

A Damascus Road experience

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Date: 23 February 2020

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[0 : 00] could for a short while and with the Lord's help and the Lord's enabling, if we could turn back to that first portion of scripture that we read in the book of Acts, Acts chapter 9. Acts chapter 9 and if we read again at verse 3. Acts chapter 9 and verse 3. Now as he, that is Saul, as he went on his way, he approached Damascus and suddenly a light from heaven flashed around him and falling to the ground he heard a voice saying to him, Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me? And he said, who are you Lord? And he said, I am Jesus whom you are persecuting but rise and enter the city and you will be told what you are to do.

I'm sure we've all heard of the phrase, a Damascus road experience. A Damascus road experience. We've heard of the phrase because we probably use it in everyday language. We talk about this or we describe this quick turnaround or someone who reached this turning point in their life and they made a U-turn. They had a Damascus road experience. Of course the phrase, it originates from this passage where Saul was dramatically converted on the road to Damascus. But you know for many unconverted people who have read this passage before or they've heard sermons about Saul's conversion, they themselves, they want a Damascus road experience. Because they say that, well if they're going to be converted at all and if they're going to become a Christian at all, if they're going to be a follower of Jesus at all, they want a Damascus road experience. And you know maybe for you, my unconverted friend here today, maybe, well you haven't yet committed your life to Jesus Christ because you're still waiting for that

Damascus road experience. You're still waiting for Jesus to stop you in your sin. You're still waiting for Jesus to shine that bright light into the dark recesses of your soul. You're still waiting for the voice from heaven to speak audibly to you. You're still waiting for that dramatic conversion. But you know my friend, I want to say to you from the outset today that if you're still waiting for a Damascus road experience, then you're probably going to be disappointed. Because the reality is dramatic conversions are few and far between. They're just like deathbed conversions. They don't happen often.

Of course, Saul's dramatic conversion and the deathbed conversion of the thief on the cross, they're given to us in the Bible to prove that they do happen. But they don't happen often. Which is why you need to commit your life to Jesus Christ now, today. Because as the Bible says so clearly to you, now is the accepted time. Today is the day of salvation. And as we were singing in Psalm 95, today if you hear his voice, do not harden your heart.

[3 : 34] Do you know my friend, the Damascus road conversion of Saul, it's not to make you despair that you haven't had such an experience. No, the Damascus conversion of Saul is to make you realize the grace of God towards you as a sinner that you are not beyond hope today. And you're not beyond redemption.

Because today the wonderful thing is you're still on mercy's ground. And if God's grace and mercy is able to extend even to the chief of sinners, then it's certainly able to extend to you today.

And that's what I want you to take away from the dramatic conversion of Saul. Not that you have to have this conversion like his in order to be a proper Christian. But that there's nothing that you've thought or done or said in your life that leaves you beyond hope and beyond redemption. There's nothing you've thought, said or done that leaves you outside the care, concern and compassion of Jesus Christ. And that's what I want us to see as we consider together this Damascus road experience. I want us to just consider this passage under three headings. Saul's condemnation, Saul's conversion, and then Saul's calling. Pretty simple headings. Saul's condemnation, Saul's conversion, and Saul's calling. So if we look first of all at Saul's condemnation. Saul's condemnation, we'll read again at verse 1. We're told there, but Saul still breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord, went to the high priest and asked him for letters to the

synagogues at Damascus, so that if he found any belonging to the way, men or women, he might bring them bound to Jerusalem.

Now Acts chapter 9, it's about a third of the way through the book of Acts, and it's at this point that the author, who is Luke, the same person who wrote Luke's gospel, he introduces us here to Saul. And Saul is introduced to us here because for the next two-thirds of the book of Acts, Saul, or Paul as he was later renamed, he's going to feature predominantly in the narrative.

[5 : 53] But we're actually given a glimpse of Saul at the end of chapter 7 and then at the beginning of chapter 8, where we're told that Saul stood by, watching and approving as the Jewish authorities stoned Stephen to death.

And it was then at the beginning of chapter 8 that after the death of Stephen that Saul began this great persecution against the church, in which Saul sought to cause havoc in the church, trying to destroy it.

