

The Persecutor Becomes a Missionary

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- [0 : 00] Let's pray. Thank you, God, for your amazing love for us. Thank you for your Son, the Lord Jesus. Please help us now as we approach your word to let it impact our lives and change our outlook that we might walk confidently in our Lord.
- We ask in his name. Amen. Please have a seat, friends. Well, I don't know about you, but I really love a good conversion story. I could listen to them all day.
- One of the highlights of the Port Hedla mission trip was that the team, we thought we knew each other, but then we heard each other's testimonies, and it was like just a really beautiful insight into their lives, how God had worked as we heard them share in different context schools and dinner parties about how they came to faith in Jesus.
- I love hearing about how people go from ignoring God or being allergic to God to loving him and receiving his mercy and grace and forgiveness. I love to read, and I recommend this to you, Christian biography, and especially the biographies of evangelists, because they're just littered with page after page of wonderful conversion stories.
- So this year I've really enjoyed reading the autobiography of Charles Spurgeon, and Martin Lloyd-Jones has a great biography as well. And you'll read page after page of what God does through his powerful gospel.
- [1 : 26] I love a good conversion story. Now, Western civilisation actually owes a lot to Christianity in this respect. This book of Acts, this chapter of the book of Acts, we read about an unlikely conversion.
- One who was the enemy, the fierce persecutor of the Christian church, becomes the great apostle evangelist of the early church. And our Western culture owes so much to this.
- Let me explain. Firstly, and more obviously, there are kind of these little phrases that we use, that non-Christians use, that come from Acts chapter 9. They won't know where it comes from, but people say things like having a Damascus Road experience, or seeing the light, or being blinded by the light, or having scales fall from your eyes as you understand something in a new way.
- These are all phrases from Acts chapter 9. But on a much deeper level, I think Western civilisation is grounded on the concept of the possibility of conversion, the concept of conversion.
- Christian-influenced cultures are very strong that individuals can undergo radical change through spiritual experience, through Christian conviction. People can change.
- [2 : 49] No one is ever completely stuck in their lot in life, but each person has a great potential for radical change and development. And this really, this worldview undergirds Western civilisation.
- So, for example, in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, penned after the atrocities of the Second World War, Article 18 states, everyone has the freedom and the right to change their religion or belief.
- Now, that alone is grounded in the Christian concept or the Christian worldview of conversion. In other cultures that are shaped by other religious worldviews, there either isn't the freedom to change, or they don't even believe that there is a possibility of change.

For example, in some, most famously in the Hindu-influenced culture of India with its locked and rigid caste system, you are your caste and you cannot change.

As the Christian gospel came to India in the 19th century, Christians went to all castes, and in particular they went to the untouchables and brought the gospel.

[4 : 07] And this is what one historian has said happened as a result of that when the gospel came to India. No longer would the socially oppressed quietly accept that they deserved their plight because of bad karma in previous reincarnations.

The mission work had sown seeds of social revolution. What happened was the missionaries didn't go in the first place to change the society, but the gospel of conversion, of radical turnaround, had a social impact that came up against the rigid caste system of India that still exists in a certain way still today.

If you have the view that people can change, that people can be converted, and you let it ferment in society for, say, a thousand years or two, then what you have is the basis of Western freedom, of individual freedom.

The Christian worldview is very happy to have religious freedom because we believe God, through his powerful gospel, can work change in people without the pressure of an enforced religion, without conversion by the sword.

Conversion gives us confidence to support religious freedom. And our secular mindset has twisted this view a little bit because no longer is it about God can change people, but man changes himself.

[5 : 40] And so we now believe in kind of self-help or self-transformation, but nevertheless it's grounded on this same worldview of change. So that's why you can walk into a bookshop, which I like to do, and you'll see a whole wall of books on personal development or education or personal growth and change.

That's all grounded in this Christian concept which is filtered into our society about conversion. I even found a whole bookshop this week that was all the books were about self-improvement and personal development.

I was having a field day. It was great. Conversionism is a staple belief of Western culture. It's a consequence of our New Testament worldview that even people like Saul of Tarsus can be turned around by God's gospel.

So let's look carefully at it, remembering how important it is. We find up... I'm going to call him Paul. We know him as Paul. Throughout Acts chapter 9, he's been called by his more Aramaic version of the name, Saul.

But we know him as Paul, the apostle who wrote much of our New Testament. And Paul in chapter 9 is breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord.

[6 : 59] Paul, the one who was there receiving people's... approving of people at the killing of Stephen, the first martyr, has been trying to root out Christians out of Jerusalem.

