

# Truth for Today

The Bible teaching radio programme

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## Lessons from Bible Journeys: Saul's conversion - Jerusalem to Damascus Acts 9:1-31

Good morning. Today we are going to look at the most remarkable conversion in the New Testament. People become Christians in different ways. Sometimes we trust in Christ instantaneously after hearing the Gospel for the first time. More often, by a series of events, we are gradually led to trust the Lord Jesus. Christians also come from a variety of backgrounds. Some people come to a faith in Christ through growing up in Christian homes whilst others are saved from the most dreadful circumstances. In the New Testament it took an earthquake to lead the Philippian jailor to Christ in Acts 16:25-34. I knew a man who was led to Christ by a chimney falling through a roof! But I cannot think of anyone else whose heart was so hard that Jesus had to personally confront his unbelief.

Saul's history in the book of Acts begins when Stephen, the first Christian martyr, was stoned to death (Acts 7:54-60). The rage and violence of a mob is one of the most disturbing revelations of what people are capable of doing to their fellow human beings. Saul stood by as Stephen was stoned to death by a crowd blinded to the truth of his powerful message. Stephen had challenged his hearers about their rejection of their own Messiah and they reacted in the most violent way. *"When they heard these things they were cut to the heart, and they gnashed at him with their teeth. But he, being full of the Holy Spirit, gazed into heaven and saw the glory of God, and Jesus standing at the right hand of God, and said, 'Look! I see the heavens opened and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God!'"* Then they cried out with a loud voice, stopped their ears, and ran at him with one accord; and they cast him out of the city and stoned him. And the witnesses laid down their clothes at the feet of a young man named Saul. And they stoned Stephen as he was calling on God and saying, *'Lord Jesus, receive my spirit.'* Then he knelt down and cried out with a loud voice, *'Lord, do not charge them with this sin.'* And when he had said this, he fell asleep" (Acts 7:54-60).

Stephen's death is a remarkable death because of the way it demonstrates the characteristics of the Saviour he so faithfully served. His death bore the similarities of Christ's crucifixion. Like his Saviour he was unjustly put to death. Jesus spoke seven times from the cross (Luke 23:34; Luke 23:43; John 19:26-27; Matthew 27:46 [see Mark 15:34] John 19:28; John 19:29-30; Luke 23:46). His final words were, *"Father, into Your hands I commit My spirit"* (Luke 23:46). Stephen prays, *"Lord Jesus, receive my spirit."* Jesus' first words from the cross were, *"Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they do"* (Luke 22:34). Stephen's last words were, *"Lord, do not charge them with this sin."* The Lord Jesus also said: *"Therefore My Father loves Me, because I lay down My life that I may take it again. No one takes it from Me, but I lay it down of Myself. I have power to lay it down, and I have power to take it again. This command I have received from My Father"* (John 10:17-18).

It is striking that Stephen is not described as being killed by an out of control vicious mob, but as falling asleep - *"Precious in the sight of the Lord is the death of His saints"* (Psalm 116:15).

But the death of this wonderfully brave and gracious man, who sought only the blessing of his people, appeared to have no effect on the young Saul of Tarsus. If anything, the experience marked the beginning of his unrelenting hatred and persecution of the followers of Christ. This is demonstrated by the opening words of Acts 9: *"Then Saul, still breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord, went to the high priest and asked letters from him to the synagogues of Damascus, so that if he found any who were of the Way, whether men or women, he might bring them bound to Jerusalem"* (Acts 9:1-2).

Saul was on a mission to completely destroy the Church of Christ. The first part of this mission began in Jerusalem and, as we see in Acts 9:1-2, it was about to move into Syria. It is worth noting that the man who had such missionary zeal for the phased destruction of the Lord's people was about to be transformed into Christ's greatest missionary. Armed with authority from the High Priest everything was in place for his march on the synagogues of Damascus to root out Christians (Acts 9:1-2). In the letters of authority (Acts 9:2) Paul had to carry out this mission there was the expression, *"any who were of the Way."* Paul thought he was dealing with a heretical movement but he was to discover *"the Way"* was not a cult, but a Person. He was going to be confronted by the One who was, *"the Way, the Truth and the Life"* (John 14:6). *"As he journeyed he came near Damascus, and suddenly a light shone around him from heaven. Then he fell to the ground, and heard a voice saying to him, 'Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting Me?' And he said, 'Who are You, Lord?' Then the Lord said, 'I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting. It is hard for you to kick against the goads'"* (Acts 9:3-5).

