

Prelude to the Study of Galatians - The Conversion of Paul

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[0 : 00] Our friends, good to be with you today. And we're starting a little series on Galatians, but for a number of reasons, I thought it best to start our series by telling you the story of Paul's conversion.

You see, I think if we understand Paul's conversion, you'll be able to understand Galatians much better, and it will help me in terms of my preparation. So the main focus is not going to be Galatians 1. We'll come back to that next week.

Instead, our main focus is going to be Acts 9. But I want to start by telling you a story, not from either of those, but from the book of Numbers. But before we do that, I'm going to pray. Let's pray. Our Father, we thank you for your word.

We pray today that your word might be what you've said it will be, that is living and active, sharper than any sword, penetrating to the division of soul and spirit, joints and marrow.

May it judge the thoughts and attitudes of our hearts, please enable me to speak faithfully from your word today, and please cause it to do what you have promised it will.

[1 : 04] And we pray this in the name of Jesus Christ and for his glory. Amen. Okay, friends, the story I want to tell you comes from Numbers 25. This is the story of Israel in the wilderness.

They've been rescued out of Egypt, and they're journeying toward the promised land. They've been wandering for some time, and they've grown tired of Moses, and they've grown tired of his God.

And they've grown quite interested in the local Moabite women. So Israelite men took Moabite women into their tents, and the Moabite women took the Israelite men into their temples, and they ate together, they drank together, they partied together, and of course, they slept together, and they worshipped the God Baal together.

And the Lord God, the Holy God, remember, reacted. And Numbers 25 verse 3 tells us that the anger of the Lord burned against Israel.

And Moses was told to instruct Israel judges to put to death those who had begun to follow the Moabite gods. And understandably, that caused grief among the people of God. They're weeping about it.

[2 : 13] A plague has apparently begun. And just then, just in the sight of, at the edge of the sight of everyone, an Israelite man enters the camp.

And while everyone looks on, he brings with him a Midianite woman. And together, they walk toward the family tent. There'd be no doubt what would happen.

He would have sex with this woman, and he would do so in open, public defiance of God. Anyway, this was all too much for one particular man, whose name was Phinehas.

He was the son of Aaron the priest. So he grabbed a spear from one of the men who was standing by. And while everyone looked on, he marched toward the tent. And he killed both the man and the woman.

And as a result, God's anger was abated, and the plague against Israel stopped. And the Lord said to Moses these words, Phinehas, son of Eleazar, the son of Aaron the priest, has turned away my anger from the Israelites.

[3 : 20] Since he was zealous for my honor among them as I am, I did not put an end to them in my zeal. Therefore tell him, I am making a covenant of peace with him.

He and his descendants will have a covenant of lasting priesthood, priesthood, because he was zealous for the honor of his God and made atonement for the Israelites. Now, it's a fairly strong story, isn't it?

And a strong statement. But from this day on, Phinehas became a model of good, zealous, God-fearing Jews. And for them, you see, God loves, they knew from this incident that God loves people who honor him.

God looks with favor on those who are zealous for him, and God rewards such people with glory and honor. Men and women like Phinehas keep Israel pure.

And God wants Israel to be pure. Such people atone for the sins of other Israelites. And it's with that bit of background, I want you to turn to Acts 9. So in your Bibles, find Acts 9.

[4 : 24] 1,057 or something like that is the page number, I think. 100 and... Oh, because I'm working on the one in the other room.

1,100. The number was right for there, I'm sure. Now let me tell you what has happened in this point, up till this point in Acts. God has commissioned his disciples to take the gospel to the world.

And they've begun. Jewish Christians have preached the gospel to their fellow Jewish countrymen and women, and they've preached to Greek-speaking Hellenistic Jews, then they've preached to Samaritans, then social and religious outcasts, and one that they've preached to is even a Gentile Ethiopian eunuch.

And so we begin to wonder, as we've got this far through Acts, what's going to happen next? Is God going to target Gentiles? And that's the case, and if that's the case, how on earth is he going to do it?

And that's the question that Acts chapters 9 through to 11 addresses. Chapter 9 prepares for God's push on the Gentiles by talking about the man who will be his instrument for reaching them.

[5 : 34] He talks about Saul, the persecutor of Christians, the man who will become God's emissary to the Gentiles. Then Acts 10 and 11 actually talks to us about the conversion of the Gentiles, of Cornelius and his household, and of the pouring out of God's spirit.

But today, I just want us to think about Saul. Now let me say, I think because we know Paul, which was his Christian name, since we know him so well from his books, it's very hard for us to imagine what Saul would have been like in his pre-Christian days.

