

Saul Meets Jesus

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[0 : 00] Well, again, let me welcome you this morning. I am, I've been loving this series in Acts because it's just, it's the kind of thing that we have to come back to again and again and again as we think about what it means to be the church.

And after this past year, I think it's just become clear to all of us that we need to be reminded why we're here, what we're here to do. And so for that reason, we're looking at this text.

The idea being that as we remember what the early church was like, the role they played in Roman society, we can get clarity on what we're called to be like in D.C. society. And as we look at the future of our church in D.C., one of the things that we are praying for, one of the things that I'm praying for most is to see more adult conversions, is to see more older children and adults, either people who have left the faith, people who've never been exposed to the faith, coming in, falling in love with Jesus, giving their lives to Jesus and being baptized.

And that's, I feel like God has just put that in my heart and I'm just praying and praying and praying to see that in the years to come. Now, I know that that statement probably makes a lot of people feel uncomfortable.

And it makes non-Christians feel comfortable. And some of you are here and you're not Christians and you're like, man, this is the absolute wrong Sunday to be here. But there are a lot of Christians actually, maybe even more Christians than non-Christians, who get really uncomfortable when we talk about adult conversions.

[1 : 41] Because that whole idea of sharing your faith, convincing somebody else to believe what you believe, is very taboo in our society. It's just one of the things that civil people don't do in our society.

My sense of why we get so uncomfortable is that, at least in part, we have a lot of misconceptions about conversion. And I think that Christians and non-Christians alike have a lot of misconceptions about Christian conversion, what it is and what it's not.

And so I want to clear up some of those misconceptions this morning by looking at, hands down, the most famous Christian conversion in all of history, which is the conversion of Saul, the persecutor of Christians, to Paul, the apostle who wrote many of the letters of the New Testament. We're going to be looking primarily at the passage in Acts 9 that I read, but we're also going to look a little bit at Acts 22 and Acts 26, where we see further retellings of his conversion story.

And then we're going to draw from some of his letters as well and try to understand what conversion is and what it's not. And there are a lot of details that are unique to Paul's conversion.

[2 : 52] We're not going to focus on those as much. What we're going to do is to draw out three features of Paul's conversion that I think would apply to any conversion out there. So let's, with that in mind, ask the Lord to guide us, and then we'll open God's word together.

Lord, we thank you for your word. And as we will see today, your word, your gospel has its own power. It doesn't depend on our rhetoric, our force of persuasion.

It doesn't depend on our production value. Somehow your word, your gospel, goes out from you, accomplishes all that you intend for it to accomplish in the power of your spirit in ways that are sometimes in spite of us.

And Lord, I pray for myself and for us that you would use your word to accomplish your will in us, even if it has to be in spite of us, in spite of me.

And I pray this for your glory, that your name would be lifted above all others. In Jesus' name, amen. So the first thing we see as we look at Paul's story, his conversion, one of the things that I think is very clear in this text from the outset is that conversion begins not with us, but with God.

[4 : 13] It begins not with us, but with God. Luke opens by telling us three things in the first couple of verses. He tells us three things. Number one, Paul is still breathing threats and murder against Christians.

He's walking along and he's grumbling and fantasizing about all of the horrendous things that he wants to do to these Christians when he finds them. That's the first thing. Number two, Paul has gotten an extradition order from the high priest authorizing him to drag any Christians he finds in Damascus back to Jerusalem for trial, to bind them and to drag them back to Jerusalem for trial. And number three, he's on his way to Damascus to do just that. So Paul is not sort of seeking Jesus at this point in his life.

And Luke wants to make that clear. He's not seeking Jesus. The whole point of the story is Jesus is the one seeking Paul. It's clear from the very beginning. But there's more going on than that.

There's more going on than just this miraculous appearance on the road. We often think of the Damascus road experience as this sudden dramatic event, right?

[5 : 24] Somebody is on the streets and addicted to heroin and robbing banks and then they meet Jesus and then everything changes. And that's kind of how we think of a Damascus road experience.

But if you know Paul's story, God has actually been working in his life for some time. Now, Saul is a Pharisee and the Pharisees were generally opposed to the teachings of Jesus and the early Christians.

But the thing you have to understand about Paul is, Paul's hatred of Christians went far beyond his colleagues. It went far beyond his colleagues. Paul's mentor, Gamaliel, had encouraged a posture of caution and leniency toward the Christians.

But Paul had broken away from his mentor and Paul had become a fanatic. Paul saw Christians as pure evil, as heretics who were tearing apart the Jewish way of life.