Saul, we're told, he was breaking down doors, he was entering every Christian home, dragging men and women out and throwing them into prison. And for fear of their lives, the Christian church scattered.

They ran from the city of Jerusalem. They ran for their lives into the regions of Judea and Samaria. But you know, what's remarkable is that the scattering of the Christians into all these regions, it was a fulfillment of Jesus' promise to the early church.

Because right at the beginning of the book of Acts, Jesus promised his church that when the Holy Spirit comes upon you, you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and Judea and Samaria to the uttermost parts of the earth.

[7 : 11] And what we see as you look through the book of Acts is that as the church scattered, so did the seed of the gospel. The gospel began to spread. It spread from Jerusalem to Judea to Samaria to the uttermost parts of the world.

But you know, prior to his conversion, Saul didn't want the church of Jesus Christ to grow. He didn't want the gospel to spread any further. No, in fact, Saul wanted to stomp out Christianity as soon as possible.

Which is why we find Saul here in the opening verses of chapter 9. We find him still breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord.

Even though most of the Christians had now abandoned Jerusalem, that wasn't good enough for Saul. Saul was determined to eradicate Christianity altogether.

So much so that he asked this high priest in Jerusalem, he asked him for authority. Authority to carry out this persecuting campaign against all the Christians.

[8 : 19] Saul wanted the high priest's blessing to go ahead. Go ahead and destroy the church of Jesus Christ. And the amazing thing is, he received it.

He received blessing from the high priest. And with that, Saul, we're told, he expands his campaign against those who were Christians. To the point that he travels 150 miles north into the region of Syria.

And he heads towards the city of Damascus. And Saul's intent, his intent was to arrest any Christians he found. And bring them back to Jerusalem in chains.

And have them tried and put to death. But you know, when you read this passage, you have to ask, well, why was Saul like this? Why was he so determined to destroy the church of Jesus Christ? Why did he hate Christians so much? And of course, we could say that the reason for Saul's behavior was because he was, well, he was like every other unconverted person.

[9 : 22] He was dead in his trespasses and sins. And he was rebelling against Christ and the gospel. But you know, there was more to it than that. Because Saul's hatred and anger towards the church and his campaign against Christians, it was all in the name of the God he professed.

Do you know, Saul, he prided himself in the fact that he was a Pharisee. And as you know, Pharisees were deeply religious people. They were obsessed with all the rules and the regulations. They were obsessed with the pomp and the ceremony. All the outward forms and fashions of religion. And that's because they were all interested, more interested in the external rather than the internal.

But for Saul, you could say that he was a thoroughbred Pharisee. Saul was a Pharisee of Pharisees. In fact, as we read in Philippians chapter 3, when Paul spoke about his past, he said that he once boasted that he was circumcised on the eighth day, which was according to the law of

Moses.

He was from the people of Israel, God's covenant nation. He was from the tribe of Benjamin, the same tribe as the first king of Israel, King Saul, who he was named after.

[10 : 44] And like King Saul, who persecuted the rightful King David, this Saul sought to persecute those who claimed to follow the rightful King Jesus. But more than that, Saul prided himself in the fact that he was a Hebrew of Hebrews.

He was a thoroughbred Jew. And as a Jew who kept the laws of God, he was a Pharisee. And as someone who was zealous for his Pharisee religion, he said he was a persecutor of the church. And with regard to the righteousness which the law required, we're told that Saul thought that he was blameless. You know, my friend, when it came to Saul's self-assessment, when Saul looked at himself as an unconverted man, he said that he was such a good person.

And not like other people. Because he had been brought up in a good way. With good and moral parents. Who taught him the truths of scripture. And that when he became an adult, Saul became so zealous for his religion, so legalistic in his mindset, so dedicated to his denomination, that he didn't see his need of a saviour.

And you know, my unconverted friend, I sometimes wonder if there are people just like Saul. Are you more like Saul than you realize?

[12 : 17] You might not persecute the church of Jesus Christ. You might not put Christians into prison. But I sometimes wonder if, like Saul, you consider yourself such a good person.

Not like other people. Not like those who don't come to church. Because, well, you've been brought up in a good way. You've had the privilege of Christian parents.