Hard to imagine because our thinking is so coloured by reading his Christian writings. However, what he does within those Christian writings is every now and then he gives little biographical bits of information that tell us about what he, the pre-Christian man, was like.

And what I want to do is try and put all of those together. I want to try and get inside the pre-Christian Paul. And I want to try you to understand this man who sets out for Damascus this day.

My source for putting all of this together, as I said, is little snippets taken from his writings. Anyway, in your outlines, I've given you the sources for the information.

[6 : 46] Can you see them there? Little Bible references? You can look them up later on. However, for a moment, I just want you to sit back and see if you can imagine the man Saul whom we meet in Acts 9.

To make it even more graphic, I want you to imagine that you are Saul and that you are the pre-Christian Saul.

Now, if that's you, I know it's a bit hard for the women amongst us, but give it a try. If you are Saul, the first and primary part of your make-up is that you are a Jew.

But I want to tell you, you're not just a token Jew. You are Hebrew of Hebrews, Philippians 3. In other words, you are an untainted Jew.

You may have been born in Tarsus, you may be a Roman citizen, you may speak Aramaic, you may speak Greek, you may have been around, however, you are untainted by the world that you live in, untainted by Greek and Roman culture, you know where your roots are, and you are not a Greek-speaking, Hellenistic Jew, you are a real Jew, a descendant of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, born of one of the pure tribes, Benjamin, a speaker of Abraham's language, Hebrew, a preserver of your ancient heritage, you are committed to your ancestors' customs and laws from the day you were born.

[8 : 04] You are a Hebrew of Hebrews, circumcised on the eighth day, in accordance with the law, and you are proud of it. But more than that, you are from a special breed of traditional Jews.

You are a Pharisee. Now, being a Pharisee means committed to preserving Jewish faith. You are committed to preserving true Jews from foreign influences. You are committed to stopping Jews from relaxing any religious observations.

You are a Bible-believing Jew. You take the greatest care to follow the laws given by God to Moses. for you are a Pharisee.

But you are not just any old Pharisee. You see, you have been educated under Gamaliel. You are a pupil of one of the greatest Pharisaic educators of the first century. You have been his student, and what's more, under his training, you have advanced beyond many your age.

You are a deeply religious man. The sort of religious man people look up to. You are a purist. You are an up-and-coming Pharisee, and you are proud of it.

[9 : 16] As a Pharisee, you know the law back to front, and you know what it says. And as you examine your way of life, you're aware that your life is blameless according to the law. You know the law.

You know that you've kept the law. As you look at the righteousness that the law demands, you're blameless. In other words, if God is going to judge people according to his laws set out by Moses, then he's going to find you blameless.

In terms of living rightly according to the law, no charge will be able to be levelled against you. So all in all, you're a man of zeal. You know you are a Jew.

You know your ancestral traditions. You know the laws of Moses. You are determined that other people know them and obey them, and that the religion they practice is pure. True religion, to be true religion must be untainted by false religion.

And so you are not like many of your ancestors who mix the worship of the true God with the worship of the gods of the surrounding nations. No, you're like Phinehas in Numbers 25. You'll seek out impurity both in yourself and in the lives of other Jews, and you'll deal with it quickly and thoroughly because you are zealous for God.

[10 : 30] You are a man of zeal. However, your zeal is directed zeal. It's directed towards God's glory. You're a seeker of God's glory, and you know God is glorified when his people hold unswervingly to his laws.

God is glorified when people love righteousness so much that they will root out apostasy and heresy in these final days. So you're committed to God, his laws, bringing glory to him, and you're zealous for him.

Now, as a zealous Jew, you have found an obvious target for your zeal, this new sect that has appeared called Christianity.

Now, it was bearable to some extent when Christians open up their ranks to Hellenistic Jews. That could be managed. But then they began to speak against the temple like Stephen did.

They began letting Samaritans join in, and the thin edge of the wedge had opened up into a gaping hole that could then cause the unclean and the impure to come flooding in.

[11 : 35] The purity of your faith was under threat from these Christians. But there was more at stake than this. Your concern is with the new beliefs that Christians bring.

You see, for you, Christians are self-evidently heretics. They're wrong. They're mistaken at the very base of their faith.

You see, what is the most fundamental point of their faith? It is fundamentally flawed. The most fundamental point of their belief asserts that Jesus of Nazareth was the Messiah.

