

Wednesday, 31 May 2023

Sauls Conversion

Acts 9:1-19a

Thank you Gwilym and the Worship team, if you have a Bible then do keep it open in Acts 9.

Just let me set up our passage. In Chapter 7 we hear the story of someone called Stephen, who gives a speech to the religious leaders of the day. After they reject it, Stephen is led off and placed at the feet of a man called Saul, who has him stoned to death.

This persecution means many who follow Jesus scattered far and wide.

So, who is Saul? Saul actually has two names in the Bible, Acts 13:9 says 'But Saul, who was also called Paul, [was] filled with the Holy Spirit'. So sometimes I may say Saul and sometimes I may say Paul, this is the same person.

On occasion, people change their names when they become followers of Jesus. A friend of mine only likes being called Joshua instead of Josh because he associates being called Josh with his old life before knowing Christ.

Saul himself is a religious leader, he is obviously well thought of amongst the crowd of the time because, although he is young, he is popular and has authority.

His goal is to keep the Jewish Faith pure and will do all he can to stop those who he thinks are changing that faith. Especially those who believe in Jesus and his resurrection.

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Before we reflect directly on our passage together, we need to know what a testimony or conversion is.

Well, a Testimony in court is a formal written or spoken statement. It is recounting evidence or proof for something.

A Christian's testimony is recounting and showing evidence of the change that God has made in someone's life.

I'd like to share a couple of short testimonies this morning with you. One of dramatic change and another of God's simple hand of grace at work.

When I was younger I heard the story of Chris Jones. Chris played junior international rugby and went on to play at a high level in Wales. And he prided himself on being the toughest player around. He would actively look for fights in games, would do all he needed to to get one up on the opposite and where possible inflict pain. He eventually had two life bans in rugby and was known for carrying an axe in his bag as he went to games. It wasn't long before this violent streak overflowed off the field as well. He eventually ended up sitting in a prison cell and in that cell, Chris asked God to help him. No flashing lights but a dramatic change in his life happened.

My friend's testimony looked very different. His grandparents bought him to church from a young age. Through years in the church, he gently came to faith. No specific time or day but just faith slowly dawned on him.

This morning I hope we can walk through the story of Saul's conversion together, reflect on God's hand at work and see the uniqueness of this passage.

What is happening in the Story?

We see Saul 'breathing out murderous threats' in verse 1. I don't know what comes into your mind when you hear verse 1 but to me, the image of a snarling bull ready to charge at someone. It is a really vivid description of Saul's mindset. He isn't just thinking about getting those who disagree with him to leave Jerusalem, instead, he wants to stop and eradicate all who follow Jesus.

We see in verse 2 his intentions are highlighted in the fact that he goes to the high priest to get letters sent to the 30 or so synagogues in Damascus, so he can imprison all who follow Jesus and stop the Gospel from spreading to others.

Saul is as far away from knowing Jesus as you could have been.

Isn't that amazing, that God chose, one who is so far away from him, to come and be used by him?

It's also a reminder to us, all can come to Jesus. Whether you feel too far from God today or you have that friend or family member who just won't have a discussion about Jesus. No one is outside the grasp of God.

Saul's conversion is dramatic. And it needs to be, Saul isn't going to respond, with logical reasoning. He is out of his mind with rage. The only way he is going to respond is if God intervenes supernaturally.

In verses 3 to 6, we see this flash of light, causing blindness for Saul and then the voice of Jesus speaking.

As I was reflecting on this moment of Conversion, three aspects stood out to me.

One is the dramatic way in which God intervenes in this passage. He does this to call a specific person to do specific things at a specific time in history. We can think of Moses being spoken to through a burning bush for example.

Another aspect that is vital to coming to faith is hearing the Word of God. Saul hears Jesus' voice in an audible way, most people that come to Christ, won't experience this but we do all hear God's word. No matter how extreme or simple your conversion may be, it must have the word of God within it.

Thirdly, there is significance found in verse 9. Paul is blinded for 3 days and goes without food and water.

We see in verse 11 that Saul spends these three days in prayer. He is blinded, confused, and trying to make sense of hearing Jesus' voice.

Some commentators say that there is a significance between Saul's three days of blindness and Jesus spending three days in the tomb.

There is also something important seen of 3 days without water. The general consensus is a human can survive 3 minutes without oxygen, 3 days without water and three weeks without food. So Saul is at the point of death, in prayer and fasting.

It may also be very easy to think because Saul's conversion was so dramatic, what does it really have to do with me?

But Saul's conversion is balanced between dramatic intervention and a 3-day journey of discovery. Some of us may know a time and date we came to believe, but for others is a gradual process. And we see both aspects in Saul's conversion.

The point here is that all of our journeys will look different as we find out about Jesus.

Where do you find yourself on that Journey?

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In verse 10 we are introduced to a new character. Ananias is clearly an ordinary but faithful follower of Jesus. God is wonderfully specific in verses 11 and 12, showing his control.

But what I find reassuring is Ananias' logical question. Everyone knows of Saul of Tarsus, firstly because he is the one who looked over the stoning of Stephen in chapter 7 before everyone scattered to places like Damascus. Saul also had letters, sent through the High priest, to all the synagogues. Saul's reputation precedes him. Ananias knows that Saul has come to cause chaos. To imprison people and potentially kill any who follow Christ.

