

The Original Damascus Road

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[0 : 00] This is the AM service on July the 26th, 1998. The preacher is Paul Barker.

His sermon is entitled The Original Damascus Road and is from Acts chapter 9 verses 1 to 19.

O God, by the preaching of Paul, your apostle, you have caused the light of the gospel to shine throughout the world. Grant that as we remember his wonderful conversion, we may show ourselves thankful to you by following his teaching.

Through Jesus Christ, our Lord, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen. Please be seated.

And you may like to have open the passage on page 893 from Acts chapter 9. Over the last few weeks, we've been preaching through these early chapters of the Acts of the Apostles.

[1 : 13] There are many famous conversion stories of people who were not Christians, who by various means became Christians. John Wesley, 200 years ago, who found his heart strangely warmed as he heard a reading from the book of Romans.

Centuries earlier, Augustine, walking in a garden, heard over the fence somebody say, take up and read. He took up the Bible, read, and was converted to Christian faith.

C.S. Lewis, C.S. Lewis, this century, very reluctantly, being convinced of the truth of Christian faith and becoming the most reluctant convert to Christ.

But the most famous of all, without doubt, is the conversion of St. Paul. Probably the same year of the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

That is, within months of Jesus rising from the dead, St. Paul was converted on the road to Damascus. So famous was his conversion that we use terminology from it today.

[2 : 17] We talk of people who've seen the light. We talk of people having Damascus Road type experiences. Well, the person St. Paul was originally called Saul, an Aramaic name.

He changed his name, probably to the Latin version Paul, in order to become more acceptable to the non-Jewish people to whom he ministered in his later years. He himself was a Jew, devout, a Pharisee, very religious, and he was zealously anti-Christian.

Indeed, the words that describe his attitude to the Christian faith before his conversion liken him almost to an animal or beast. Back in chapter 8, verse 3, we're told that Saul was ravaging the church like a beast will ravage a dead animal or its prey or its meal.

In chapter 9, verse 21, after today's passage, when they hear that he's converted, they say, is not this the man who made havoc in Jerusalem? To make havoc, the word there is also like a beast will terrorise or destroy its prey.

And chapter 9 begins, today's reading begins, by saying, meanwhile, Saul, still breathing threats and murder. And the idea there, some suggest, is like an animal that is panting, its saliva dripping from the side of its mouth as it anticipates tearing up its animal prey.

[3 : 48] Well, that's what Saul was like, St. Paul was like, before he was a Christian. Indeed, so zealous was he that he wasn't content just to terrorise and destroy, imprison, even kill, Christians who were living in Jerusalem, but he wanted to go far and wide and find them.

And we know that when the persecution began by Saul and others in Jerusalem, many Christians fled and went to other towns in other areas. And it's perhaps for that reason that Saul decides to go to Damascus, the capital of modern and ancient Syria, and try and find Christians there.

So we read at the beginning of today's chapter 9, meanwhile, Saul, still breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord, went to the high priest, that is the most senior Jewish person in Jerusalem, which was then under Roman rule, of course, and asked him for letters to the synagogues at Damascus, so that if he found any who belonged to the way, men or women, he might bring them bound to Jerusalem.

The letters were of introduction and would give him authority to take away any converted Jews to the Christian faith. It's called here the way in verse 2. Probably the most early description of the Christians.

The name Christian itself wasn't used for some years later. But the way probably refers to Jesus' own statement when he said in John 14, I am the way, the truth, and the life.

[5 : 16] And so from its earliest days, Christians were those who were known as those belonging to the way, the way of Jesus Christ. Damascus was 240 kilometres from Jerusalem, a full week's journey on foot.

Shows the extent of his zeal to go that far to try and persecute the Christian people. Now we have to remember in the story of Saul's conversion that this is not the story of somebody who is searching for Christian truth.

It is not the story of somebody who's got great doubts trying to discover the truth about Jesus Christ. This is the story of a vehement opponent.

This is the story of somebody who is absolutely convinced that Christian things were heretical and wrong and those who espouse them ought to be locked up or killed.