Now, you and everyone else in Jerusalem knows that Jesus of Nazareth was crucified by the Romans. Messiahs don't die. Well, they certainly don't die on crosses.

And the law makes clear that whoever hangs on a tree is under the curse of God. So, for Christians to take a condemned criminal who died an ignoble death that put him under the curse of God and say he is the Messiah blessed by God is a horrible blasphemy.

[12 : 40] A crucified Messiah is worse than a contradiction in terms. It's an outrageous blasphemy. And the perpetrators of such must be removed from the people of Israel.

Sought out, punished, purged from the community of Israel. The teaching of these Christians represents a malignant growth that calls for drastic surgery.

And the sooner it happens the better. So, you've put up your hand. You have volunteered. The chief priests and their associates may be operating from jealousy and vested interests.

Not you. Your motives are religious. You will root out apostasy like heroes of old. You'll preserve God's glory and purity and the purity of your religion. You are, in one sense, a modern-day Phinehas.

And like your great predecessor, you expect God's favour. Like Phinehas, you will deal drastically with this impurity and you expect that God will look with favour upon you as a result.

[13 : 42] Maybe he'll even reward you for your zeal. But that's irrelevant. You will do the job. And so this is you, heading up to Damascus.

A Jew. A Hebrew speaking Jew. A Pharisee. And a zealous one at that. And a persecutor of God's new enemies, of the believers in Jesus of Nazareth. That, friends, is the context of Acts 9.

Have a look at it. Keep an eye on your Bibles now as we work through the passage. I'm going to keep using the second-person narrative to help you get a feel for what might have gone through Saul's brain.

There you are. On your way to Damascus, you have authority to bring captive Christians to Jerusalem. Chapter 9 verses 1 to 2. And all of a sudden it happens.

just as you get close to your destination, a light, a blinding light, flashes from heaven. You lose sight. You fall to the ground and a voice rings out.

[14 : 43] And your rabbinic schooling has taught you that such voices can only be from God. They can only mean rebuke or instruction. And so you listen, expecting God's got some more instructing to do.

And the surprises come thick and fast. And they are shattering and they leave the you in pieces. They blast aside your understanding and assurance. The first surprise is this, that the words are those of rebuke, not instruction.

You have not earned God's favour. On the contrary, you have earned his rebuke. You have misunderstood him and he needs to stop you in your tracks before you go on and he needs to straighten you out.

The second surprise for you is the content of the words. Look at them. Saul, Saul, why do you persecute? And I want you to hear the last word, me. You're flabbergasted.

You think, hang on, there's got to be some mistake here. The only people you've been persecuting is Christians, not God. You're not persecuting God, you're defending God and his laws.

[15 : 49] How can God say you're persecuting him? What have you done that could be the persecution of God? God? And the confusion strikes you. And you wonder, what's going on here?

And you can't even express it. All you can do is stumble out a few words, who are you Lord? And if the first words you heard from God were confusing, the second are beyond belief.

They blow you away, disintegrate you, and leave you in a smouldering heap. these are words that will reverberate in your mind for the rest of your life. I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting.

Now at this point, your whole belief system has been shattered. You have been told that your whole way of life has been misguided. And you have just been told by the very person you thought your life was in honour of.

Can you imagine the trauma that must have been for Paul that day? Numb, you are let off to the city. For three days you will fast and pray, trying to make sense out of what has happened.

[17 : 00] Verse 9. But you are no fool, you begin to think it out, and you put two and two together. And your thinking goes something like this. You know Jesus existed, that cannot be denied.

You know Jesus was crucified, again that can't be denied. You know Jesus is alive as Christians claim, that can't be denied. You've seen him yourself. You know that Jesus is linked with God, again that can't be denied.

You heard it said. You know that Jesus is indissolubly linked with this group of Christian people. The voice made that clear. Did you hear it? Persecuting Christians equals persecuting Jesus equals persecuting God.

So what can this mean? And already the shattering implications begin to hit you. One, the crucified, cursed Jesus must be the Messiah, the Son of God.

Now when we get to Galatians 3, you'll see Paul work that out. He'll show us. Two, despite your zeal and your sense of doing God's will, your previous way of life and your previous understanding of how to relate to God stands under his rebuke.

[18 : 15] keeping laws doesn't relate you to God. Being Jewish doesn't relate you to God. God is to be related to now through relating to Jesus. And we'll see how Paul works that out in Galatians 2 and 3, but if you want to read more, Romans 1 to 8.

Three, God is a God of grace, mercy and forgiveness. Now up until this point, you, the good Bible reading Jew, knew this. Now, you knew it intimately and personally.

