

Saul Meets Jesus

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Date: 31 July 2022

Preacher: Duncan Murchison

[0 : 01] Acts chapter 9. What we're thinking about tonight is how Saul, or Paul, meets Jesus for himself.

It seems strange because, well, if we've ever been hated, or perhaps if we're honest, if we've ever hated someone, we know that there's not really a healthy relationship there, that it's a broken relationship, that there's not much hope of it being fixed. And especially if we've been hated by someone, we probably don't really care to know that person, to want to have anything to do with them, to want to help them when they're in need. It takes a lot of grace to be able to do that.

Fortunately for all of us, God is not like me, or I hope it's not just me or like you. He is gracious, always, and he does save those, even those who have hated him, who have completely rejected him. And there are countless stories of this. I was reading one on the Solace website recently. Solace do the public Christianity stuff in Scotland. And they were doing a blog or something, the story of a student who had gone to university, hating God, wanting nothing to do with him, and at university, I think in Dundee or somewhere, they heard about God. They started studying the Bible with another student. And of course, because God is good, they came to believe. They went from hating God to believing. And there's so many stories around the whole world. You maybe heard, I think it was a year or two ago, the story of Seth Mahigia, I think it is. And he was an integral part of the

Atheist Society of Kenya. He went from promoting atheism, being part of an organization that was deliberately against God, against religion, against mostly the Christian faith in that country.

And yet, I think it was with him, the Atheist Society tweeted out that he was no longer part of the organization because he'd come to believe in Jesus. He'd gone from his opposition to Christ to trusting in him. It's incredible. It really does happen. And maybe you're sitting here tonight, and that is your story as well. You've gone from hating Christ to loving him. But all of us can probably say, at the very least, we've gone from indifference to Christ, to God, to loving him. And for those who don't believe, perhaps there is something here for you. Because what we have in Acts chapter 9 is perhaps the most dramatic and the most famous example of this phenomenon of those who are against God coming to trust in him. And to say, as Paul says, that Jesus is the Son of God. He's the way of salvation. That he's the one that we need in this life. It's Paul. Here he's called Saul. One name is

[3 : 15] Greek, one is Hebrew. That's the only real difference. It's the story of a man who has his life transformed from not just hatred, but really what we see, murderous hatred, to loving Jesus and to loving his people. And that same grace that we're going to see. What this is, it's not a story really about Saul, although of course it is. What it is, is a story of the grace of God, the love of God for sinners as we all are. Even to those who have dedicated their lives against Jesus, as we know there are many.

No one is too far away from God's grace. No one is too bad for him. He rescues. He saves. So I want us to think about Paul just under three headings in his encounter with Jesus. First of all, hatred.

Second of all, hunted. And third of all, transformed. So first of all, hatred. And that is something that we do see from those who don't believe. You may remember, it's probably over 15 years ago now, there was the new atheists who promoted an atheism that was not only denying the existence of God, that wasn't just indifferent or apathetic to him, but hated God. And it was guys like Dawkins and Hitchens, and they'd say things like, God is not good. They were active in their hatred. They wanted nothing to do with them because they hated him. And it's almost, they protested almost too much. They just wanted to deny completely that God was even good if he was there. They hated him. But it's not just atheists or those who hate God, at least. Many people might even believe in

some sort of God or another religion, but they don't like the idea of Christianity for various reasons. And we have to say some might have been hurt by church in the past or suffered in some way, and we must be sensitive.

But what's more often the case is people really want independence from God. They want independence from the authority that the Bible holds, that God himself holds over this whole world. What we all really want, in a sense, without God is we want to be the captain of our own fate. We want life to be about us, and we want to get what we want from life. And you might wonder what that has to do with Saul.

Surely, if you know anything about Paul, he was a very religious man. And actually, he's persecuting Christians because of his religion, because of his faith, because he claimed to love God so much. Surely, he was many things. But did he hate God? Yes. Saul hated God because he hated Jesus. He hated Jesus' people. He had all the appearances of loving God. And perhaps this is the challenge to us, because we can certainly appear like Paul. He was very devout and faithful in the Jewish faith. He was a Pharisee, the ones who were most known for their dedication to God's law, to God's word.

[6 : 22] He knew all the laws. He knew all the rules. And even more, he actually kept all the rules. He was very good at what he did. And I'm sure he was a great teacher. And he was zealous. And he would say himself he was advancing so much in the Jewish faith. And he was probably very popular amongst his fellows.

And one of the ways he showed his devotion was to oppose Christianity completely. He saw it as a cult, as a heresy, as something to be stamped out to keep religion pure so that God would be glorified.

And so in chapter 7, he, and the start of chapter 8, he approves the execution of a man called Stephen, a very godly man, but who had fallen foul of the authorities for his faith. And chapter 8, verse 1 says, Saul approved of his execution. He hated, he hated Christ's people. And in fact, we're told that he was, from then on, there was great persecution against the church. Verse 8, verse 3, Saul was ravaging the church and entering house after house. He dragged off men and women and committed them to prison.

This is systematic elimination of Christianity. This is persecution in its most severe. He was going against them, trying to destroy this cult in his eyes as quickly as he could. And he was driven to another city. He was going to Damascus in chapter 9. He was traveling to outside of Israel so that he could find more Christians to lock up and put before the chief priests. He was so driven in his hatred, he was willing to travel. As we're told in verse 9, verse 1, he's breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord. And that's what drives him to Damascus. What he doesn't realize is that he's persecuting the God that he claims to be devoted to. He's persecuting the disciples of Jesus. And in that way, he's persecuting Jesus himself because he's persecuting the body of Jesus. And that's why Jesus will say to him in verse 4, Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me? It's personal for Jesus because his people are being attacked. That's how much Jesus values his people, the church, us. And that's how wrong what Saul was doing was. He was going against Jesus himself. He was going against God. He doesn't believe Jesus is God. That's what makes verse 20 so amazing. He is the son of God because, as we'll see, it's complete transformation. But really, the problem is, you might ask, well, why does he hate this so much? What's the problem with Jesus? What's the problem with Christianity? Well, for Paul, and I think actually for many of us, for many people, is that Jesus being God, that the gospel doesn't fit in with what he wants to be true and with what most people want to be true. Saul is highly religious.