And as he cleans them out, they spread to synagogues around the Roman Empire. And Saul, the strategist, can see that this is a problem. In fact, this is God's sovereign plan that the Christian gospel will spread through the synagogues around the Roman Empire.

And so Saul, what he wants to do is... It's outside his jurisdiction. And so he goes to other places to get permission to take Christians back to Jerusalem where he can do nasty things to them.

Paul is driven by faith. He wants to do what he can to crush the blaspheming fanatics, that is, the Christian church. And in particular, we see him targeting what Luke calls people who belonged, verse 2, to the way, capital W.

The Christians are becoming known as a more independent force, as a subversive kind of different movement in the Roman society. They are the followers of the Lord, verse 1, or the people who belong to the way, verse 2.

[8 : 14] And there's a little bit of irony there because later Luke will describe Saul as the one who was converted on the way or on the road. And so he persecutes those on the way and he becomes a follower of the way while he's on the way.

Now, let's see what happens. Now, as he was going along approaching Damascus, verse 3, a light from heaven flashed around him. In our Port Hedland testimonies, we didn't know and had a light, but Saul got this.

He fell to the ground and heard a voice saying to him, Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me? He asked, Who are you, Lord? The reply came, I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting.

And we want to read this, friends, remembering that we're not reading fable or Christian fairy tale. What we're reading is historical fact and we know that for at least three reasons. One is we know from Luke's Gospel, chapter 1, verse 1 to 4, that Luke said he's carefully researched what he's written.

He's interviewed many witnesses and put together an orderly kind of journalistic account. And so there would have been lots of people for Luke to interview about this event, not least, of course, Paul himself.

[9 : 31] And we know that Luke was a travelling companion in some of Paul's missionary journeys. So later in the book of Acts, Luke, instead of writing they did this, they did this, Luke will write we did this, we did this, because at that point he's part of the team.

And so Luke would have had an ample opportunity to interview Paul about this event. And the third reason we can trust it's historical is that such a conversion of such a public figure who hated Christianity and then became one of its most prominent leaders would have been publicly quite controversial.

And so the events would have been scrutinised from within the church as well as from within society. In fact, Paul himself draws on this event and repeats it two more times in Acts 22 and 26 before Kings.

And so if there was any exaggeration or falsehood to this there would have been a great opportunity to expose that as Acts was published or as Paul spoke it before Kings. The net effect for Paul is that he thought he was doing the will of God and he finds he's not doing the will of God.

And worse than that he's not only not doing the will of God he's persecuting the very saints of God. Not only that he's persecuting the Lord Jesus himself.

[10 : 54] Why do you persecute me? I am Jesus whom you are persecuting. Jesus' words are not saying stop hurting me. Jesus as Lord is confronting Paul.

Why do you wage war with the King of Kings and the Lord of Lords? Why do you do that in the name of God? I am the Son of God. It's all there kind of implicit in the revelation of the authority of Jesus.

The Lord Jesus makes no offers to Paul. He doesn't ask for any favours. He confronts, he commands and he converts Paul.

Paul has an encounter with the Lordship of Jesus with the authority of Jesus. This sheds light for us sorry to use that metaphor on the nature of conversion.

I think and this is my tendency as well the modern church especially in Australia tends to see conversion as an encounter with the love of God.

[11 : 58] So the person who is cold to God opens their heart to God's love and receives God's warm love and that's a conversion. But here in Acts chapter 9 we actually see a different angle on conversion or even a different model of conversion.

Paul doesn't have so much an encounter with the love of Jesus but with the authority of Jesus. Paul's conversion is a confrontation with the authority of Jesus as Lord as the one who sits at God's right hand.

Not every conversion will have a blinding light or a personal kind of conversation with Jesus but every conversion should have a confrontation with Jesus in his authority as Lord and a surrender of our lives to him as Lord.

Now some Christians argue that preaching the love of God in Jesus pressing the love of God is a more appropriate way or a more effective way of doing evangelism today.

Other Christians argue the opposite. They say pushing the love of God too hard actually is an accommodation to our 21st century sentimentalism and that's why we have conversions that are so kind of weak where there's no repentance.

[13 : 18] My own view friends is that we need to reflect the balance of the Bible the balance of the scriptures and possibly also we need to take into account the kind of person that we are evangelizing that we are sharing the gospel with.

Many a person will glaze over when you wax lyrical about God's love for them. They will just gloss over but the authority of Jesus confronted and presented to someone could connect with someone who knows that they shouldn't be running their own life that they shouldn't be living autonomously that they need to surrender to a greater authority than their own puffed up pride.