And he believed that he was doing God's will by murdering as many of them as possible. I mean, get that into your mind. I'm glorifying God by murdering as many of these people as possible.

[6 : 34] So you ask, well, why was Paul such a fanatic? What's the source of his fanaticism? Carl Jung, the analyst, once said this. He says, fanaticism is only found in individuals who are compensating for secret doubts.

That's a really important point. Right? So then we have to ask the question, was Paul's fanaticism due to the fact that he was compensating for secret doubts?

In Paul's own account of his conversion in Acts chapter 26, at one point, Jesus says to him, it's hard for you to kick against the goads.

You say, what does that mean? Well, a goad is like a long stick with a pointy end. It's like a cattle prod, and you use it to get livestock to go in the direction that you want them to go. So then you ask, well, what does this mean?

What were the goads in Paul's life? What was goading him? A few things. Right? Number one, commentators say it's very likely that Saul and Jesus were roughly the same age.

[7 : 40] And so it's very likely, being in a small geographic area, that they would have been around each other, maybe even met earlier in life. It's very possible that in one of the places in the Gospels where you see Jesus and you see the Pharisees kind of standing off to the side and grumbling, it's very likely that Paul was among those Pharisees, watching Jesus teach, watching Jesus heal, watching the way the crowds responded to him.

And these experiences may have goaded Paul, punching little holes of doubt in his certainty. Right? And then there was the matter of Stephen. We saw not too long ago that Saul was standing there, giving approval to what was happening.

He was overseeing the events of the murder of Stephen when Stephen fell to his knees, the rocks crashing into his body and into his head. Stephen crying out, seeing a vision of the glory of God, Jesus at the right hand of the Father.

Stephen crying out in prayer, God, please forgive the sins of those who are killing me. Please don't hold this against them. And Saul, this pious man, had been taught to believe that Christians were evil heretics, that they represented everything that was wrong in the world.

But this did not fit the stereotype. Stephen had the face of an angel. This isn't an evil person. He's praying that God would forgive me, even as I approve his execution.

[9 : 09] Surely that haunted him in the late hours of the night. Then there was probably moral doubt. You know, Saul was exemplary in every way. No offense, he was probably a better person than all of us.

He had kept almost all of the commandments in word and deed his entire life since he was very young. But what about his heart? What about that last commandment? Thou shalt not covet. You know, all the other commandments you can keep in word and deed, more or less, but coveting is different. Coveting is not a word. It's not a deed. It's a feeling.

And I don't know about you, but when I realize that I am struggling with coveting something, I don't remember making the choice to do it. I catch myself red-handed in the act of coveting.

And that's how it often happens. Had he really never coveted anything or anyone in his whole life? So Paul's fanaticism was very likely an attempt to compensate for secret doubts as the Spirit goaded him toward Jesus.

[10 : 16] And you know, here's the thing. Everyone, everywhere, struggles with doubt. Christians struggle with doubt. Non-Christians struggle with doubt. Sometimes it's just doubt.

Human beings doubt. It's kind of what it means to be a human being. What this shows us, though, is that sometimes, for those people who are not followers of Jesus, they're not just doubts.

Sometimes, as a non-Christian, when you are doubting your certainty that Jesus is a fraud, that Christians are wrong, sometimes when that doubt creeps in, it's actually the work of the Holy Spirit beginning to goad you, beginning to poke holes in your certainty.

Sometimes it's the work of the Lord in your life. You know, I think of the example of Cy Gart, who is a research biochemist. He's been a tenured professor at NYU and at Rutgers and University of Pittsburgh.

And he wrote about his Christian conversion. And I love his story. He talks about being raised in a staunchly Marxist, atheistic household.

[11 : 33] His dad made sure that he was a staunch atheist and a staunch Marxist. And his dad taught him, always ask questions, question everything. Right? And so he grew up believing in the power of reason, the power of science to sort of explain everything.

But then, cracks began to appear. Cracks began to appear in his watertight worldview. He began to see inconsistencies in the worldview his parents had given him.

He writes this. He says, if humans were a blind product of evolutionary chance with no special purpose or significance, then how could the stated goals of socialism to advance human dignity and value make sense?

He's like, how can we believe that humans have dignity and value if we're just a blind product of chance? And then he began to ask questions that science simply could not answer. He began to wonder, where did the universe come from?

How did life begin? What does it mean to be a human being? What's the source of our creativity? Of art? Of poetry? Of music?