You can imagine Saul, a proud young Jew, at the head of his forces approaching the city of Damascus eager to start purging its synagogues of Christians. Then suddenly a light from heaven shines around him. Divine love and grace always shines on individuals. Normally, it is in less dramatic circumstances, but, nevertheless, God reaches out to us in a personal way. A little while ago I was listening to Professor Dawkins speaking in a university debate. He quoted from Psalm 19:1, *"The heavens declare the glory of God; And the firmament shows His handiwork."* Then he added that this was a God he could believe in, all-powerful and majestic. What he could not believe in was a God who was interested in puny human beings and their insignificant lives. He then went to describe in a most striking way the complexity of the human eye. His description reinforced to me that God's power is not simply displayed in the vastness of the universe but in His ability to create the tiniest and most complex of creatures. For all our knowledge of outer space we have yet to discover in the material universe anything approaching the extraordinary complexity of life on earth.

- To be able create both what is immense and also what is tiny demonstrates the true power of God.
- To be able to communicate with man demonstrates the grace of God.
- To be able to enter His own creation to bring about the salvation of mankind demonstrates the love of God.

Saul never knew Christ on earth but, in our passage, he sees the glorified Christ in heaven. The light of Christ's presence which shone upon Saul both blinded him and brought him to his knees. Yet amidst this great power Saul discovered a Saviour God who is so great that he not only observes every human action from heaven but also feels the suffering of his people. You will remember Moses had a similar revelation whilst observing the Burning Bush: *"And the LORD said: 'I have surely seen the oppression of My people who are in Egypt, and have heard their cry because of their taskmasters, for I know their sorrows. So I have come down to deliver them out of the hand of the Egyptians, and to bring them up from that land to a good and large land, to a land flowing with milk and honey'"* (Exodus 3:7-8).

The Saviour's presence strips away all Saul's pride and arrogance and, at the same time, the Saviour's words express His tender heart. But Jesus also has something to say about Saul's state of soul because He says to him, *"It is hard for you to kick against the goads"* (Acts 9:5). I think the Lord Jesus was explaining to Saul that he knew that the witness of His suffering people, from Stephen onwards, had an effect upon Saul. He had resisted their gentle loving testimony but nevertheless it had stung his conscience. Saul's true spiritual condition was exposed: *"So he, trembling and astonished, said, 'Lord, what do You want me to do?' Then the Lord said to him, 'Arise and go into the city, and you will be told what you must do.' And the men who journeyed with him stood speechless, hearing a voice but seeing no one. Then Saul arose from the ground, and when his eyes were opened he saw no one. But they led him by the hand and brought him into Damascus. And he was three days without sight, and neither ate nor drank"* (Acts 9:7-9),

Saul, in spite of his utter weakness, immediately asks the Lord what He wants him to do (Acts 9:6). It is striking that the Lord Jesus does not reveal His will to him straight away, but allows him time to wait and reflect. Sometimes the Lord does not want us to rush headlong into new actions and directions. It is so important to reflect and, in Old Testament terms, to wait on the Lord. We can be too anxious to act when what is needed is stillness - *"Be still and know that I am God"* (Psalm 46:10).

I think the next way in which the Lord communicates with Saul is very beautiful. Saul had seen the Lord Jesus in all the glory of His resurrection. It was something he never forgot and which carried him forward throughout the rest of his life. As we shall see, he refers to this experience on several occasions. But now the Lord chooses one of His people who would have, in all probability, suffered and possibly died at the hands of Saul, to reveal to Saul his new life in Christ: *"Now there was a certain disciple at Damascus named Ananias; and to him the Lord said in a vision, 'Ananias.' And he said, 'Here I am, Lord.' So the Lord said to him, 'Arise and go to the street called Straight, and inquire at the house of Judas for one called Saul of Tarsus, for behold, he is praying. And in a vision he has seen a man named Ananias coming in and putting his hand on him, so that he might receive his sight.' Then Ananias answered, 'Lord, I have heard from many about this man, how much harm he has done to Your saints in Jerusalem. And here he has authority from the chief priests to bind all who call on Your name.' But the Lord said to him, 'Go, for he is a chosen vessel of Mine to bear My name before Gentiles, kings, and the children of Israel. For I will show him how many things he must suffer for My name's sake'"* (Acts 9:10-16).