You see, what had you been doing? You had been opposing God. You had been persecuting God and his people. You had been a blasphemer. You knew that while you were pursuing this course, God did what?

He reached out to you and he said, stop right there. Now, your understanding of God is one that rested ultimately utterly on having met the God of grace.

From now on, everything you do would remember that fact. It would remember that God had been gracious and kind to you. He'd given you grace, mercy and forgiveness in the person and work of Jesus.

[19 : 29] And that's worked out, well, from the very first page through the very last page of Paul's writings. You'll never see it go out of his vision very much. God is a God of grace. And four, a whole new way of thinking about the Old Testament must be engaged in.

Central to this is an understanding of who Jesus is and what he's done. Old frameworks of understanding and interpreting must be done away with and a new framework with Jesus at the center must be put into place.

And fifth, there's a task now to be engaged in. You had directed your zeal toward the law and ancestral traditions, not anymore. Now your zeal must have another target.

From now on, you know that God is glorified when Jesus is proclaimed and known. So now, you the zealous Jew must direct your zeal toward making Jesus known.

And it must be made at declaring Jesus to be the Messiah, even if it means suffering and death. And so you will eventually go to your death doing that very thing. Okay, friends, I hope that exercise just helped you get a little bit into the mind of Paul.

[20 : 37] These five implications, let me tell you, are just a few of the implications that sprang from Paul's encounter with Jesus. They are just a few of the reflections on what it means to realise that Jesus is the Messiah.

Paul spent the rest of his life working on further implications and you just need to read any of his letters, but particularly Galatians will help us. But I want to ask just a couple more questions before we wind up tonight.

Why do you think this story is here in Acts 9? Well, it may be there just to introduce Paul the Apostle who's going to go to Cornelius in a chapter or so, but I think the writer of Acts wants us to see more than that.

He wants us to see that Paul's encounter with Christ is not just a private affair, it's part of God's overarching plan. Remember how we started off by saying, well, the gospel, where's it gone?

Jews, Greek-speaking Jews, and it's going to head along that track until we get to Gentiles? You see, what Luke wants us to see is that this is what God has had in mind from the beginning of time.

[21 : 44] You see, in chapters 10 and 11 we'll hear how a door opens for the Gentiles and how they respond to the gospel. Here in chapter 9 we find out how God is going to cause the door to open and who will be sent to be their teacher and leader and apostle.

And chapter 9 verses 15 to 16 records his commission. However, let's finish up by looking past the book of Acts and I want you in your Bibles to go to 1 Timothy chapter 1 and someone who finds the page number first can yell it out for us.

But if you're in Acts you just keep going, if you get to Hebrews you've gone too far. Someone got a page number? Acts? Say it again. 1192. 1 Timothy chapter 1 verse 12.

Let's read verses 12 to 14. Paul says, I thank Christ Jesus our Lord who has given me strength that he considered me trustworthy appointing me to his service.

Even though I was once a blasphemer and a persecutor and a violent man, I was shown mercy because I acted in ignorance and unbelief.

[22 : 51] The grace of our Lord was poured out on me abundantly along with the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus. I want you to notice what Paul is saying.

His point is that I was the most unlikely candidate for conversion to Christian faith. I was not favorably disposed toward Christianity. In fact, I was in open opposition and you couldn't get a person more antagonistic.

I was self-assured, confident, religious persecutor of what I believe was a blasphemous sect. And yet, God reached out to me. He acted in mercy.

He poured out his grace in abundance and brought me to respond in faith and love. God acted in such a way that where there was once disbelief, there came belief and love.

And in verses 15 and 16 Paul moves from his situation to make the point. Look at what he says. He has already mentioned grace and mercy but listen to him mention them again. Here is a trustworthy statement that deserves full acceptance.

[23 : 53] In other words, you can bank on this. Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners of whom I am the worst. But for that very reason I was shown mercy so that in me the worst of sinners Christ Jesus might display his immense patience and look at this last half of the sentence as an example for those who would believe in him and receive eternal life.