[12 : 38] And humor? And then he began to meet Christians who were highly educated. He began to meet Christians who were scientifically minded. And his whole perception of Christianity began to shift.

And what he would say is that all of these were like cracks in the ceiling of his worldview. He had a nice, orderly worldview. He knew the good guys and the bad guys. He kind of knew what he believed. And all of a sudden, these cracks started to appear in the ceiling.

Light started shining through. And he had to figure out what to do with that. Right? That's how God began working in his life. That ultimately led him to faith. So the first thing that we want to make clear is that conversion begins with God.

Right? For some of us, this happens before we have any conscious memories. You know, some of you were baptized as babies. You grew up in the church. You never knew a day apart from the Lord.

And praise God for that. For other people, it begins when the Spirit of God starts to put cracks in the ceiling of your worldview. Inconsistencies. Questions you can't answer.

[13 : 40] Unfulfilled longings. So this is the first thing. Conversion begins with God. The second thing we see in Paul's conversion is that conversion calls us not to moralism, but it calls us away from moralism.

It calls us not to moralism, but it calls us away from moralism. Now when I say moralism, you know, moralism comes in many forms. Lots of different kinds of moralism. But moralism basically means believing that life is about being a good person.

And most people out there think at the end of the day, what life is really about, whatever you believe, what life is really about is being a good person. That's all that really matters. Paul lived in a very highly moralistic society, and religion in Paul's culture was all about keeping God's law. And it was especially focused on keeping the external aspects of the law. Be circumcised, keep the Sabbath, tithe. I would argue that we also live in a highly moralistic society, and I would actually argue in some ways I think we live in a more moralistic society.

Because we don't just have one kind of moralism, we have what we would call a kind of moral pluralism. There are lots of different moralities out there.

[14:56] And in our society, we might think of our moral pluralism tends to generally fall along political lines. Right? So your politics, to a large degree, shape your morality for the average person in our society.

So roughly broad categories, we can sort of think of there's kind of red state morality, and then there's like blue state morality. Right? So red state morality, a love for freedom, love for God, love for country, tends to hold to the kind of traditional Judeo-Christian values around marriage and sexuality.

But when you bring up things like social justice, when you bring up things like structural racism, people get really nervous if they live in a kind of red state morality society.

And then on the other side, you have blue state morality. And largely speaking, you know, this is all rough, crude categories, but blue state morality actually co-ops a lot of the Christian values around things like justice, equality, universal human rights, care for the poor.

Right? Very serious about ending all forms of racism. Right? But it de-emphasizes the need to believe in God or really anything. And then it swaps out the Judeo-Christian view of human nature, which sees human beings as sinful and in need of grace.

[16:20] And in its place, it holds on to a kind of post-enlightenment view of human nature that comes from people like Rousseau, Marx, Freud. It's a view of human nature that says humans are inherently good and it's society that's corrupt.

It says that our true self is defined by our feelings and that we're morally obligated to express that to the world. And it says that any traditions or institutions or religions that get in the way of that are oppressive and need to be overturned.

Alright, so this is kind of two distinct moral worlds that people live in that are largely shaped by politics. And here's the point I want to make. A lot of people think, a lot of people assume that becoming a Christian basically means shifting from blue state morality to red state morality.

I can't tell you how many conversations I've had with people where that's essentially what they think being a Christian is. It's shifting from blue state morals and adopting red state morals.

Because I ask, you know, what's the hesitation for you? And what they describe is I'm just not sure I can embrace what essentially amounts to red state morality. Right?

[17:31] And so it's all about what morals you have. And if we look at Paul's story, we have to realize this couldn't be further from the truth of what Paul experienced.

Before Paul met Jesus, he thought very highly of himself. I mean, in Philippians 3, Paul says, if anyone could have been confident of God's approval, if anyone could be confident that when they walked up to the gate, God would say, we've been waiting for you.

Come on in. Right? If anybody could say that, it would have been Paul, he says. He says, you know, I was a Hebrew of Hebrews. When it comes to righteousness under the law, I was blameless. But then Paul comes face to face with Jesus. And when Paul sees Jesus in all of his glory, when he sees that blinding light that is so magnificent, that is so overwhelming, that it blinds him, when he realizes that Jesus is the Son of God who has defeated death and he is standing there, in the flesh, it changes everything.

Right? And the first thing that it changes for Paul is the way he sees himself. In that light, he sees himself clearly, maybe for the first time in his life. And his knees buckle.

