

When God changes a heart

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[0:00] Now, our reading today is from Acts chapter 9, it's on page 1103. If you need a church Bible, there are still some at the back, but the words will be on our screens as well.

I'm going to read the first 31 verses. So let's hear God's Word together. Meanwhile, Saul was still breathing out murderous threats against the Lord's disciples.

He went to the high priest and asked him for letters to the synagogues in Damascus, so that if he found any there who belonged to the way, whether men or women, he might take them as prisoners to Jerusalem.

As he neared Damascus on his journey, suddenly a light from heaven flashed around him. He fell to the ground and heard a voice say to him, Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?

Who are you, Lord? Saul asked. I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting, he replied. Now get up and go into the city, and you will be told what you must do.

[1:08] The men traveling with Saul stood there speechless. They heard the sound, but did not see anyone. Saul got up from the ground, but when he opened his eyes, he could see nothing. So they led him by the hand into Damascus.

For three days he was blind and did not eat or drink anything. In Damascus, there was a disciple named Ananias. The Lord called to him in a vision, Ananias.

Yes, Lord, he answered. The Lord told him, go to the house of Judas on Straight Street and ask for a man from Tarsus named Saul, for he is praying. In a vision, he's seen a man named Ananias come and place his hands on him to restore his sight.

Lord, Ananias answered, I have heard many reports about this man and all the harm he has done to your holy people in Jerusalem. And he has come here with authority from the chief priests to arrest all who call on your name.

But the Lord said to Ananias, go. This man is my chosen instrument to proclaim my name to the Gentiles and their kings and to the people of Israel.

[2:11] I will show him how much he must suffer for my name. Then Ananias went to the house and entered it. Placing his hands on Saul, he said, Brother Saul, the Lord Jesus, who appeared to you on the road as you were coming here, has sent me so that you may see again and be filled with the Holy Spirit.

Immediately, something like scales fell from Saul's eyes and he could see again. He got up and was baptized and after taking some food, he regained his strength.

Saul spent several days with the disciples in Damascus. At once, he began to preach in the synagogues that Jesus is the Son of God. All those who heard him were astonished and asked, Isn't he the man who caused havoc in Jerusalem among those who call on his name?

And hasn't he come here to take them as prisoners to the chief priests? Yet Saul grew more and more powerful and baffled the Jews living in Damascus by proving that Jesus is the Messiah.

After many days had gone by, there was a conspiracy among the Jews to kill him. But Saul learned of their plan. Day and night, they kept close watch on the city gates in order to kill him.

[3:25] But his followers took him by night and lowered him in a basket through an opening in the wall. When he came to Jerusalem, he tried to join the disciples, but they were all afraid of him, not believing that he really was a disciple.

But Barnabas took him and brought him to the apostles. He told them how Saul on his journey had seen the Lord and that the Lord had spoken to him and how in Damascus he preached fearlessly in the name of Jesus.

So Saul stayed with them and moved about freely in Jerusalem, speaking boldly in the name of the Lord. He talked and debated with the Hellenistic Jews, but they tried to kill him.

When the believers learned of this, they took him down to Caesarea and sent him off to Tarsus. Then the church throughout Judea, Galilee and Samaria enjoyed a time of peace and was strengthened.

Living in the fear of the Lord and encouraged by the Holy Spirit, it increased in numbers. Amen. Amen. And if you will turn with me to Acts chapter 9 and let's discover together what happens when God changes a heart.

[4:38] So what we're looking at this morning is possibly the most dramatic conversion story within the Bible, perhaps within Christian history. Try and picture, I was trying to picture it in our own day.

So imagine in Edinburgh, local news reports of this man, this kind of religious terrorist, knocking down church doors in order to shut down gospel meetings, in order to arrest and to drag away Christians.

Imagine if he came to our church today, the doors were kicked in, people were getting beaten and scattered and handcuffs were being put on and families were being dragged off to prison.

Sometime later, we hear the news. The same guy is off to London to keep spreading his terror further away. Perhaps we breathe a little bit easier as the people of God.

But then months later, he's back. And on Sunday morning, there's a knock on the door. And then he walks.

[5:49] But this time, he's not carrying letters of arrest. He's carrying a Bible. This time, his heart is not gripped by hate, but with love for Jesus and his people and his message.

Jesus is alive. He really is God's son and God's savior. The most dramatic conversion in history. In this Damascus Road event, and we use that expression, don't we?