Psychologically, some suggest, like Jung, that where there is fanaticism it is underneath secret doubts. Now that may or may not be true of St Paul but what happened to Saul on the road to Damascus is not a psychological crisis but rather the direct intervention of God in his life.

[6 : 39] It wasn't Saul walking to Damascus with great doubts plaguing him about his own thinking but rather Saul going convinced of the truth of his own ideas and being found by God's direct intervention to be wrong.

Some people say that St Paul must have been an epileptic because on the way he had an epileptic fit that fit was accompanied by things like hallucinations and visions and dreams and therefore for this illness and so on he suddenly changed his mind about where he stood.

Well there's nothing in the passage that suggests that. Indeed this passage is so important that it's repeated three times in the course of the Acts of the Apostles and nowhere in Paul's own letters does he suggest any sort of illness like that that's triggered this sort of change of religious idea.

Some people say that he was suffering from a nervous breakdown or exhaustion because he was so intent on killing Christians but again there's nothing that suggests that at all. but even today there are those who dismiss people's Christian conversion as being a psychological problem or a statement of illness or trouble or a phase that you're going through like many parents tell their converted children it's just a phase dear you'll grow out of it when you get a bit older as I was told I haven't yet.

Some people dismiss the Billy Grahams of this world as people who just manipulate or brainwash or try and bring about some emotional fervour. In any age true Christian conversion is an act of God and no doubt from time to time there are spurious conversions but St. Paul's like many of ours like many faithful Christians in the years gone by his conversion was an act of a divine almighty God and the God who converted Paul is a God who still converts well St. Paul was going along and approaching Damascus and suddenly a light from heaven flashed around him light is often a symbol of God's presence in the Bible Moses on Mount Sinai had bright lights shining when God was there and so on this light was brighter than the midday sun we're told later in the

[9 : 06]

Acts of the Apostles that this happened about midday the time of the brightest sun assuming it was a sunny day unlike here this blinding light of St. Paul meant that he was unable to see so often when there is blinding light of God's presence people cannot see God there is a thinking in the Old Testament that you cannot see God and live St. Paul sees real light not a vision in the sense that it's something just internal but real light his companions saw it as well it's not a hallucination it's not a mirage of somebody who's desperately thirsty in the desert and seeing some fictitious mirage or oasis ahead this is real light it was really there it was a real act of God later on Saul acknowledges that what he saw was Jesus Christ verse 17 Ananias had heard about Jesus who appeared to you on the way and in verse 27 of the same chapter we read that they describe for them how on the road he had seen the Lord so this dazzling light that left

St. Paul blinded was a vision of Jesus Christ indescribable because Jesus is God but still nonetheless a vision of the risen and ascended Lord Jesus Christ such a vision would demonstrate to Saul that Jesus lives the resurrection is real the cross wasn't the end of this man's life but he lives beyond the grave and the testimony of those who no doubt Saul has already heard as like Peter like Stephen Jesus lives he reigns he's ascended he's in heaven what a radical thing for Saul to see when he's been so convinced of the fiction or the fiction rather of the resurrection there's a sense of appropriateness in the way Saul's converted here it's almost ironical or humorous remember that Saul's first mention back in chapters 7 and 8 Stephen is preaching and his preaching leads to his death by stoning and Saul is there approving of his

Stephen's death and minding the clothes of those who are stoning him and the thrust of Stephen's speech as you've heard preached in recent weeks was that God has appeared throughout the ages to his people but often in places outside where you would expect so each time in Stephen's speech when God appears it's outside the land and now here for Saul outside the land where you'd expect God to appear just near Damascus in Syria God appears Jesus in fact appears to Saul demonstrating the truth of what Stephen had said and the wrongness of Saul and his compatriots actions but more than that at the end of Stephen's speech Stephen looks up and he sees the risen and ascended Jesus and it was that above anything that provoked his hearers to the rage of stoning him to death how ironic then that Saul should see the same thing that he also should see the risen and ascended