Saul is one who travelled to get letters of authority to hurt Christians. Now he meets the true authority of the Lord Jesus.

And I think biblically speaking the authority of God or the authority of Jesus is actually the foundation upon which that God's love is then placed. That God's love is great because he's God and he has great authority.

Friends, do you recognise the authority and power of the Lord Jesus in your life today? Have you had an encounter with the King of Kings and the Lord of Lords?

[14 : 45] Do you submit to it? Will you bend the knee every day to that authority? Will you turn from autonomy, living as an enemy of the authority of Jesus?

In short, friends, are you converted? Are you truly converted? Is today your day? As Paul submits to the authority of Jesus, his life is revolutionised.

The words of his conversion are words of rebuke, command, and also commission. There is a commission and we see part of it in verse 6. Jesus says, but get up, enter the city, and you'll be told what you are to do.

There's going to be a job for Paul to do. He's being commissioned to be a missionary in effect. Now, Paul is travelling with his P team, his persecution team, and they are kind of involved but kind of not in this conversion.

So they stand speechless, verse 7, hearing a voice but seeing no one. Now, the Greek word for voice and sound are the same.

[15 : 57] I think Luke is saying that they heard the sound of a voice but didn't actually discern what was being said, which is in effect how Paul describes it later in chapter 22.

These are people who Paul's co-persecutors are not really participants in the vision. But it's good they're there because Paul is knocked blind by the lordship of Jesus and they would have had to lead him to the city.

But it's not to say that this is just a private spiritual event because what is happening is going to be corroborated by others in the church, not least Ananias.

He's in Damascus and the Lord Jesus independently comes to him and says, here Ananias and Ananias answers, here I am Lord.

He's a devoted Christian. He's ready for service. The Lord said to him, verse 11, go up, get up, go to the street called Straight and at the house of Judas look for a man of Tarsus named Saul.

[17 : 04] At this moment he's praying and he has seen in his vision a man named Ananias come in and lay his hands on him so that he might regain his sight. The Lord Jesus, as always in Acts, is controlling everything and he's the main player, he's the main, it's the Acts of the Risen Lord Jesus and he's setting Paul up to be received into the Christian church in stages.

And Ananias is suspicious. Now I don't know whether this is understandable or not. Paul has a bad reputation. Ananias says, Lord I've heard from many about this man, what evil he has done to your saints, that he has authority to bind all who invoke your name.

Ananias in a sense is a Christian convert but he's actually not converted to the power of the Lord Jesus to save anyone. Jesus responds and gives us the full commission.

Verse 15, Go, for he is an instrument whom I have chosen. For what? To bring my name before Gentiles and kings and before the people of Israel.

I myself will show him how much he must suffer for my name. The protest of Ananias draws out Paul's commission that he's going to carry the name of Jesus as an evangelist, as an apostle, before the people of Israel, before kings and before Gentiles.

[18 : 38] And he will suffer for the name. And what Jesus says, what he speaks, happens. And so pretty much the second half of the book of Acts is exactly what Jesus just said.

Just as what Jesus says in Acts 1 verse 8 about you'll go to Judea, Samaria, ends of the earth. Just as that has happened in Acts, so will this happen just as Jesus said.

Now Ananias is converted now to the power of God because he comes and approaches Paul in verse 17, lays hands on him and says, brother Saul.

And so Ananias receives him as a brother in Christ. The Lord Jesus who appeared to you on your way here, on the way, has sent me so that you may regain your sight and be filled with the Holy Spirit.

And immediately scales fall from his eyes, his sight is restored, he's baptized and he eats and regains his strength. The one who was an enemy of the Christian church is now part of the Christian church.

[19 : 45] And it shows his repentance in that after three days the first thing he does is to be baptized and to be joined to this movement called the way.

And what happens in the rest of chapter 9, we won't go through it carefully, but Paul gets preaching. He obeys Jesus and confounds many Jews in the synagogues by preaching that Jesus is the Son of God, he is the Messiah, and he amazes and surprises people who know who he is, they know his background, and he powerfully convinces people of the lordship of Jesus.

And he does this for a fair while, verse 23 says, after some time had passed, the Jews plotted to kill him. This is probably the three years he talks about in Galatians chapter 1, verse 18, but after some time of preaching, Saul himself, the persecutor, becomes the persecuted, and he becomes a Christian outlaw with so many for his Christian faith.

And he escapes in a basket, not so much that he's obsessed with security, because he heads straight to Jerusalem where he's received into fellowship with the apostles.