Maybe even moral parents. Who gave you good morals and set you on the right path. And they brought you to church each Lord's Day. And they brought you to Sunday school. And they taught you the truths of scripture to the point that now, as an adult, you could say that you're zealous for your religion.

Your religion of appearing in church once on the Lord's Day. You're legalistic now in your mindset because you know what the Bible says. You've read it before.

You know some of these Psalms. You know the Ten Commandments. You're legalistic. You know what the Bible says about the Lord's Day and the Christian life and what the Christian should and shouldn't do.

[13 : 24] Even though you don't adhere to it yourself. Like Saul, you might be zealous for your religion. and legalistic in your mindset. And even dedicated to your denomination.

Because whatever anyone else says, you say, I'm free church. But you know my friend, do you know what the founding father of the free church, Thomas Chalmers, said about the free church? He said, Who cares? Who cares about the free church in comparison with the Christian good of the people of Scotland? Who cares about the free church in comparison to the good of your soul?

Do you know my friend, like Saul, do you consider yourself to be a good person? Brought up in a good way with good morals. That you're so zealous for your religion, so legalistic in your mindset, so dedicated to your denomination that you don't see your need of Jesus.

It's a frightening position to be in. Do you know my friend, if that's how you think today, I want to tell you clearly and plainly, you're lost.

[14 : 37] You are absolutely lost. You need to be converted. My unconverted friend, like Saul, you need to be converted.

That's what I want us to consider secondly, Saul's conversion. Saul's condemnation, and secondly, Saul's conversion. Look at verse 3.

As he went on his way, he approached Damascus, and suddenly a light from heaven flashed around him. And falling to the ground, he heard a voice saying to him, Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?

And he said, who are you, Lord? He said, I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting. Do you know, when we understand how lost Saul really was, and how much he hated Christians, and persecuted the church, and hardened his heart against the gospel, when we understand all that Saul did, and all that Saul was, and when we read about his conversion, and we see this change that took place in his life, you know, the first thing we ought to realize is that no one is beyond hope, and no one is beyond redemption.

If God's grace and mercy is able to extend to even the chief of sinners, which Saul described himself as, if God's grace and mercy is able to extend to him, then it's able to extend to you, and even to those around you.

[16:07] But you know, my Christian friend here this morning, you know, Saul's conversion, it ought to be the greatest comfort and hope to you.

Because I know that there are people in your home, and in your family, and in your community, and in your workplace, that you're praying for. I know that your longing is that God's mercy and grace would extend to them, and that they would have this encounter with Christ.

My Christian friend, I know that you're burdened for your unconverted husband. I know that you have a care and a concern about your wife, who is still a stranger to grace and to God.

I know that you worry and maybe even cry over your children, who are on the broad road leading to destruction. And I know that you maybe have work colleagues that are easy to get along with, but they seem so careless with their soul.

But you know, my Christian friend, Saul's conversion, it ought to be the greatest comfort and hope for you. Saul's conversion ought to encourage you to keep praying for those around you and to keep speaking to them about Christ and to keep witnessing before them in any and every situation this wonderful Jesus who is able to save to the uttermost.

[17:30] Because if Saul's conversion teaches us anything, it should teach us that if the chief of sinners can be brought to see that he's the chief of sinners, if he's able to be saved, then God is able to save to the uttermost.

And sinners can have a same encounter with this Christ too. So my friend, keep praying for them. Keep praying for your unconverted husband. Keep praying for your unconverted wife.

Keep praying for your friends, your neighbors, your family. because if God is able to change Saul's heart, he's able to do in us and for us exceedingly abundantly above all, more than we could ask or even think.

But you know the thing about Saul's conversion and his encounter with Christ, it's that it was so unexpected. Saul wasn't seeking to have an encounter with Christ.

Saul was seeking to eradicate any mention of Christ. Because Saul was still breathing out threats and murder against Christians. Saul was hunting Christians down in order to kill them.

[18:42] And Saul was determined in his mindset. He was going his own way. He was seeking the desires of his own heart. Saul wasn't expecting an encounter with Christ. But you know, in order for the Lord to bring Saul to himself, the Lord had to meet Saul on the road to Damascus.

the Lord had to stop Saul in his tracks and speak directly to him. Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?