Lord Jesus imagine his feelings of guilt when he realised the folly of what he'd done to Stephen when he realised that Jesus is alive and does reign in heaven and he appeared to Saul as well as to Stephen not only does Saul see light but he hears a voice verse 4 we're told he fell to the ground and he heard a voice saying to him Saul Saul why do you persecute me like light heavenly voices are an indication of God's presence here it's not God the Father it's Jesus Christ this passage clearly assumes that Jesus is divine is God to be worshipped and Jesus words to Saul on this road are why do you persecute me not why do you persecute Christians why do you persecute those who follow the way but why do you persecute me how closely identified then are

Christians to Christ this is the heavenly head speaking on behalf of the earthly body saying you persecute me that's what Saul's been doing that's what his friends have been doing persecuting Jesus Christ himself and the same today when people persecute the church they're really persecuting Jesus all over again as Jesus said would happen if they persecute me know that if they persecute you know that they've persecuted me first he said to his followers Jesus words to Saul are personal words he doesn't just say why do you persecute me he says Saul Saul why do you persecute me speaking we're told later in Aramaic Saul's own language this is an intelligible word it's not gobbledygook he doesn't hear some sort of strange speaking that he doesn't understand and can't comprehend he doesn't need an interpreter or a translator Saul clearly sees and clearly hears and understands what's going on you see

[14 : 40] Christian conversion is not a bypassing of the mind as some people despise it to be but rather it's something that appeals to the mind it appeals to the conscience it appeals to reason and rational thinking Jesus asks a question why he asks Saul to engage his mind to think about what he's doing and what's going on but notice that Jesus asks a question he doesn't just make a statement we might expect Jesus to say stop persecuting me to issue a command we might expect him to say I'm condemning you or judging you or sending you to hell for persecuting me but no Jesus asks a question he opens up the opportunity for a response he invites Saul to explain himself defend himself or confess his wrongdoing and repent God's always like that isn't he way back at the beginning of the

Bible when Adam and Eve eat of the prohibited fruit the first thing that God says to them is not stop doing it or I'm about to kill you but he asks them a question where are you he elicits a response he gives them an opportunity to confess the same in Genesis 4 when he deals with Cain who kills Abel you see God's grace is at work here inviting a response to a question inviting a confession inviting an explanation the first word you see is not a word of condemnation even to this chief of sinners St Paul Saul's response to the question is to say who are you Lord who are you sir probably is what he means by that the word Lord has got a wide range of meaning in part and probably in its context here it's who are you sir he recognises a person of some authority or respect sometimes the word Lord is more loaded with meaning to mean the Lord Jesus Christ or God himself in the Old Testament but probably here Saul has not quite got that far in identifying

Jesus as the Lord God Jesus reply in verse 5 is I am Jesus whom you are persecuting it's a personal introduction Saul greetings I am Jesus is the sort of context by this you see Christian conversion is not about knowledge and facts about Jesus it's about knowing him about a relationship with him Saul I am Jesus welcome is the sort of thrust of what Jesus is saying here and for any Christian in any age it's the same if we are converted Christian person that is if we're a Christian person we have a relationship with Jesus Christ who has said to us I am Jesus welcome and we have responded in a relationship with Jesus Christ at the heart of Saul's conversion you see is the initiative of God himself it's not Saul's achievement it's not his genius it's not his initiative he doesn't go looking to be converted in fact the opposite but God has taken a divine intervention into his life and it's the same with any conversion in any age it is

God's work we may think to an extent well yes I decided to be a Christian or I decided to follow Jesus or I was brought up to follow Jesus but in the end the bottom line is that God has converted us it is God who has made his light to shine in our hearts as Paul himself says in 2 Corinthians later on so when we say that Saul has seen the light it's not his genius or his ability but rather it's God who has made his light to shine and Saul so to respond well after this appearance of Jesus on the road to Damascus Saul is blinded and remains blinded by the light Jesus commands him in verse 6 to get up and enter the city and you will be told what you're to do the men who were travelling with Saul stood speechless they'd heard the voice but they hadn't seen Jesus they were puzzled about what's going on and no doubt puzzled why Saul is blind Saul got up from the ground and though his eyes were open he could see nothing so his friends with him led him by the hand and brought him into