The word of God always amazes me. I can never get over the ways in which the Spirit of God reveals the supernatural alongside the ordinary. The Son of God had appeared from heaven outside of Damascus. Now the Lord speaks to Ananias and tells him the address of where Saul is staying. This interaction of dimensions is profound. When Yuri Gagarin became the first man to travel into space it is reported he said he saw no angels. Today we are bombarded by a belief that the observed material world is all there is. Yet such a high proportion of modern cinema and literature is devoted to the supernatural and science fiction. Furthermore the powers described in these works are quite extraordinary and imaginative. Yet, strangely, people refuse to accept even the possibility of a Creator God with the power to intervene supernaturally in His own creation. The Book of Acts, as in today's passage, describes

examples of such events blended with the ordinary lives of Christians such as Ananias.

Ananias had every reason to avoid contact with Saul (see Acts 9:13-14). But the Lord explains to his alarmed disciple how he was going to transform the destroyer of the Church into the Apostle Paul who would work the hardest to build the Church of Christ. Ananias' simple obedience should not be overlooked. I think it cost him a lot to go and visit Saul; it was an act of faith: *"And Ananias went his way and entered the house; and laying his hands on him he said, 'Brother Saul, the Lord Jesus, who appeared to you on the road as you came, has sent me that you may receive your sight and be filled with the Holy Spirit.' Immediately there fell from his eyes something like scales, and he received his sight at once; and he arose and was baptized. So when he had received food, he was strengthened. Then Saul spent some days with the disciples at Damascus"* (Acts 9:17-19).

It is touching to know that the first words Saul heard from one the people he intended to capture and drag to Jerusalem for punishment was, *"Brother Saul"* (Acts 9:17). Ananias instead of being imprisoned by Paul is the one through whom Saul is freed from blindness and receives the blessing of the Holy Spirit. I suspect also that Ananias was the brother who baptized him. What follows is equally remarkable. Saul after eating and building up his strength is introduced to the disciples in Damascus and has several days of fellowship with them. I don't know who was most surprised, Saul or his new found friends that the greatest persecutor of Christians was now himself a Christian.

On a practical level, this demonstrates to us that the Lord Jesus is able to transform the greatest enemies and opponents of Christianity into men and women of God. Perhaps we need to pray more that the Lord will intervene in the lives of those people we think it is impossible to lead to Christ. And perhaps we need to start praying to together today for those people we know in such circumstances.

The development of Saul as a believer is very important. He was saved by the Lord Jesus. He understood his sins and reflected on his actions. He was healed of his blindness and filled with the Spirit of God. Then he was baptized and introduced to the fellowship of the Lord's people. All these experiences equipped him for service: *"Immediately he preached the Christ in the synagogues, that He is the Son of God. Then all who heard were amazed, and said, 'Is this not he who destroyed those who called on this name in Jerusalem, and has come here for that purpose, so that he might bring them bound to the chief priests?' But Saul increased all the more in strength, and confounded the Jews who dwelt in Damascus, proving that this Jesus is the Christ"* (Acts 9:21-22).

It is astonishing that Saul visits the very synagogues to intended to purge of Christians to witness to the reality of the risen Christ. Notice that the focus of Saul's service is the Person of Christ. He preached Christ and he proved from the word of God that Jesus is the Christ. His own learning and knowledge of the Scriptures had been transformed by meeting the Person they testified about. As a result of this preaching the persecutor becomes the persecuted: *"Now after many days were past, the Jews plotted to kill him. But their plot became known to Saul. And they watched the gates day and night, to kill him. Then the disciples took him by night and let him down through the wall in a large basket"* (Acts 9:23-25).

Saul had ridden to Damascus at the head of a force determined to rid the city of Christians. He finds himself leaving it in a basket because he is a Christian. I have no doubt there was never a more joyful escapee.

