

A story worth repeating

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[0:00] Some stories are worth repeating. Often you have this with someone writing a book and people reading the book and deciding it's a really good story and they put it on as a stage play and then they make a film of it and people like the idea of revisiting a story in lots of different ways.

I was out at a meal on Wednesday, a birthday meal, and someone was talking about their dad and their dad used to read The Christmas Carol by Charles Dickens every Christmas.

And it obviously got into this woman's head and she decided that this was a very worthy story. And since then, she's read it too and she's bought every configuration of the retelling of the story of The Christmas Carol, obviously including The Muppets and even descending or ascending, depending on which way you think of it, to The Smurfs' Christmas Carol.

A good story is always worth retelling again and again. And this is the third time in the Acts of the Apostles that the story of Paul, formerly Saul of Tarsus, is told.

And Luke likes threes. He likes putting things into threes. You remember Luke chapter 15, those three stories of lost things that are found. And in Acts he tells these three stories of how Paul became a Christian.

[1:32] And it was a decisive moment in his life, a bit like the Christmas Carol story about a transformation of an individual. So that the new person in the story is completely different from the old person.

What is a bit of a surprise in this story, I suppose, is that Saul is not portrayed as a bad man, an immoral man.

He's portrayed as a man who is upright and is seeking to do the right thing. And he believes that opposing Christians and opposing Christ is the right thing according to his religion.

And that is something that's worth bearing in mind. I've been reading this week a book about Tim Keller and his teaching on the Christian life. And one of the things that Tim Keller used to emphasize and has emphasized in the book is that there are three ways to live.

We kind of think often of there being two ways to live, that we either believe or we don't believe. But Keller made the point, and it's an important point to grasp, that there are believers and there are unbelievers and there are those who are religious.

[2:43] A religious category where there are some measures of belief and acceptance of things that are true, but without a saving faith in the Lord Jesus Christ.

And sometimes, you know, with a kind of binary choice, do you believe or not believe? Well, you know, I do believe certain things, but it's possible to have a kind of religious substructure in one's life that makes it almost impossible to see Jesus clearly.

So this story about Saul of Tarsus who became Paul is so decisive that it needs to be repeated in its toad three times. And it's true of every Christian that everyone has a story of one kind or another. And we could go around, we could go around profitably and asking people who are Christians to tell us how they became a Christian. And the interesting thing is, it's a kind of kaleidoscope, isn't it, of stories, the way that people come to know the Lord Jesus Christ.

You know, some come from no background whatsoever. Some come, you know, having grown up in a church and being very aware of the story and being able to recite the story.

[4:03] Some people have never heard the story ever before. Now, this story of Saul becoming Paul is amazing.

It's dramatic. It's unforgettable. We might feel that perhaps our Christian story is not quite so amazing or unforgettable. Perhaps it seems kind of ordinary. But there is no ordinary coming to know the Lord Jesus Christ. When Daniel asked me to tell you a little bit about myself, I didn't tell you how I became a Christian.

But I became a Christian September 1972. That morning, I met someone in school and they showed me a leaflet that said, Jesus is alive.

And interesting, the resurrection of Jesus Christ is something we've been thinking about in some of the songs and in this reading. Jesus is alive. I was intrigued. I've had some contact with the church. [5:01] One or two of the teachers at the school were Christians and they've spoken to me about Christ, but had not become a Christian. I went along to a young people's meeting that evening.

And it was striking to see young people my age reading the Bible and reading the Bible in such a way. Thank you. Reading the Bible in such a way that seems as though God was speaking through that word.

And when they prayed, it was as though they were talking to someone. Not just talking to the roof, but talking to an individual. And when they sang likewise, it was as though they were singing songs to a real person.

And that evening, having heard quite a bit about Christianity in the years before that, I asked the person who took me home, will you tell me how I can know God like that?

And that's the way I became a Christian. He explained the path of becoming a Christian. And I asked Jesus Christ to rescue me, to turn the lights on in my life.

[6:06] And that's how it began, 1972. Now, do you have a story of how you came to faith in Jesus Christ? For some of you, it might be less dramatic than Paul or even less dramatic than mine.

It's said, isn't it, that you don't need to know the date of your birth to know that you are alive. And that's true. You know, some people, they grow up in a Christian family and they come to church from the time when they're tiny.

And they just can't think about the moment when they morphed from being a person who was in a Christian family and came along to church to that moment when they actually became a Christian consciously.

And that's okay. You know, you don't need to know the day of your birth to know that you're alive. And you have a story. You have a story of faithful praying, faithful telling, of absorbing this message that's become part of you, that's become the foundation of who you are and your identity.