So it is a logical human response to go... 'Are you sure you want me to go and endanger myself and potentially endanger others by restoring sight to Saul?'

But although Ananias doesn't fully understand God's plan, he is obedient when God say Go!

Verse 15 was probably a confusing thing to hear for Ananias. 'This man is my chosen instrument to proclaim my name...' As I mentioned Saul's conversion is unique and this is why. Paul had a specific call on his life from God. He was to be a mouthpiece, for the Good News of Jesus, to go out to the rest of the world.

Paul also wrote about half of the New Testament books. He spreads the gospel far and wide and is one of the main sources of Christian theology.

In verse 16 God says 'I will show how much he must suffer for my name'. No longer is Saul the persecutor but he will be the persecuted. His transformation and call are unique.

Ananias welcomes Saul by calling him Brother. Following God's commands. Ananias was a key part of Saul's testimony.

Let me tell you another testimony from history.

On January 6th 1850, a young man just shy of 16 years old got up one Sunday morning to go to a certain place of worship, only for a snowstorm to hit. As he ventured out he ended up going to a small local chapel.

Because of the snowstorm, the normal preacher wasn't able to attend, so instead a shoemaker took his place in the pulpit. With no gifts in speaking and no time to prepare he opened his Bible and read from the book of Isaiah.

The young man watched on as the shoemaker babbled through 10 minutes or so of a sermon, that didn't have much clarity. As the shoemaker came to finish he looked up to see this young man and

said "Young man, you look very miserable." He continued, "And you will always be miserable—miserable in life and miserable in death—if you don't obey my text; but if you obey now, this moment, you will be saved." Then lifting up his hands, he shouted, "Young man, look to Jesus Christ. At that moment that young man came to know Christ.

This is the testimony of Charles Spurgeon, who is one of the best know pastors in Church history. His sermons and works have touched so many people's lives.

All that wouldn't have happened had not a simple shoemaker been bold enough to stand in and preach that day.

Ananias was the same for Paul's conversion. We all have the power to obey God and can leave a legacy of Christ in others' lives.

The last couple of verses shows the transition of Saul to Paul, of life from death. From being blind to being able to see. Both physically and spiritually.

1 Peter 1:3 says 'All praise to God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. It is by his great mercy that we have been born again because God raised Jesus Christ from the dead.'

The end of verse 18 is a really important response that is shown to us. Saul was immediately baptised.

Baptism isn't just unique for Paul but is a command from God. And the requirements for Baptisms are simple. Believe in Jesus, trust in him as Lord and Saviour, and follow him. It's not about having everything else sorted, it's simply, that you know Jesus, and you believe he has washed away your sins through his work on the cross and his resurrection from the dead, then be baptised.

There is so much going on in Saul's conversion, things we can rejoice in and lots to learn from. There are three points that I'd love us to look at this morning.

Firstly, as we have spoken about, this is a story about Paul's testimony and his conversion. How God has shown the proof and evidence in Paul's life and changed his direction.

But what is key to remember is that Conversion looks different for every individual. As we mentioned Paul's testimony is unique, because of who he was and what he was called to do afterwards.

For every single one of us, our story is unique. For some of us, our conversion to following Jesus happened a long time ago. For others, we are right at the start of learning anything about him.

In home group this week it was wonderful to share how God brought each one of us to know him. And what was special in doing that was that we could see that our testimonies are unique to us. Some of us had a specific moment in life, for others, it was gradual change and understanding. Some came from an upbringing in the church, and others had no church involvement till later in life.

We mustn't think my conversion isn't as good as someone else because it wasn't dramatic or because I didn't have a specific point to remember. It is all a miraculous work of God through his word.

So can I encourage you this morning, Rejoice! Rejoice in the miraculous conversion that God has done in your life if you know him. Celebrate your testimony, encourage people and share it with others.

Why not take a really simple challenge, this week or month, meet up with someone from the Church and share your testimony with them?

Secondly, our response is key. We see Saul is changed ultimately in two ways. He is filled with the Holy Spirit, which means he truly believes that Jesus is God and that he died, to take the punishment for our sins and rose to life three days later. This is the first point for everyone. Do you believe in Jesus?

He is also baptised. Being baptised is an important command of Jesus. If you know Jesus, believe in him and trust him, then our natural response should be to follow his command and be baptised. This united us with Christ and shows publicly that we follow him.

So if you don't know Jesus today, then why not, seriously find out if he is worth following? Ask someone about him today. There are probably 100 stories or so in this room, that will reflect the reality of Jesus and the true transformation he brings to life.

If you do know Jesus and haven't been baptised yet, then please let me encourage you to seriously think about that. Come and chat with one of the elders and respond to the command that Jesus lays out.

My last point as we come to a close this morning is that... as our testimonies are unique, so is our calling. Paul had an incredible calling to be a chosen instrument for God. To take the good news out to all nations and ended up writing so much of the New Testament. And all of us have a unique position in life. Nobody can access the world as you can. You are the only person that can see your family, friends and work colleagues, from your perspective.

We share a common calling, to live faithful lives, in obedience to Christ and to take the Good News to the world but only you can see that through your eyes.

So react to the Mission. Be active in living your testimony and let it impact your understanding of the people God has put in your life that only you can share him with.

Let's Pray before we close our time in worship together.