And you know, my unconverted friend, you know, sometimes I wonder. And for those of you here who I know, sometimes I worry.

Sometimes I wonder and sometimes I wonder how the Lord is going to stop you in your tracks. like Saul who was determined in his mindset and going his own way and seeking to fulfill the desires of his own heart.

I sometimes wonder and I sometimes worry with your life so full and your life taken up with all these things in your life and your life is so full and you've got everything around you.

[20:04] I sometimes wonder and I sometimes worry how the Lord is going to stop you in your tracks and speak directly to you. And the reason it concerns me is that it's very unlikely that the Lord will speak to you with bright lights and a voice from heaven.

But it is very likely that the Lord will stop you in your tracks and the Lord will speak to you directly either through sickness suffering or sorrow.

That's why I worry. I worry about what the Lord is going to bring into your life in order to shake you and wake you up to the reality of eternity and your need to turn to Jesus Christ.

Because you know my friend the Lord will stop you in your tracks. just like he stopped Saul. The Lord will speak to you directly just like he spoke to Saul. The Lord will shake you either through sickness, suffering or sorrow.

And the Lord will bring sickness, suffering and sorrow into your life not to drive you away from him but always to drive you to him so that you'll turn to him that you'll be converted because that's what conversion is.

[21 : 28] Conversion is turning away from your old life of sin and turning to eternal life in Jesus Christ. Conversion is turning from sin to salvation, from Satan to Christ, from darkness to light, from being lost to being found, from being a sinner to a saint, from being hell bound to being on the road to glory.

My unconverted friend, you need to be converted and you need to be converted today. You need to be converted today. But as we said, not everyone has this Damascus Road experience.

Most people are converted gradually over a period of days, months, weeks, sometimes in a moment. But you know the important part is not how you're converted.

It's that you're converted. And my unconverted friend, you need to be converted. So that's why I call you my unconverted friend.

Because you need to be converted. And if you're still waiting for this Damascus Road experience, if you're still waiting for the bright lights and the voice from heaven, I can assure you it's not going to happen.

[22 : 49] Because Saul was the only one, Saul was the only one who had this Damascus Road conversion. Saul was the only sinner to ever experience the bright lights and the voice from heaven.

Saul was the only person to ever have an encounter with the risen Christ on the road to Damascus. But you know the wonderful thing is that there are many whom Jesus has spoken to directly and personally through his word.

There are many whom Jesus has knocked on the door of their heart through the preaching, through the reading and through the singing of God's word.

And you know that's what I love about this passage. Jesus spoke to Saul directly and personally.

Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?

me? And you know my friend, when Jesus speaks to you, he speaks to you directly and personally by his Holy Spirit. He speaks to you directly and personally through his word.

[23 : 59] When Jesus speaks to you, he knocks on the door of your heart. And you know the thing is, you know when the Lord is speaking to you.

You know when the word of God is affecting your heart and breaking your conscience. You know when Jesus is speaking to you directly and personally.

You know when the gospel is calling you to come to Christ, to experience eternal life in him. You know. You know when the Lord is talking to you, don't you?

So don't ignore it. don't ignore the knocking because he'll keep knocking. Don't ignore the knocking. Now is the accepted time. Today is the day of salvation. Today if you hear his voice, do not harden your heart.

[25 : 05] Behold, I stand at the door, says Jesus. If anyone opens the door, I will come in and be with them.

We've considered Saul's condemnation, Saul's conversion. Lastly, Saul's calling. Saul's calling. Look at verse 8.

Saul rose from the ground and although his eyes were opened, he saw nothing. So they led him by the hand and brought him into Damascus. And for three days he was without sight and neither ate nor drank.

Now there was a disciple at Damascus named Ananias. The Lord said to him in a vision, Ananias, and he said, here I am, Lord. And the Lord said to him, rise and go to the street called Straight, and at the house of Judas look for a man of Tarshish named Saul, for behold, he is praying.

Saul's Damascus road experience wasn't just the conversion of a man, it was the creation of an apostle. Because an apostle is literally a sent one.