Damascus very ironical because Saul was expecting to arrive in Damascus in a blaze of rage and ravaging the church to go storming about from synagogue to synagogue bringing out all the Christians and binding them up and hoisting them off into Jerusalem as some sort of train of captives but no he enters Damascus humiliated and humbled blind and having to be led by his hand by his friends for three days he was without sight and neither ate nor drank now in Damascus his reputation had gone before him no doubt Christians were there purely because of his persecution back in Jerusalem they'd fled Jerusalem and got to Damascus thinking they were safe there may well have been other Christians in Damascus who'd already been there anyway people who'd been there on the day of Pentecost for we know that Christians or Jews had come to Jerusalem on the day of Pentecost for the feast and been converted several thousand of them and then presumably they'd gone back to their own towns and cities wherever they were from so for various reasons there were Christians already within a year of the resurrection in Damascus the capital of Syria now God takes the initiative with them as well not to convert them they're already converted but rather to bring about the integration of this converted

[20 : 34] Saul the ex-enemy of Christ into the church of Christ in Damascus so God for whatever reason chooses this chap called Ananias we know nothing about him apart from what's here there was a disciple in Damascus called Ananias the word disciple just means a follower of Jesus the Lord said to him in a vision just as Saul had had a vision so too Ananias and just as Saul was addressed personally so is Ananias Jesus said Ananias and he answered here I am Lord Saul had to ask who are you Lord but Ananias knew he was a Christian the Lord said to him get up and go to the street called Straight a street that's still in Damascus today and at the house of Judas look for a man of Tarsus named Saul at this moment he's praying I'd love to know what he was praying get me my sight back maybe he's praying for forgiveness Christ I recognize the folly of my persecution maybe he's praying praise to Christ for showing him the light and bringing him to the truth of the gospel

Saul is praying and he's seen in a vision another vision a man named Ananias come in and lay his hands on him so that he might regain his sight two visions one for Saul to tell him that Ananias is coming another to Ananias to tell him to go Ananias is afraid of Saul who wouldn't be he's the chief persecutor of Christian people he's the raging lion from Jerusalem he's the one who's come to ravage the Christians why should Ananias go to him into the very lion's lair but Jesus overrules Ananias' fears Ananias has said Lord I've heard from many about this man how much evil he has done to your saints in Jerusalem and here he has authority from the chief priest to bind all who invoke your name but Jesus overrules and says go for he is an instrument whom

I have chosen to bring my name before Gentiles kings and before the people of Israel three groups of people the Gentiles are listed first in the list because that's Paul's priority in his mission which the rest of the Acts of the Apostles tells us about but Paul's mission was not only to Gentiles to kings and also to the people of Israel in fact they were the people he went to first at every town Paul went to he went to the synagogue first to the Jews to tell them that the Messiah had come and in most of those places some Jews were converted and then Paul would spread the gospel to the Gentiles in the town as well and a church would be established of Jews and Gentiles together worshipping Jesus Christ by the time we get to the end of the Acts of the Apostles we see that Saul and Paul has done all three of the things he's charged to do here he's gone to the people of Israel he's gone to the Gentiles and he's in Rome before the emperor to the kings of the nations indeed he's already been to the governors and kings back in

Caesarea in Israel but more than that not only is Saul chosen for the task of the gospel to the world he's also chosen we're told in verse 16 to suffer I myself will show him how much he must suffer for the sake of my name the one who caused other Christians to suffer is himself now called to suffer for Christ so often preaching of the gospel today promises too much it promises us a good and healthy or prosperous life free from all pains and troubles because Jesus takes them away but the gospel never promises that in this life the gospel hints at the fact that Christians of any age in any place may suffer many are called to suffer but all Christians are called to be prepared to suffer for the sake of Christ who himself of course suffered uniquely on the cross for us by the time we read to the end of the Acts of the Apostles we see that St.