And that's a good thing. But it is important, isn't it, to have a story of our Christian faith and how it came into being. We all have some kind of story if we are a Christian.

[7:27] Do you have a story that's connected with coming to faith in the Lord Jesus Christ? Now, in this story, the Apostle Paul talks a bit about his past.

And as I said, he didn't have a past that was marked by badness, as human beings might describe badness.

In fact, he was a regular religious guy. He was one of the elite religious guys. And the Jewish people, verse 4, all know the way I have lived ever since I was a child, from the beginning of my life in my own country and also in Jerusalem.

They have known me for a long time and can testify if they're willing that I conform to the strictest sect of our religion, living as a Pharisee.

But then there's the turn, the change in his life. But now it's because of my hope in what God has promised our ancestors that I'm on trial today. What's the charge against the Apostle in this pre-trial?

[8:35] The charge is that he is proclaiming that Jesus Christ, who was dead, is alive. And what he's saying is, I'm being charged for the hope that me and my people have always had.

I didn't think that Jesus Christ fulfilled that hope, but now I realize he has fulfilled that hope. And I'm simply proclaiming what we believed all along, but didn't realize.

You know, when Paul writes to the Corinthians in 1 Corinthians 15, he says, these are the things I want to deliver to you of first importance, that Christ died for our sins according to the scriptures,

that he was buried, that he was raised again according to the scriptures.

He's saying, when I trawl through the Old Testament scriptures, I see so many indicators of the Christian message. I don't know quite how I was so blind to those things, but it's possible, isn't it? It's possible not to see the wood for the trees, to be so close to something that we just don't see the obvious. And that was his circumstance.

[9:46] And I'm now proclaiming the hope that I previously had not seen. A recent commentator writes about this. The concept of resurrection should not have been controversial.

The question had really become whether God had raised this man, Jesus. Paul is keen to show that he's not a gullible fanatic, swept up in this new Christian movement.

Paul is begging the question for the audience. What must have happened to Paul to completely change his mind about Jesus? How did this man, who was a fully paid up religious Jew, opposed to the idea that Jesus was anyone special, and opposed to the idea that he had been raised from the dead, how did he suddenly say, I'm a Christian, and I want to tell you about Jesus?

How did that happen? How did that change happen? It's remarkable. He goes on further to talk about his circumstances there in verse 9.

I too was convinced that I ought to do all that was possible to oppose the name of Jesus Christ. He says that he is obsessed with persecuting there in verse 11, and even hunting them down, Christians, in foreign cities.

[11:07] Paul knew what it was to be incredulous concerning the mess of Jesus Christ. You know, it's remarkable, isn't it, in the Gospels, we have the person who sometimes is called doubting Thomas.

It's a bit unfair, I think, really, because he certainly did doubt on one particular day. I don't know whether necessarily he doubted throughout his life or thereafter. But he did doubt when the disciples said they'd seen the risen Lord Jesus, as we read in John chapter 20.

And he said, I'm not going to believe unless I can see the marks in his hands and feet and touch those marks.

I don't believe it, and I won't believe it until it's been demonstrated to me it's true. And so Paul is saying, I'm standing here under this charge that I'm proclaiming the Lord Jesus Christ is raised from the dead.

I want you to tell you that this seems like an incredible message. And I was once incredulous. I was an unbeliever.

[12:15] I was a skeptic. But now I am convinced. I was obsessed in my objection to Jesus. Now, this is a remarkable thing.

You know, if someone stands up and says, you know, previously I was a card-carrying left-wing Labour Party member, but now I am representing the Reform Party, you can't think, my, something must have happened.

And here is the apostle saying, I was on the other side. I was in the far right, as it were. But I've been brought to an awareness that these things that the disciples were saying about Jesus, these things are true.

On one of his journeys, as he goes to pursue Christians, we call it the Damascus Road. We call it the Damascus Road experience. And the apostle, this third telling in Acts of the Apostles, tells this story of how he is stopped in his tracks as he journeys along the Damascus Road.

And he hears a voice. Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me? About noon, verse 13, as I was on the road, I saw a light from heaven, brighter than the sun, blazing around my companions.

[13:44] We all fell to the ground. And I heard a voice in Aramaic, Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me? Now, he'd read the Old Testament.

He knew how these things worked. You know, when there's a spectacular light that's shining around you, and when there's a voice that's speaking from heaven, he knows the rules.

He knows that this is the kind of thing that God does when he does a significant thing. He'd read about Moses and the burning bush. He'd read about the flame that was burning and the bush that was never consumed.