The Christian faith gets its next great leader. As Saul is chosen by God, the mission of Jesus is going to go further and wider and indeed go right to the heart of the Roman Empire.

And of course, nobody saw this coming except for the God of glory and of grace. But what does this story have to do with us and how do we relate to it?

Because this is a unique and a dramatic moment. But I hope that we'll see there are common features. There are certain things that are true whenever God changes a heart, yours and mine.

[6:55] So we prayed for Boaz at his baptism that there would never be a day when he wouldn't know and trust Jesus as his Lord. And that's what we pray for all of our covenant kids, isn't it? So we hope in a real sense that he'll have a very different story to that of Saul.

But yet, in the same time, we want the same story, don't we? We want someone to grow up to know Jesus as Lord and to live for him. But whatever our story today, whether you're here today and you're largely ignorant about who Jesus is and what he taught, or whether you're skeptical, or whether you've grown up knowing the truths about Jesus, God's desire is this, that you and I would meet Jesus personally.

That we would become members of Jesus' family, the church. And that together we would join in the mission of Jesus.

Because that's what happens whenever God changes a heart. So let's see it together in Saul's story. When God changes a heart, we meet the risen Jesus personally.

So look with me at the first nine verses. And especially here the first couple of verses. And like every Christian testimony, Saul has his before I met Jesus story.

[8:18] And before Saul met Jesus, we find him breathing out murderous threats against the Lord's disciples. This is picturing Saul as being like a wild beast.

This is a man intent on murder and mayhem towards Jesus' followers. He's absolutely a man on a mission, but it's a mission to shut down and to destroy the church of Jesus.

Clearly, Saul is not seeking Jesus. And equally clearly, God works in power, taking the initiative, showing his sovereign grace, showing that God calls people powerfully in salvation.

In verse 15, the Lord said to Ananias about Saul, this man is my chosen instrument. And it's a feature of the Bible and it's a feature of the church that God chooses unusual instruments for his orchestra and for his purposes.

So God chooses people and God can choose whoever he wants and he can use whoever he wants. Nobody would have imagined God picking a persecutor to become a preacher, but that's what God does to showcase his glory and grace.

[9:38] And in this, I think there's a word of hope for us all. No matter how bad we might feel that we are, no matter how far from God we might feel we are, no matter how bad or far from God the

people that we pray for are, nobody is beyond God's grace.

Nobody is sitting here saying, I am worse than Saul. And the wonderful thing about Saul who becomes Paul is he'll use his story to encourage us. He will describe himself as the chief of sinners. He'll say, I was the worst sinner ever. And if God can save me, then God can save us too. So there's his before knowing Jesus story.

And then comes this Damascus road moment. And what happens here, and we see it in verses three to six, in essence is that Paul meets the risen and glorified Lord Jesus.

So in verse three, he sees a light from heaven. This is the glory of God in Jesus being revealed. And this glory knocks Saul to the ground.

[10:49] And then he hears the voice, Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me? And instantly Saul knows he's dealing with the Lord. And notice what Jesus is saying here, that when Saul is attacking his church, Saul is attacking Jesus.

Jesus closely identifies with his people. That's a great source of comfort. In this moment, the one that Saul thought was dead and buried, thought he was a false Messiah, he discovers he's alive and he's full of the glory of God.

He's not the dangerous liar, he thought. Rather, Jesus is the risen Lord. And he gets these new instructions. Now get up and go into the city, and you'll be told what you must do.

So he had been heading to the city to destroy Christian churches. But now he's going as a follower of Jesus to make disciples for the Lord Jesus in a literal flash.

Everything he believed about Jesus, he discovers is wrong. All that Jesus said about himself is wonderfully true. And his life is changed forever. Again, just think about how that relates to our own stories.

[12:07] For some of us, that maybe comes really close to where we were. Maybe apathetic to the truth claims of Jesus. Maybe for years you've shrugged your shoulders at the claim that Jesus is the Son of God.

That Jesus died to be your Savior. Maybe you went further. Maybe you mocked and despised Jesus and the church as weak and worthless. Until the glory and the love of God in the Lord Jesus broke through.

Until Jesus makes himself known personally and powerfully. And then everything changes. Can we relate to that? Can we remember that?