At first, they're not keen on him, as one person has said, if Saul is at your prayer meeting, you pray with one eye open, but Barnabas, the son of encouragement, is kind of the bridge, and he brings Paul to the apostles and explains what has happened in his life.

[21 : 20] And in Jerusalem, Paul starts to suffer for his gospel preaching. And in verse 31 of chapter 9, we have one of Luke's wonderful summaries.

Meanwhile, the church throughout Judea, Galilee, and Samaria, had peace and was built up. Living in the fear of the Lord, and in the comfort of the Holy Spirit, it increased in numbers.

Now, I don't think persecution completely stopped, but there would have been a lull without their main leader, Saul, driving it. And it's a time where the Christian church throughout Judea, Galilee, and Samaria has a time of peace.

They live in the fear of the Lord, that is the worship, full reverence of the authority of Jesus at God's right hand, in the comfort of the Holy Spirit, and they increase in numbers.

It's a great time for the church. And of course, whenever Luke mentions geography, we're reminded of what Jesus said in Acts chapter 1, verse 8, you'll go to Judea, Samaria, and the ends of the earth.

[22 : 26] And so next we would expect, they've done Judea and Galilee, they've done Samaria, we would expect them to go to the ends of the earth. That's exactly what will happen next week when we look at Acts chapter 10 and the gospel going to Gentiles who are outside the covenant.

Friends, consider with me the wonderful converting grace of God, that the most hardened persecutor can be shown mercy, that the Lord Jesus can sovereignly invade someone's life and turn it around completely.

Jesus has that authority. He said it, I have all authority on heaven and earth has been given to me. This, friends, I think we see in Paul's life the great value of the doctrine of election, that God saves sinners by his own initiative.

Christians sometimes say, and this is sort of a half-truth, more half-wrong if you ask me, Christians say, God doesn't force anyone to believe. Well, I think he forced Paul.

He didn't stop and ask Paul, would he like to become a Christian? Gloriously and mercifully, the Lord Jesus appeared to Saul and was irresistible.

[23 : 47] God's election, God's grace is irresistible grace. People refuse to believe because they're stubborn rebels, but we can pray that God would smash their stubbornness by his spirit and make them born again.

Who do you know who is hardened to the gospel? Who do you know who you think they're beyond the gospel? There's no point even trying. Do you have people like that in your workplace?

They might be really kind of outrageous in their sin in whatever capacity you think, oh, they're just beyond the gospel. Friends, no one is beyond the gospel. We need to keep praying.

We need to be hopeful. We need to keep talking boldly to such people. I think experience shows in Paul and in church history that such people often make the best Christians because of what God does in their life.

God has a powerful gospel that is mighty to save, and he uses human instruments. Paul has a special role as an apostolic instrument, but I think we see in Acts God uses his church to preach the gospel.

[24 : 58] We need more faith, we need more holy expectation. There's a great verse about election later in Acts in chapter 13 48 where it says, when the Gentiles heard the gospel, they were glad, they honoured the word of the Lord, and all who were appointed for eternal life believed.

Isn't that a great promise? That in God's election we can have confidence, knowing that there's gold in them hills, and God will bring out that gold as we share the gospel.

Later in Acts chapter 18, Paul is discouraged it seems, in Corinth. Some have been converted, but he's also received abuse from the Jews in Corinth, and God appears to him in another vision and says, in effect, don't leave Corinth.

I know you want to leave, don't. Why? Because I have many people in this city. That is, God has many people who aren't yet saved, who he has chosen to be saved.

The doctrine of sovereign election is the driving force behind Paul's boldness, behind Paul's confidence in doing evangelism, and it should give us hopefulness as well.

[26 : 13] You should never give up praying for someone, even if you've been praying decades. Keep praying for God to pour out his mercy on those who seem most hardened to the gospel.

Nobody is hopeless, there is hope for everyone, under the powerful hand of the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ. Let's pray.

Lord God, we thank you for the miracle of the gospel preached and heard and believed. We thank you for the powerful miracle of the gospel in our own conversion, in our own lives.

We thank you for the miracle of the conversion of Paul. Father, we pray that you will give us confidence to keep promoting the gospel, to keep praying for the gospel to spread, to keep sharing the gospel, and to keep looking for the opportunities that you give us.

Give us encouragement, Lord, today as we thank you for what you've done in our church over the last year, over the gospel being proclaimed and heard by many, for the gospel taking root in the lives of many.

[27 : 24] And, Lord God, go with us and go before us with authority and power as we share the authority and lordship of Jesus with many. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.

Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.