[18:47] And he falls to the ground. In the light of Jesus' glory, Paul sees the truth, not just about himself, but all human beings, which he writes about in Romans chapter 3. He says, you know, I used to think the world was divided into good guys and bad guys.

I used to think I knew who the good guys were and who the bad guys were. And I knew by the morals. I knew by the way they lived. And then I met Jesus. And I realized, there's no difference. There's no difference. He says, for there is no distinction between anyone, Jew, Gentile, red state, blue state. There's no difference. It doesn't matter. He says, here's the truth I realized when I saw Jesus.

All of us have sinned. We all fall short of that glory. I've never met a human being in my life who comes close to what I saw on the road. I've never met anyone who could hold a candle to that light. It was so bright. It was noon. And the glory of Jesus was so bright that it blotted out the sun. I've never seen anything like it. But this doesn't lead Paul to despair. See, that could easily lead you to say, well man, it's hopeless.

[19 : 55] Let's give up. But it has the opposite impact on Paul. It leads him to a joyous revelation which he goes on to say in verse 24 in Romans 3. He says, therefore we're justified by his grace as a gift.

He gets it. Oh, I can't ever attain this. It has to be given to me through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus whom God put forward as a propitiation by his blood to be received by faith. Propitiation, what does that mean? Here's what it means. Jesus didn't come to be an example for us to follow. He came to be a substitution. He came to take our place. To live the life we should have lived.

To die the death that we deserve to die. To take our place on the cross and give us his place at the table.

Right? Life is not about being a good person. Conversion is not about shifting from red state morality to blue state morality. Life, the reason that you're here is that you might come to know Jesus Christ entirely through the gift of his grace that he gives you.

[21 : 05] That's the gospel. And that's only possible when you come face to face with the hard truth about who you are. Really. And you need a really bright light to be able to see it as it really is.

and most of our lives we live in very dim conditions where we think we can tell who the good guys are. This reminds me of the story about Dr. Kamesh Sankaran who is a physics professor at Whitworth University.

Another physicist. I don't know why. Or another scientist. But he has a great story. When he was a PhD student at Princeton he says that he was still a very devout Hindu.

And he was I think one of the leaders of the student association for Hindus at Princeton. And he describes himself as a very moral person. Again, probably better than most of us in this room.

And he says he writes that he had a disdain for Christians in the West. He saw Christians in the West as morally bankrupt as debauchorous even. But then he found himself working 12 hours a day as PhD students do right alongside another doctoral student.

[22 : 17] And that guy was a Christian. And so what do you do with 12 hours shoulder to shoulder working? Well eventually you start you get past the nice small talk and you start talking about real stuff. And so you start talking about faith.

And so they talk about different aspects of their various faiths and then they come to the topic of the cross. And this Christian guy begins to describe to Kamesh how Jesus was willing to take the sins of the world on himself and to die so that people could be forgiven and saved.

And Kamesh says that he was deeply offended by this idea. He says he writes this he says I was a deeply religious person diligently striving to be good.

How dare this man think that anyone especially someone like me was a sinner in need of salvation. You know he said this because he was a devout Hindu but I think most people on the street if you were to ask would say probably something similar.

How dare you think that I would need that. But then he says all at once he experienced several catastrophic failures in his life. They were unexpected but it was financial failure academic failure and relational failure all at once the bottom dropped out in his life.

[23 : 34] And here's what he says the blows came from different directions but their cumulative effect was devastating. By removing the frail crutches on which my life was built God exposed the reality of my profound weakness especially my utter inability to fix relational brokenness.

I was in more pain than I had imagined possible and I was devoid of the props on which I was accustomed to resting. Knowing no other way out I decided to end my own life.

So this is his rock bottom. In the midst of this darkness a voice within me spoke this is why Jesus had to die for you.

All of a sudden the offense of the cross made sense. The cross is a whole lot clearer when you look at it from below.

it's really hard to see it clearly when you look down on it from above. This happened on a Sunday morning so instead of killing himself Kamesh called his friend and asked if he could go to church with him and his friend was just getting their family ready to go so Kamesh comes to them and that morning thankfully he heard the gospel and he ended up giving himself to Jesus.