Maybe it happened as you were listening to a sermon. Maybe in a conversation with a friend. Maybe as you were at home reading the Bible. Maybe listening to something online. All of a sudden, you met Jesus personally.

And the wonderful thing is that's open to all of us today. And what we see about Saul is he is an absolutely changed man. Look at verses 7 to 9. And Saul gets up. He can't see anything.

[13:15] And he's having to be led by the hand into Damascus. He went there proud and self-sufficient on his own mission. But he arrives weak and helpless physically.

But finally alive spiritually. This preacher of hate becomes a preacher of love. Again, our story, I imagine, will be very unlike Saul's story.

But you and I all need this in common. To discover personally Jesus as the Son of God. Jesus as your Savior.

To know him crucified for you. Dead and buried for you. And then risen and ruling in heaven for you. You need to meet Jesus as he is revealed in his word.

That he is good news. He is the way to forgiveness. He is the way back to God. And this is what happens when God changes a heart.

[14:13] We meet the risen Jesus personally. And today, if you're not a Christian, ask him to do that for you. He's delighted to do it. To reveal himself to you in saving power.

Ask him to be your Lord and your Savior. So when God changes a heart, we meet the risen Jesus personally. Here's the second thing that we discover from Saul's story.

When God changes a heart, we become members of Jesus' family. So every so often, you get, maybe in the news, this kind of shocking change of loyalty.

You know, the footballer who transfers to his bitter rivals. Or the politician that shifts to represent another party. Or perhaps when a spy network is uncovered.

And you discover here these traitors hidden in plain sight revealed at last. We'll multiply any of those stories by a thousand. And I think we're coming close to what happens in Saul's own story.

[15 : 20] We met him first in chapter 7. And he is standing watching as the first Christian is killed for their faith. He is approving as stones are launched at Stephen to kill him.

And now in chapter 9, we see him approving and getting approval to lead a terror campaign. Nothing makes him happier than grabbing a bunch of Christians and taking them off to prison. Saul's identity, Saul's reason for existing is that he thinks he is doing God's work. That for him, Jesus is public enemy number one.

And therefore, the church of Jesus must be wiped off the map. But then, as the risen Lord Jesus appeared personally alive and full of glory, everything changed.

And notice that when Luke writes up this account, he doesn't hide the fact that this was a shock to everybody that heard about it.

[16 : 27] This is not a likely candidate for becoming not just a Christian, but an apostle. So, look at the story of Ananias. Ananias is a wonderful character.

Ananias is told, verse 11 by God, go and find Saul. He's praying. Go place your hands on him and restore his sight. And recognize Ananias' response is the equivalent of, God, I think you're sending me into the lion's den.

This is the guy who's been making life miserable for the church. He's been hauling people to prison. He's been arresting people. And then, just to flip over to verse 26.

So, you fast forward a few months. Paul's been spending some time in Damascus. And then, he comes back to Jerusalem. And notice the response of the disciples. Verse 26.

When he came to Jerusalem, he tried to join the disciples. But they were all afraid of him, not believing that he really was a disciple. They are persuaded this is a trap.

[17 : 33] Saul is a spy. He's looking to infiltrate and to destroy from the inside. And what God needs to do is to overcome fear and skepticism.

Verse 15. Here's how he does it with Ananias. Go, this man is my chosen instrument to proclaim my name to the Gentiles and their kings and to the people of Israel.

So, he speaks directly to Ananias to calm his fears. And then, to the disciples, he sends a Barnabas. Barnabas took Saul and brought him to the apostles.

He told them how Saul in his journey had seen the Lord and that the Lord had spoken to him. And how in Damascus he preached fearlessly in the name of Jesus. And then, you think about the story of Saul himself.

Saul would never have imagined becoming a follower of Jesus. That as the great persecutor, he would become the great preacher of the gospel. What happened? Well, it took the resurrection of Jesus to change his mind.

[18 : 35] It took him seeing the risen Jesus to overcome his hate, to break down his hostility, to change his loyalty and his identity. And that changes who he belongs to fundamentally.

There's a beautiful scene in verse 17 when Ananias arrives at the house of Judas on Straight Street. Think about this. This is the first time Saul, as a Christian, is meeting another Christian.

Normally, a Christian sees Saul. They want to run a mile. But what does he hear? Look at verse 7. He hears, brother Saul, the Lord, Jesus who appeared to you on the road as you were coming here, has sent me so that you may see again and be filled with the Holy Spirit.