You see Paul is clear he'd been a leader of sinners yet God had saved him if God can save the leader of sinners do you think he can save lesser sinners of course he can Paul's conversion is testimony to God's ability if it can be done with Paul then it can be done with anyone can you see what we've done we've imagined Saul we've imagined being ourselves in his shoes we've soaked up his background religious heritage now I want you to think for a moment if you were Saul would you have ever imagined that you could have become a Christian if you're one of the apostles or Christians in Jerusalem or Damascus would you have ever imagined that Paul could have been converted could such a person become a Christian not likely is it humanly speaking he's not a very suitable candidate and yet he did and if he did you can and if he did so can your friends and if he did so can anyone to my shame

I want to tell you this story we had when we were in Perth and we were church planting we had a woman who turned up to English as second language Bible study she came to learn English but she was converted along the way she had a husband that husband was back in China and he was winning awards for throughout all of China for his translation work from Chinese to English he was a very capable man he was in his mid thirties and finally when he moved to Australia to be with his wife he camped to a place for dinner and he walked in he carried himself well he looked well he looked intelligent he sounded intelligent his English was spotless and as he talked in the sinfulness of my heart

I thought no you won't become Christian I'd love you to but you won't two or three years later he came to me in the middle of church service we took a little break for coffee and he came to me and he said Andrew I've got something to tell you what is it he said I've just become a Christian and then his eyes just filled with tears and they streamed down his face he said to me Andrew I am 38 years old why has no one told me this before I've lived 38 years no one's told me why not in my sinful heart I thought God could convert a Saul but not him now Paul's saying if he can convert me he can convert anyone he can bring anyone you see the

Christian message is one you can have confidence in friends it will convert a Saul it will convert my friend from China it is worth preaching it is worth preaching because it has the endorsement of God God is behind it it will convert the unconvertible it will convert the souls of this world it is able because God is able friends this gospel we preach is not a human intervention invention as Paul says in Romans 1 verse 17 it is the power of God to salvation for all who believe it is God's gospel able to convert Saul you me and our friends and our contacts by the way I just want to wrap up by saying we are going to explore this gospel lots more when we come to Galatians in the coming weeks but I just want to make a statement about us as a church here at Holy Trinity see we are a gospel church as individuals we believe we believe the gospel together we are committed to the gospel and to preaching it across all eight congregations here at

[28 : 46] Holy Trinity we are committed to this whether we're Chinese Aussie multicultural whatever we are we're committed to this together we're committed to the gospel and to preaching it and we're committed to doing this every week and that's why we preach systematically from the Bible week in together on Wednesday and we do it every other service that's why we sponsor people to go various places around the world preaching the gospel that's why we are constantly encouraging people to consider gospel ministry as a way of life this is a gospel church committed to gospel priorities active in gospel ministry and we need to know that when we preach the gospel God will be active it is the gospel about his son and promoted by him and his spirit do you know last year our Chinese congregations baptized 100 people and the gospel took atheists and turned them to

Christians isn't it phenomenal if you've never been to one of our Chinese baptisms turn up it's a tear jerking experience seeing these people come to faith but it has happened in all our congregations as we've gone about preaching about Jesus people have come to believe God promises that wherever this gospel is preached it will bear fruit and increase it is God's gospel it has the power to convert the unconverted and build up those who are already converted and that brings us to the crunch because I want to ask you if you really believe it so let me ask when we meet together like tonight do you come expecting God to be at work through the preaching of his word do you expect that he'll convert people do you expect that he'll be here building you up and others up through the preaching of his word in preaching and singing and hearing do you expect that God will confront you teach you convict you rebuke you train you in righteousness and equip you you see we are gathered together here tonight in the name of

Jesus Christ God the Father is here with us now God the Son is here with us now and God the Holy Spirit is present in his power the God of all the earth is with us now he's the God who spoke a word that turned chaos into order and darkness into light and the God who uttered a word which turned nothing into something is present now with us he's speaking even now and his word goes forth and as it does it turns Pharisees into Christians hearts of stone into hearts of flesh it makes new worlds and new hearts and lives in the lives of sinful people like you and me it turns chaos and emptiness and meaningless lives into fullness of purpose of life with him friends this God is here and I need to say it because we often don't believe it so let us come with the expectation that he's not asleep he's not like

Baal and the others he's not gone off to rest somewhere he's here so let us come with the expectation that he's not asleep that he will speak that he will be active and let's put into practice the things we believe and let's pray father we thank you that you are the god who uttered your word that turned nothing into something on the first day of creation and that you are speaking even now as your word goes forth in the gospel thank you that you can make hearts of stone into hearts of flesh thank you that you are here with us today please father forgive us for we often come with the expectation that you might actually be asleep but father we know that you are not so please forgive us when we think those things even if we don't voice them please speak please be active please help us to put into practice the things we believe in and father please work in our lives even as you worked in the life of the apostle

Paul father we pray these things in Jesus name amen! can if you do please week of some like me and yeah he can like you can flip with love you