And he'd heard about the name of someone coming from nowhere, Moses. Moses. Moses. And now he is there with a light shining around him, brighter than noonday, and calling his name, Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?

He realizes that something terrible is happening, but also something amazing is happening. Something terrifying, but something also incredibly exciting.

[14:53] He realized that this is an invitation. It's an invitation to pay attention, to draw near, and to take notice. This is the way that God had worked in the Old Testament, and this same God that he believed in, the God of Abraham, Jacob, Isaac, Moses, and so on, is the God who is now making himself known to him.

Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me? Who are you, Lord? Who are you? Now, it's a mystery at this stage.

He's been struck off his horse. He's been knocked off his horse. He's been knocked to the ground. Who are you, Lord? I want to be clear who I'm dealing with.

I want to be clear what I'm dealing with. It's fascinating, isn't it? In the 21st century, in the last year or so, there's been indications that there's been what has been described as a quiet revival in Britain.

I don't know whether you can, strictly speaking, have a quiet revival, but a quiet, a gentle revival, a taking of a fresh interest in the Lord Jesus Christ, and sometimes strange ways of people being brought to attention in thinking about the Lord Jesus Christ.

[16:19] Here, the apostle describes a very dramatic circumstance. If you are moving 100 miles fast in the opposite direction that Jesus is going, something very dramatic needs to stop you and to turn you around.

A great power is needed to reverse your energies and your forceful pursuit of the opposite direction, and that's what happens here.

The reply is, I am Jesus whom you are persecuting. It's interesting, isn't it, that the name that Jesus uses in heaven is the name Jesus.

Jesus, the human name of Jesus. You know, you could have pulled rank. This is the Lord Jesus Christ, the King of Kings, and the Lord of Lords. But I am Jesus whom you are persecuting.

The human name, a reminder that we're talking about someone who is in heaven. We're talking about someone who is God, but he is the God who has become man.

[17:26] This kind of very obvious divine event, this light and this voice from heaven, is to do with the man Christ Jesus.

It is to do with the one who lived and died and rose again. I am Jesus whom you are persecuting. Let's be in no doubt what's going on here.

Jesus is demonstrating that he is alive, alive to the understanding of Saul of Tarsus, that he might be changed.

C.S. Lewis writes about this incident. Imagine the excitement. He saw with the eyes of his heart, so real that it seems as though he was seeing it with ordinary physical eyes, and then so real that he realized he was seeing it with his physical eyes.

The blazing light and the face, and the face was the face of Jesus Christ. And Saul of Tarsus says, so it was you all along.

[18:34] Saul pushing against Jesus, pushing against Christians, pushing against Christianity. So it was you all along. Remember those words that Jesus spoke to him.

It is hard for you to kick against the goads. We first hear about Saul of Tarsus in chapter 9 of Acts. He's holding the coats of those who pick up stones to kill the first Christian martyr, Stephen. And he's there witnessing that act.

And after that, he becomes a professional Christian hunter. He goes around seeking to imprison Christians and to harry them. But I guess this seems to indicate that something was working on Saul of Tarsus.

Something was getting at him. Something was kind of snagging his awareness. He was just finding a question arise in his mind.

[19:37] Why do these Christians continue, even though they are hated, even though they are being pursued and persecuted? Why do they continue? Why do they keep doing it?

I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting. Maybe the faces of some of those persecuted people, the faces of Stephen and others, came to mind to the apostle.

The kind of reality, the authenticity of their testimony. It is hard for you to kick against the goads. It's futile to resist a greater force than your own.

This is the irresistible grace of God at work in this individual. And sometimes it seems, doesn't it, in our life, as though there is someone on our heel, someone at our shoulder.

We can almost feel their breath on our collar as they're pursuing us. The hound of heaven pursuing us. Maybe that was like that for you when you became a Christian.

[20:48] You kind of putting things off, batting things away, but you couldn't get out of your mind the reality that there was a presence. There was someone there, something there, working at you, drawing you, and that's the experience of this man here.

So Saul of Tarsus becomes Paul, the apostle Paul, and he becomes a witness. That's the words he uses there in verses 16 and 17.

Now get up and stand on your feet. I've appeared to you to appoint you as a servant and as a witness of what you have seen of me and what I will show you. I will rescue you from your own people and from the Gentiles.

I am sending you to them. Paul now is a witness. He is to give testimony. It's been said that testimony is more than teaching.

It's more than just passing on information. It is a powerful witness and contesting the truth of a matter because you are an eyewitness.

[21:54] A witness is someone who has seen something and then says something and the apostle has seen something. He's seen this vision on the Damascus Road and now he's telling something.