It's as if he hears from Jesus through Ananias. Saul, welcome to the family. And again, in verse 27 and verse 28, he is accepted by those in Jerusalem he had previously wanted to kill.

Saul stayed with them and moved about freely in Jerusalem, speaking boldly in the name of the Lord. And, you know, this reminds us that the love of God, the forgiveness of God, the grace of God is the force capable of turning enemies into friends.

[20 : 03] That's what we need more of in our lives and in our world, isn't it? Back to verse 18. Immediately, something like scales fell from Saul's eyes. He could see again. He got up and was baptized.

And after taking some food, he regained his strength. So notice the sign of membership, the sign of belonging to God's church was placed on Saul. Baptism. And this tells us when God changes a heart, we become members of Jesus' family, Jesus' church.

Even if our story is nothing like Saul's, if it seems so quiet and calm and tame and ordinary by comparison. The moment we personally believe in Jesus, a miracle happens.

Drama happens. The Bible tells us there's a change of kingdom. The Bible tells us there's a change of kingdom.

A dramatic change of identity. Because now for the first time, we know God as Father personally. It's there in the wonderful instinct of Saul in verse 11.

[21 : 34] Here he is. He's not eating or drinking. But what is he doing? He is praying. He's enjoying life with God, his Father. When God changes our heart, we now have Jesus as our Lord and our Savior and our friend and our brother.

And just as was the case with Saul, we too are filled with the Holy Spirit. So God comes to live in us. And so it's God and our relationship with God that defines us.

Maybe before defined by jobs and grades and bank balances and success. But now what matters, I'm a child of God. I'm a friend of Jesus. So when God changes a heart, we have a new relationship to God.

And we have a new relationship to God's family. We become members of his body, the church. And we hear that with Saul, he is now called Brother Saul.

And he receives the sign of baptism to show he belongs. And then we see this becomes his new instinct. So notice, back to verse 26 again, when he goes back to Jerusalem, what's his first instinct?

[22 : 41] I want to join the disciples. Because they're my new family. They're my brothers. And they become his brothers. And let me just say, if you're a Christian, maybe especially if you're a new Christian, if Jesus is your Lord and Savior, let me ask you, have you identified publicly with him?

Let me remind us as Christians that you and I, we need a living connection with a local church. Maybe especially if you've just moved to the city and you're a Christian, find a local church as a place to belong and to worship and to serve so you can share life with other brothers and sisters in Christ.

If not here, then some other gospel church. Because when God changes a heart, we become members of Jesus' family. And here's the third thing that we all have in common with Saul, is that when God changes a heart, we join in the mission of Jesus.

Verse 20 to 31 show what it looks like in Saul's case. Verse 20, at once, he began to preach in the synagogues that Jesus is the Son of God.

So one thing we know about Saul is that he had a reputation, a terrifying reputation. He was the enforcer. You know, he got things done. He was a man on a mission.

[24 : 02] He had traveled or was traveling 150 and more miles in order to arrest more Christians. So when he arrives in Damascus, everybody, they know what to expect.

When he turns up in the synagogue, they know, or they think they know, what his message is going to be. But then the Bible says Saul baffles them. They're astonished.

Why? Because they start speaking for Jesus. Verse 20, Jesus is the Son of God. Verse 22, Jesus is the Messiah.

So Saul will now take his Old Testament and he will say to anyone that will listen, Jesus fulfills all of these Old Testament promises. Jesus is the one you're waiting for.

And again, nobody imagined Saul saying this. So when Saul met Jesus that day on the Damascus road, he is converted to faith. And he also gets this wonderful call to serve Jesus, to be his instrument.

[25 : 05] Verse 15, to proclaim the name of Jesus to the Gentiles and their kings and to the people of Israel. And verse 16, I will show him how much he will suffer for my name.

What Mark saw out from this moment on, he will speak for Jesus and he will suffer for Jesus as he is no longer a persecutor.

Now he participates in the mission of God. And he's got this really clear message. So in Damascus, he's talking to them about the unique identity of Jesus.

He is the Son of God. He's got this unique status. He is the one promised in the Old Testament.

This king who would rule for God and whose rule would last forever. The one who is now seated on the throne of heaven.

The one who saves his people by way of sacrifice. Saul said, this is Jesus. Just as the father declared at Jesus' own baptism, you are my son whom I love.