[24 : 58] so the thing that makes you a Christian is this if someone were to ask you how do you know that you are right with God how do you know that your relationship with God that you can have assurance that you are right with God here's how you know you're a Christian you don't point to your Jewish credentials you don't point to your Hindu devotion you don't point to your red state morality you don't point to your blue state morality in fact you don't point to yourself at all you point to Jesus you point to the finished work the cross his life his death his resurrection so conversion is not about swapping out one morality for another it's about giving up on moralism altogether the last thing that we want to see about conversion not only does it begin with God not only does it call us away from moralism as the center of our life and identity but conversion joins us not only to Christ but also to his church the first lesson

Jesus teaches Paul as a new Christian is that he needs people isn't that amazing the first thing that Jesus teaches Paul as a new Christian is that he needs to join the church after his encounter with Jesus Paul is left blind this man who knew everything right top of his class Hebrew of Hebrews Pharisee of Pharisees crawling around on the ground unable to even he has to be led like a child to Damascus to the house of Judas he fasts for three days we can only imagine it says later that he was praying during that time we can only imagine what that was like three days of fasting and repentance and then Jesus sends a man named Ananias who is a Christian in the church of Damascus and we have this amazing scene one of the most powerful scenes in the Bible Paul is sitting there completely helpless entirely at the mercy of a man he had planned to kill just a few days earlier if he could and Ananias lays his hands on Saul and says brother

Saul calls him brother brother Saul the Lord Jesus who appeared to you on the road by which you came has sent me so that you may regain your sight and be filled with the Holy Spirit and Paul is filled with the Spirit he regains his sight and immediately they baptize him and all of Paul's letters are filled with teaching about the absolute centrality and necessity of the church for the life and the growth of Christians came out of his own experience so it doesn't matter how brilliant you are you're credentials are important in one way but in another way when it comes to God they don't matter at all it doesn't matter how gifted you are the most important lesson you will ever learn as a Christian is that you need the church is that you can't do it alone I don't think it's possible to have the kind of relationship that we're called to have with Jesus apart from his church and I think we kind of see that here indirectly in verse four Jesus says Saul Saul what does he say why are you persecuting my people no he doesn't say that he says why are you persecuting me now that's profound Saul had not been persecuting Jesus personally he had been persecuting the church and what Jesus is saying is that he is so connected to the church so present with his people that whatever Saul did to the church he was doing to Jesus personally they're inextricably linked and what this means is that our relationship with Jesus is inextricably bound to our relationship with the church so just think about this if Jesus says to someone who is persecuting his church why are you persecuting me how would Jesus respond to someone a Christian who has decided to forsake the church who says I'll follow Jesus I'll listen to sermons online but I'm just not sure I want to be a part of a church I don't think it's a stretch to assume that Jesus might say something like this why have you forsaken me why have you forsaken me right this is one of the great challenges

I think of the last year when we were prevented from meeting together in person technology has been a major blessing it's allowed many people to stay connected who otherwise might not have been able to be connected it's allowed a lot of new people to get connected to churches like ours that they weren't previously connected to and we thank God for that that's a great use of technology but nothing can replace our physical presence and participation in the local church there is too much in scripture to argue for this case that this is where we are meant to experience Jesus most fully and that our attitude toward the local church is inextricably linked to our attitude toward Jesus himself so biblically I would say that the idea of following Jesus but being in no way connected to

the local church there's no category for that in scripture so these are the characteristics of true Christian conversion conversion begins not with us but with

[30 : 33] God conversion is not a call to moralism it's a call out of away from moralism and conversion joins us not only to Christ but also to Christ's church and with this understanding of conversion I just want to ask you to join me in praying regularly daily to see more conversions in this church more baptisms more people coming to know and experience the free grace of Jesus Christ let's pray Lord we do recognize that because this is a work of your Holy Spirit it's something that you must do every Christian and every conversion story I have ever heard has been a glorified bystander in your work a lucky providentially present witness to see the culmination of a renovation project that you've been doing in many cases for years and years and years in the hearts of your people and so we pray this Lord for our community

I pray that you would give us the boldness and the confidence to recognize that you're inviting us into something that you're doing and that you would give us the trust and the faith Lord to be present and to be willing to speak the words of the gospel recognizing that somebody might be in the very place that Kamesh was or Sygart was at a place of all they needed is to hear the words and you've done everything else Lord I just pray that Lord and I pray that for those who are hearing this who may have misunderstood the gospel or people who thought they were Christians but realized that they're still moralists like we all are prone to be I pray that you would make the clarity of the gospel and the grace at the heart of it uniquely powerful to them right now that they would that they would if they need to realize that maybe they've never heard the gospel before this very moment and that they would respond to you in faith and with gratitude Lord we pray this in your son's holy name amen wish for the sake of you