[26 : 17] It's someone who has been personally saved and sent by the risen Christ. And that's what Saul was. Saul was saved and sent by the risen Christ, just like all the other apostles.

But you know, it should be a reminder to us of the kinds of people Jesus saves and sends into service. Because when Jesus chose the original twelve, when he chose the original twelve apostles, he saved and sent this mixed bag into his service.

There were fishermen, there was a tax collector who worked for the oppressive Roman government, there was a zealot who was a freedom fighter against the Roman government, there was a doubter, a denier, and a deceiver.

And yet Jesus saved and sent these apostles into his service. And now on the road to Damascus, the same risen saviour, Jesus Christ, he sends and he saves and he sends the most unlikely

candidate into service.

And you know, it should be a reminder to us, not only that there's no one whom Jesus can't save, but there's no one whom Jesus can't send into service for the furtherance of his kingdom and the glory of his name.

[27 : 38] There's no one whom the Lord can't use. And you know, that's what Ananias had to learn. Because when the Lord told Ananias that Saul had been converted, Ananias could hardly believe it.

Ananias says in verse 13, he answers, Lord, I have heard from many about this man, how much evil he has done to your saints at 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 instrument of mine to carry my name before the Gentiles and kings and the children of Israel, for I will show him how much he must suffer for the sake of my name.

Even though Ananias questioned Saul's salvation, as you would, this man who hated Christians is now a Christian himself. You know, Ananias, he must have been terrified going to meet Saul.

And yet Jesus assures Ananias that he had saved Saul. And he was sending Saul into his service. Even though Saul was desperate to eradicate Christianity, Jesus saved him and sent him.

[28 : 50] And you know the wonderful thing is that Saul would be used as a wonderful means to extend Christianity into Europe. You know, Saul's Damascus Road experience, it impacted the whole of Europe.

It even impacted us here. Saul's Damascus Road experience was not just an experience for Saul. Saul. It was a Damascus Road experience for the whole church.

It was a turning point in the life of the church because it was through Saul's conversion that the gospel was going to spread from Jerusalem to Judea to Samaria to the uttermost parts of the earth. Through Saul's conversion, new churches would be planted. Through Saul's conversion, most of the New Testament would be written. through Saul's conversion, more people would hear this glorious gospel.

And you know, my friend, this passage, it's reminding us today, never think that there are sinners whom Jesus can't save. And never think that there are sinners whom Jesus can't send into service for the furtherance of his kingdom and for the glory of his name.

[30 : 10] He is able to do exceedingly, abundantly, above all, more than we could ask or even think. Saul's condemnation, Saul's conversion, Saul's calling.

But I just want to say in conclusion, there was one clear evidence that Saul had been converted.

And that was when Jesus said to Ananias in verse 11, Behold, he is praying.

Behold, he is praying. The evidence that Saul was saved was that he was praying. Of course, Saul would have prayed as a Pharisee.

He would have prayed those long public prayers in front of everyone. But when Jesus said, Behold, he is praying, this was the first time in Saul's life when Saul's prayers weren't just a formality. they were earnest prayers. They were heartfelt. Saul's prayers were now full of emotion and love for Jesus. And you know what begs the question?

[31 : 24] My unconverted friend, do you pray? Do you pray? I'm not asking if you say your prayers at night. I'm not asking if you recite a prayer that you learned when you were a child.

I'm asking, do you pray? Do you speak to your heavenly father? Do you earnestly pray for your own salvation? Do you pray with all your heart?

Do you pray with emotion and love for Jesus? Do you pray? Do you pray? Because when you pray, when you pray with emotion and love for Jesus, with sincerity and earnestness, that's the evidence that you're converted.

My unconverted friend, you're not beyond hope. You're not beyond redemption. Don't ever say that you're beyond the pale.

If God's mercy is able to extend even to Saul, the chief of sinners, then it's able to extend to you today. God's love for God's love for you must turn to this Jesus.

[32 : 39] You must call upon his name. You must come to him and seek his forgiveness, his freedom, and his fellowship. My friend, today, today if you hear his voice, do not harden your heart.

heart. Do not harden your heart. May the Lord bless these thoughts to us. Let us pray.