[26 : 04] With you I am well pleased. Saul's message now focuses on Jesus, the Son of God. This is how God reveals himself to us in love to the world.

Jesus is the perfectly obedient son. And in perfect obedience, he carries out God's plan to rescue a world lost in darkness and sin.

Is it a popular message? Not for many. Verse 23 to 25, we see what happens as Saul begins to suffer. There's a conspiracy among the Jews.

They're keeping close watch in order to kill him. And so he has to be rescued by being lowered in a basket through the city wall. But the hunter has now become the hunted.

Now that he professes Jesus as Lord. And that leads him back to Jerusalem. But again, notice he has this really clear message. Verse 27, he preached fearlessly in the name of Jesus.

[27:08] Verse 28, he speaks boldly in the name of the Lord. So he's saying in Jerusalem, Jesus is Lord. His heart is no longer burning with hate, but love for Jesus.

Now he knows he's the Lord. He is the way back to God. He is God's savior king. And as he speaks boldly, again, there is suffering.

The Hellenistic Jews try to kill him. And he was shipped off to Caesarea and then to Tarsus. How to explain this turnaround in the mission and the message of Saul?

Simply put, because he met the risen Jesus. And in that dramatic moment, there was no more room for doubt for Saul. Saul had been wrong. Saul has been humbled by God's grace.

And now he's on this new mission to make Jesus known far and wide. Now again, most of us, we probably won't have a preaching ministry that spans countries and continents.

[28:12] And when we tell people about Jesus, we probably won't stir up so much hate that it leads to repeated death threats and beatings and arrests. But this much is true.

When God changes a heart, he gives us a new mission. That in our way, with our gift, with our personality, to talk and to give glory to Jesus.

And to point others towards Jesus as Lord and Savior. That happens as we become worshipers.

You know, this moment right now, this is part of our mission.

As together, we are proclaiming that Jesus is Lord and that we want to worship him. To glorify and enjoy God together. To be part of a body of Christ that makes the love of Jesus visible in the world.

To be a worshiper is something that impacts all of our life. How we spend our time and our money.

How we use our resources and our gifts. How we face our circumstances.

[29:18] And who we talk about and value most of all. So we become worshipers and we become, like Saul, witnesses. Sharing and showing in our own way what we have discovered to be true about Jesus.

So sometimes we're saying to people, come and see. Like Andrew, one of the disciples, to his brother. Come and meet Jesus. I found the promised Messiah. So we can invite people in.

Come to church with me. Come to that CU event with me. Come to spend time with some friends of mine. And they're followers of Jesus. Because now we live with a mission.

So that others can discover the truth that we've received ourselves. Sometimes our mission is more go and tell. And there's a man that Jesus healed. In the gospels.

And he wants to follow Jesus wherever Jesus goes. And say, no, instead of doing that, go home.

And tell everyone how much God has done for you. As he travels these ten cities. And all he can do is talk about the change that Jesus brought in his life.

[30:19] So we come and see and we go and tell. Because when God changes a heart. We're now participants in the mission of Jesus. Showing and telling together and individually.

Jesus is the son of God. He is the saviour king. He really is the Lord. So that while our story will not be Saul's story. Probably the most famous and dramatic conversion story in church history.

God wants to do the same thing in our hearts today. To give us a living personal encounter. A meeting with the risen Lord Jesus.

That we would become members of his family, the church. And that together we would join the mission of Jesus. That we make his love known to others.

Let's pray about that together. Lord God, we thank you for the dramatic way that you saved and transformed Saul. Bringing him into your church and giving him that mission as an apostle and preacher to the Gentiles.

[31:29] Thank you that while that was unique though. There are things common to us. Thank you for those of us who can say. That there was a moment and a time. And we still enjoy those times of meeting with.

The Lord Jesus personally. That we can call him saviour and friend and king and Lord. Lord, we pray for any here today who are not Christians. That that might be a wonderful privilege that you would grant to them.

That you would open their hearts and they would ask that Jesus would become their saviour too. Lord, we thank you that as we trust in Jesus, we also get a new family. The family of faith. And so we thank you for your church. And we pray that we would be active members in your church. And we thank you that you give us meaning and purpose and a mission as the people of God.

And we pray that you would be with us as we go from this place into our own situations. That you would help us to make Jesus known. And all for his praise and glory we ask it.

[32:31] Amen.