Paul or Saul has been suffering been beaten many times beaten imprisoned and now facing possible death in Rome where tradition has it he was martyred in the 60s AD Ananias obeys the vision he went and entered the house he laid his hands on Saul and said brother Saul what a words of great compassion they are to an ex-enemy of Christ not just Saul but brother Saul because Saul's converted he belongs to the family of Christ and therefore for any Christian he is now a brother for one who is reconciled to Jesus Christ is reconciled to Christian people sadly so often the church does not reflect that sadly so often today churches are torn apart by division or enmity but here is the chief of enemies of the church just newly converted and Ananias extends a hand of

[26 : 09] Christian fellowship to him and says brother Saul what grace he exercised there what grace we ought always to exercise within Christian fellowship we are brothers and sisters together if we are Christian people if we are reconciled to Christ we must be reconciled to each other as well brother Saul the Lord Jesus who appeared to you on your way here has sent me so that you may regain your sight and be filled with the Holy Spirit and immediately something like scales fell from his eyes his sight was restored he got up was baptized and after taking some food regained his strength God's grace has converted Saul the chief of sinners the enemy of the church the one who is to become the greatest missionary of the church well some points of conclusion firstly

Saul's conversion ought to ease our own doubts about the Christian faith if one who is so convinced of its stupidity and folly can be converted then that ought to encourage us to realize the truth of the Christian claims the truth of the resurrection the truth of the ascended and reigning Lord Jesus Christ the truth of the power of God to change lives for eternity Saul lived within a year of the resurrection converted within a year of the resurrection the distance we have of nearly 2,000 years ought not to trouble us if one who was there on the spot who knew and heard people who knew and walked with Jesus is now converted from being an extreme enemy that ought to encourage us to see the truth of the Christian claim but more than that Saul's conversion should allay our concerns of our own unworthiness to be Christians many times people are troubled by thinking well I just don't think I'm good enough or worthy enough for God but if

Saul could become a Christian a murderer having been a murderer then the same for all of us none of us is too unworthy to become a Christian God's grace if it can extend to Saul can extend to anybody so don't be troubled by thinking I'm not good enough to be a Christian goodness is not the issue grace is and grace is great enough to save even Saul and therefore us thirdly we need to recognise that Saul's own conversion is not necessarily a model of how anybody will be converted not all Christians have Damascus road type experiences not all see literally blinding light or see a vision of Jesus or hear out loud his voice what matters is that we are converted not how what matters is that we are walking in a relationship with Jesus serving him if that is true then we are converted no matter what past experience we have or have not had some Christians rest on their past experiences they've had an experience that's radically changed them or converted them and they think they've made it

St Paul never thought that what matters is that we keep on in our discipleship and following Jesus some Christians on the other hand are anxious because they've not had that sort of conversion experience sometimes people have grown up in Christian families for them it seems that Christianity is just a natural thing the absence of experience does not necessarily mean a lack of conversion but on the other hand we must remember that any person who's a Christian is so personally because of an act of God in their life not because of parents or grandparents or uncles or aunts or godparents but because God has acted in their life and brought them to faith and relationship with Jesus are you a converted person because all Christians are converted are you converted are you one on whom God has acted to change your heart to bring you into relationship with Jesus

Christ if you are walking with him relating with him serving him then that is evidence of a conversion it's not the experience of the past that matters so much as the current discipleship of Jesus God still converts it's not just psychology not just a natural choice it is God's act in our life that brings about the existence of Christian people but finally Saul's conversion ought to be a great encouragement to us in our own preaching of the gospel sometimes we think that so and so is too far away from God ever to become a Christian well if Saul could be converted anybody can so there's no excuse ever for us to give up praying for someone to give up sharing our faith with them to give up telling them the truth about God Saul's conversion ought to give us boldness and courage because God's power and grace is big enough for anybody even Saul and therefore anybody we know as well so let me encourage you from this story to be bold and faithful in sharing the gospel with your friends or family or neighbors whoever you know who is not a

[32 : 07] Christian person because God's grace and power is big enough even for them that's why we're having a mission in September to provide extra opportunities to invite friends or families to hear the gospel so that God may convert them to become followers of Jesus like Saul became St Paul let's pray our God we thank you that in your grace and power you change Saul from being an enemy of Christ into being a faithful witness of him even to death we pray that you will encourage us in our own faith and relationship with Jesus and especially also in our witness to Jesus to those who are not yet Christian we pray our God that you will exercise the same grace and power in their lives as you did in Saul's and in ours to bring many more into your kingdom for Christ's sake

Amen Amen