He'd had a change of perspective. His eyes were opened and now he's preaching about a new perspective. He's preaching about a change of mind and heart.

This is the message that he's going to proclaim. There in verse 18. To open their eyes and turn them from darkness to light and from the power of Satan to God so they may receive forgiveness of sins and a place among those who are sanctified by faith in me.

Just a moment before that he had seen a light that was brighter than the noonday sun and he now sees himself as a witness testifying to light that can dispel spiritual darkness.

He's now proclaiming Jesus who said I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will not walk in darkness but have the light of life. The gospel ministry that Paul is now called to is an eye-opening ministry.

[23:15] I once was blind but now I see. That's how John Newsome put it. That's what happens when a person becomes a Christian. Blind and then seeing.

Almost like but greater than someone having a cataract operation. Remember people who've had cataract operations in Lansing Tab, gone to visit them and they said, oh, that's what you look like. And when a person becomes a Christian they suddenly realize what Jesus looks like and who he actually is.

A change from darkness to light. A regime change from being under the authority of the evil one to be under the authority of Christ.

And this is an important thing to remember. That the person who turns the wheels of religion is Satan. It's Satan who keeps people dark whether it be in being an atheist or being religious but not Christian.

[24:27] It takes the power of God to bring people from the power of Satan whether they come from rank unbelief or a religion that has no spiritual life.

A change. A change. A change from darkness to light from the evil one's kingdom to the kingdom of the Lord Jesus Christ.

And forgiveness of sins. I hadn't realized that Paul probably thought that my pursuing Christians and persecuting them was actually opposing God.

I thought that I was doing something for God but now I realize I was doing something against God.

The Old Testament, one of the Psalms, Psalm 19 speaks about being forgiven for unknown sins.

Unwitting sins. The apostle realized the magnitude of his rebellion against God in not believing in the Lord Jesus Christ.

[25:34] A change of our lives from darkness to light from the evil one to the kingdom of light.

An old life turned into a new life. And a place among those who are sanctified by faith in me. A place in the church of Jesus Christ.

It's a remarkable thing, isn't it? That someone who wanted to destroy the church is given a place in the church. That someone who wanted to kill Christians and remove the message of Christ from the earth is given a place in the church.

Jesus Christ has died that we might be forgiven and that we might have a place in his family, a place in his body. Welcome.

Welcome. We have a sign at Lansing Tab which we've had up for about 10 years and I like the sign. It has a line from Romans chapter 15 and the line is Accept one another as Christ has accepted you.

[26:45] And what a wonderful thing it is that God has welcomed those who are believers in the Lord Jesus Christ. You're welcome here.

You have a place here. People need a place. People need to belong and the gospel gives us that place of true belonging.

He's testifying. God has helped me to this very day so I stand here and testify to small and great alike. I'm saying nothing beyond what the prophets and Moses said would happen that Messiah would suffer and as a first to rise from the dead would bring the message of light to his own people and to the Gentiles.

Now hear what he's saying. As we mentioned earlier, there's nothing new here. All that I'm saying is rooted in the Old Testament. It's all rooted in our story. Nothing new here.

But I'm testifying. I'm declaring this message that Christ is the fulfillment of the Old Testament promises and the gospel of salvation that I'm proclaiming is the fulfillment of those promises too.

[27:56] Now at this point, I don't know if you've ever kind of felt this when you're hearing a preacher or whether any preachers here have had people say this to them. You are mad.

That was the response that he gets from Felix, Festus rather, who is the governor of Judah. You are mad.

Verse 24, You're out of your mind, Paul, he shouted. Your great learning is driving you insane. Some people are just too clever by half.

You've been doing so much thinking that clearly you've been turned crazy. You are mad. I love the statement. I may have used it before, but there was an evangelist, an American evangelist, and he used to say this.

You might think I'm nuts, but I'm attached to the right bolt. And that is right. A Christian might be perceived as nuts, but we are attached to the right bolt.

[29:01] You're mad. You are mad. Paul, you are really crazy. Have you lost it or something? Now, it's interesting, Paul's response, very calm, and the response is, what I'm saying to you is true and reasonable.

This is not something that's been made up. It's not something that you need to jetson your mind to believe. It is true and reasonable.

I want you to say that this is a matter of public record, says the apostle. The king is familiar with these things, and I can speak freely to him. Verse 26, I'm convinced that none of this has escaped his notice, because it is not done in a corner.

King Agrippa, Herod the Great's grandson, king of Israel. Do you believe the prophets? prophets? I know you do.

You know enough of scripture to know that what I'm saying is compelling. It is true and reasonable. There are reasons for believing.