When Saul arrived in Jerusalem the first thing he did was to find Christian fellowship: *"And when Saul had come to Jerusalem, he tried to join the disciples; but they were all afraid of him, and did not believe that he was a disciple. But Barnabas took him and brought him to the apostles. And he declared to them how he had seen the Lord on the road, and that He had spoken to him, and how he had preached boldly at Damascus in the name of Jesus. So he was with them at Jerusalem, coming in and going out. And he spoke boldly in the name of the Lord Jesus and disputed against the Hellenists, but they attempted to kill him. When the brethren found out, they brought him down to Caesarea and sent him out to Tarsus"* (Acts 9:26-30).

Just like Ananias, the disciples in Jerusalem were very afraid of Saul. They knew many of their fellow believers in the city had suffered at the hands of Saul. His pedigree as an enemy of the church was well known. It is at this point Barnabas takes Saul and brings him to the Apostles (Acts 9:27). Barnabas is wonderful example of a pastor and became the great friend of the Apostle Paul. He was big hearted man described later, by the Spirit of God, in Acts 11:24 as: *"a good man, full of the Holy Spirit and of faith."*

We all need good Christian friends who understand us, care for us, see our potential and help us to find our place in the Christian fellowship. Because of Barnabas, Saul is received into the fellowship in the Church at Jerusalem. He continued his work preaching Christ in the very city his persecution of Church of Christ began. This work continued until the man who watched over the death of Stephen became the target of assassination himself. The people of God, who not long before were the targets of Saul's hatred, become his protectors from those who wanted to kill him. They ensure his safe conduct to his hometown of Tarsus (Acts 9:30). *"By this all will know that you are My disciples, if you have love for one another"* (John 13:35).

Acts 9 began with the Saul still breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord (Acts 9:31). It ends with Saul safely protected from danger by the people he sought to destroy (Acts 9:31). Furthermore, the Lord Jesus, who felt in heaven the sufferings of His people on earth, ensures the churches enjoyed a period of peace and spiritually prosperity: *"Then the churches throughout all Judea, Galilee, and Samaria had peace and were edified. And walking in the fear of the Lord and in the comfort of the Holy Spirit, they were multiplied"* (Acts 9:31).

Saul's conversion is recorded three times in the Book of Acts.

1. In today's passage in Acts 9:3-4: *"As he journeyed he came near Damascus, and suddenly a light shone around him from heaven. Then he fell to the ground, and heard a voice saying to him, 'Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting Me?'"*
2. When Paul addressed the crowd in Acts 22:6-7: *"Now it happened, as I journeyed and came near Damascus at about noon, suddenly a great light from heaven shone around me. And I fell to the ground and heard a voice saying to me, 'Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting Me?'"*; and finally
3. Paul recounts His Conversion before King Agrippa in Acts 26:12-14: *"While thus occupied, as I journeyed to Damascus with authority and commission from the chief priests, at midday, O king, along the road I saw a light from heaven, brighter than the sun, shining around me and those who journeyed with me. And when we all had fallen to the ground, I heard a voice speaking to me and saying in the Hebrew language, 'Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting Me? It is hard for you to kick against the goads.'"*

Notice the light gets brighter on each occasion: (1) *"a light shone"*; (2) *"a great light from heaven"* and last of all; (3) *"light from heaven, brighter than the sun."*

Now let's compare these verses to the three occasions Paul himself as a person.

In 1 Corinthians 15:8-9 he writes: *"Then last of all He was seen by me also, as by one born out of due time. For I am the least of the apostles, who am not worthy to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God."*

In Ephesians 3:8-9 he writes: *"To me, who am less than the least of all the saints, this grace was given, that I should preach among the Gentiles the unsearchable riches of Christ, and to make all see what is the fellowship of the mystery, which from the beginning of the ages has been hidden in God who created all things through Jesus Christ."*

Finally in 1 Timothy 1:14-16 he writes: *"And the grace of our Lord was exceedingly abundant, with faith and love which are in Christ Jesus. This is a faithful saying and worthy of all acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, of whom I am chief."*

The features of Saul's remarkable conversion remained indelibly written on the life of this dear servant of God. Throughout the life of the Apostle Paul until he himself was martyred, the glory of Christ increased in his heart and a deep sense of humility marked his service and made him so Christlike.

I have been a Christian for fifty years and this morning I am asking myself two questions:

1. How much has the glory of the risen Saviour increased in my heart and through my life?; and
2. How much is my life marked by the true humility that comes from knowing, *"the Son of God who loved me and gave Himself for me"* (see Galatians 2:20)?

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