for preaching the gospel to you but you know your reaction to the gospel is the same as those who reacted to the gospel that Paul that's all preached you you still reject the gospel of Jesus Christ and fight against it even though you might fight against it in the most polite and most respectful way by saying not for me not just now not today you're still fighting against it you're still rejecting it you're still rejecting not me you're rejecting the gospel and who is the gospel but Jesus Christ himself you're rejecting Jesus Christ and you know it's an awful thing to do but you know it was after telling us about the dramatic and decisive change that took place in

[32 : 48] Saul's life on the road to Damascus and then all the challenges that Saul faced from those outside and inside the church Luke now tells us the timeless truth that the church was being built up and strengthened by what?

the preaching of the gospel and Luke highlights this and he highlights it again and again throughout his book that the church was built up and strengthened by the preaching of the gospel because he highlights this because there's no other way for the church to be built up and strengthened apart from the preaching of the gospel doesn't matter how much we change or how many innovations the church brings in the Bible affirms to us that there's no other way no other way for the church to be built up and strengthened apart from the preaching of the gospel by the power of the Holy Spirit that the gospel is what?

the power of God unto salvation and you know that word power and the power of God it's the word dynamite that's how powerful it is that's how powerful this gospel is and you know we forget it so often it has the power just like dynamite able to blow into people's lives and change them and transform them for the better but you know the change in Saul's life and the challenges he faced as a Christian you know if they teach us anything it's that no one is beyond the reach of the gospel you look at you read Acts 9 the change in his life the challenges he faced no one no one is beyond the reach of the gospel no one here is beyond the reach of the gospel none of you and you know that's why it's always worth the effort always worth the effort to share the gospel with anyone and everyone do you know my unconverted friend that's why I always speak to you about your soul because you're always worth the effort you're always worth the effort to speak to you about the gospel because it's the power of God unto salvation and you know as the first century church as they proclaimed the gospel they experienced peace they were built up they were walking in the fear of the Lord they had the comfort of the

Holy Spirit and what happened to the church it multiplied it grew and you know that should be our prayer as a congregation as we move forward every day into 2020 that we would multiply by experiencing peace the peace that we were singing of in Psalm 122 peace within these walls and that we would be built up through walking in the fear of the Lord and experience the comfort of the Holy Spirit because you know the Lord's promise to his church and it's a promise that still stands that he will build his church and the gates of hell will not prevail against it they will not prevail against it therefore we need to keep going keep preaching keep speaking keep witnessing because this gospel it's able to change lives and transform hearts knock knock as we were saying to the children

Jesus is knocking my unconverted friend Jesus is saying to you today behold I stand at the door and knock if anyone hears my voice and opens the door I will come in so you have to open the door and let him in a change needs to take place in your life and it needs to take place by confessing your sin and by committing your life to Jesus Christ and when that change takes place don't think your life's going to be easy there will be challenges as we saw with Saul challenges from outside the church and challenges from within the church but you know there's no better group if I can put it that way to be part of than the church because she belongs to Jesus and he is preparing her for the world that is to come a city that hath foundations whose builder and maker is God well may the

[37 : 41] Lord bless these thoughts to us let us pray oh Lord our gracious God we give thanks to thee for the power of God that are able to change lives and transform hearts and bring us from death unto life from darkness to light from the dungeon to liberty and help us then we pray or to come to come confessing our sin to come committing our life to come realising that this Jesus doesn't reject sinners but welcomes them and Lord that we may face challenges from without and within but Lord we give thanks that the Lord is with us the Lord of hosts upon our side doth constantly remain and the God of Jacob is our refuge us safely to maintain Lord do us good then we pray build us up we ask that we would seek to give thee all the glory the honour and the praise because it is due to thee and that Christ would have the preeminence and that we would receive blessing all go before us then we ask for we ask it in

Jesus name and for his sake Amen we shall bring our service to a conclusion by singing the words of Psalm 102 Psalm 102 in the Scottish Psalter page 368 we're singing from verse 13 down to the verse 18 Psalm 102 it's a prayer for the church and for God to build his church repair his church and even use his church to his own glory that even the generations yet unborn would praise and magnify the Lord Psalm 102 at verse 13 thou shalt arise and mercy yet thou to Mount Zion shalt extend her time for favour which was set behold is now come to an end thy saints take pleasure in her stones her very dust to them is dear all heathen lands and kingly thrones on earth thy glorious name shall fear and we'll sing on down to the verse marked 18 of Psalm 102 to God's praise thou shalt arise and mercy yet the tomb and sigh on child and stand her time for favour which was set behold is now come to an end thy jays take pleasure in her soul her very dust to them is dear all heathen mountains and kingly thrones on earth thy glorious name shall fear

God in his glory shall appear when Zion he builds and repair he shall regard and lend his ear unto the need his humble prayer thou plait his prayer he will not scorn all times this shall be on record and generations yet unborn shall grace and magnify the

Lord the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ the love of God the Father the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all now and forevermore Amen percent of of I don't they will we will let the Queen all and our MR