[30:16] We're told as Christians in 1 Peter, always be ready to give a reason for the hope that you have, and this is what the apostle is doing in this trial. He's given a reason for the hope that he has.

Do you think in such a short time you can persuade me to be a Christian, says King Agrippa? There's a famous sermon by a preacher called George Whitefield, which has the title, Almost Persuaded.

It's based on the authorised version of this verse. Almost thou dost persuade me to be a Christian, is the old version. And George Whitefield made a great deal of that, that people might be almost a Christian.

They might be close. They might be on the threshold. And perhaps they need to take a step over the threshold. They need to find themselves in rather than outside the kingdom.

Do you think that in such a short time you can persuade me to be a Christian? Or as Eugene Peterson puts it, keep this up much longer and you'll make a Christian out of me.

[31:23] I like music and I like songs. And I was reading a book called 31 Songs by Nick Hornby, the novelist.

And he writes about certain songs. And he says that certain songs can take you out from yourself and kind of bring you to a kind of transcendent sphere.

They can remind you that there might be something more than time. There might be such a thing as eternity. And there might even be something that's called God. He says, I like listening to music like that, but I don't listen to it too often, just in case it gets hold of me.

And that can be our experience with Christianity. You know, there's a story in Mark's Gospel about Herod, who liked to have John the Baptist come to speak to him.

He liked to listen to what he was saying, but he wasn't wanting to get close enough that what John the Baptist was saying would change him. Keep this up much longer and you'll make a Christian out of me.

[32:37] The Apostle says, Paul, Paul says, Don't, Short time or long, I pray that not only you, but all who are listening to me today may become what I am.

Accept these chains. Hear the rattling. Pray that you and all those here would believe. There's a sense in which there appears to be an awareness in King Agrippa that the man standing in front of him on trial had truth on his side and that maybe he ought to step over to that side too.

There's no record that he did, but maybe there was enough for him to be convinced that what Paul was saying was true. So Paul is on trial and we read that the aftermath that the king rose and within the governor and Benice and those sitting with them, after they left the room, they said, This man is not doing anything that deserves death or imprisonment.

This man could have been set free if he had not appealed to Caesar. Now, that's a pretty clear statement, isn't it? This man has got nothing to answer.

He's not a guilty man. There's no crime in speaking about Jesus, although some countries have made speaking about Jesus a crime. There is no crime about speaking about Jesus.

[34:07] He seems to be a man who has truth on his side. I sometimes tell a story. I think Stephen Brenda will have heard it because they've been to so many of my courses on the SGP.

The story of the people standing in the art gallery before a Picasso painting. Some people like modern art. Some people don't like modern art. Some people looking at modern art say things like, My three-year-old could paint that.

Anyway, something of that kind was going on in front of this Picasso. But behind the people who were talking about this was the director of the gallery.

And after they'd finished their spiel about Picasso, the director of the gallery just kind of leaned in quietly and said, The merit of this work of art is not in doubt.

It is not on trial. You are. Yet in front of this art, it is not on trial. You are. Your taste, your response to this is on trial.

[35:09] And of course, that's the case too, isn't it? About the message of Jesus Christ that Paul has spoken here and which he kind of embodied on the road to Damascus when he was changed from the dark side to the light, when he was brought to a place of forgiveness and a place of a relationship with the Lord Jesus Christ, a place of repentance.

He changed and suddenly he realized that Jesus was who he claimed he was and that Jesus had died for him and that Jesus had been risen from the dead.

So we all are like those people in the art gallery. We're standing in front of the picture that's painted in scripture about Jesus and he is not on trial.

It's true and reasonable, says the apostle, to believe that Jesus Christ is who he claims to be. He is not on trial. We are. I asked earlier, do you have a story about how you came to know the Lord Jesus Christ?

Hey, wouldn't it be a wonderful thing if the 29th of June, Calvary Evangelical Church was the time and the place? Hey, just after noon, light dawned for you.

[36:33] That would be a good story, wouldn't it, in the future? Let's pray. Heavenly Father, we would thank you for the story, the third telling of the story of Saul of Tarsus being converted and becoming Paul.

Father, we thank you for the message of the Lord Jesus Christ. We thank you for his persistence with Saul. Saul, we thank you for the way that he drew him to himself.

And Father God, we would pray that we're here today with that story in our minds, but also in our hearts because we know Jesus. We pray that you'll help us to rejoice again, that we are those who've seen the light, that we're forgiven.

We have a place in your family. But Father, if we've not got a story to tell, we pray, Father, that today will be the beginning of that story. For we ask it in Jesus' name.

Amen. Amen.