And so he lives in a mindset that says, if I do this, then I'm a good person. I'm a good Jew. I'm a good whatever. And I'll be saved. I'll live. I'll have made it. And hopefully you can see that's just a me-centered religion. That is works. That is doing it for appearances, hedging bets. And what Christianity was saying, what the fact that Jesus died for sins was saying and rose from the dead, was that to believe in Jesus, it's not a performance. It's not works. It's not all these rules. It is all grace. And actually, Paul doesn't want to know that his good works are meaningless.

[10 : 04] All that he's dedicated his life to, it means nothing. It will not save him. And he will say later, and we'll probably read it later from Philippians, that his good works are rubbish, and he counts them as rubbish. But at this point, he's built his whole life on this. And Christianity threatens that with its message of grace, of God's love for sinners. And he loses his power in that. And so he hates it.

He hates Jesus because Jesus tells him that he's not a good person, that he needs something more, that he needs the cross, that he needs forgiveness. And so he's filled with hatred. He's opposed to Christianity. He wants to jump through the hoops. He wants to do the performances. He doesn't want the good news, but see that the gospel is good news. A lot of the time, actually, people don't really hate Christianity. They hate what they see, whether it's in the media or, sadly, from us sometimes. They hate, because sometimes what they really see is Paul at this point. They see that there's something to be done. They see the works religion. They see the religion and not the gospel. What the transformation of the gospel brings, as we'll see, is a completely different way of life, outlook on life. We'll see Saul here, that's not the way. The gospel is the way. But going back to this, we're not all Saul, and we don't all really hate God, we would say. But when it comes down to it, those who don't believe are the same as Saul, because God isn't who Saul wants him to be, and God isn't who often we want him to be, because what we often want is a God who affirms our decisions, who agrees with what we think, who is willing to move with the times, to go with what society says. That's the God that people often want. I don't know if you've ever spoken to someone. He says, well, I could believe in God if God believed, fill in the blank, whatever it might be, because what they really want is a God who just affirms what they think.

[12:06] And that's exactly what Saul's doing, because he's just creating his own God, which is himself. Because if he can just keep all the rules, then he's a good person. Well, if we can have the right views in society, then we're good people, in most people's view at least.

If God only thought exactly how we thought, then he would be a pretty pathetic God. He would be no God at all, one who changes, one who chops and changes, one who is at our whim, rather than being the King of Kings and the Lord of Lords. And if we, like Paul, we want the God who only affirms us in our actions, then when presented with the God of the Bible, what are we going to do? We're going to despise him and want nothing to do with him, because he challenges us, because he says that actually, you've not got it all right. You've not got it all worked out. You actually need the cross.

You need Christ on the cross. You need the Son of God. You need forgiveness. You need the hope of the resurrection. That's what we're told. That's what Saul was being told, and that's what we need to hear. God tells us we need him, that we need Christ, that we need forgiveness. And that is not the popular message, but it is the good message, the good news, because he rescues us. As we're going to see, he intervenes. He pursues us to rescue us from ourselves. It might be subtle, but as we're challenged, we will more and more despise God. And so the question is, what do you think of God?

God? Maybe you do hate God. I don't know. Maybe you could honestly say you don't believe that you hate God, but you want nothing to do with him. We'll see that we need this God, that without him, we're just trying to build our own thing, that we're just trying to live for ourselves, that it's a me centered thing, that it's a religion thing rather than a grace thing. God is a God who challenges us with our need for forgiveness, with our need to bow before the cross and say that there's nothing else for me but Christ. There's nothing else that can save me but him. That's what we're challenged with. That's why Paul hates it. That's why so many ignore, because they can't see anything else. Wherever you stand, whether you hate or whether you don't think you hate, whatever it might be, what we're going to see now is that God can and will and does save people like you and like me.

[14:37] And that brings us on to our second point, hunted. Now, I'm told that that's not the most positive word. So if it helps, maybe think God pursues us, but he does hunt us. Maybe you've heard that poem, the hound of heaven, that kind of the way that God pursues us, chases us down. That poem describes the way God chases down those who run from him, who try and reject him, the hound of heaven.

Well, God pursues us in his grace. And it's a wonderful thing. It's not hunting in the sense of killing, of something negative, but of pursuing us in his love. Paul was hunting for Christians in his hatred. God pursues us in his love, and he will get us. When Paul would tell the story later while he was under arrest, later on in Acts, he's under arrest. And he tells us that actually he was being hunted for a long time, because he says that in verse four, when he'd been asked, Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me? That Jesus also said, it is hard for you to kick against the gods. God had been working in his life. God had been going for him. It's hard for you to kick against the gods. God had been prodding his conscience, telling him, this is wrong. Long before this journey to Damascus, Saul was feeling the guilt of persecuting God's people. There was something in him that knew what

he was doing was wrong. And clearly what he tried to do was to push it down in his heart, to get all these thoughts of Jesus out, to be free from Christ and to be able to live his own life. But he was kicking against the gods. But God was working in him, bringing him to see that guilt. And in fact, when we see the guilt of our sin, that's God's grace working in us, showing us who we are, and giving us the opportunity to turn to him in faith. And yet so many have tried what Paul was trying there, don't they? To kick against the gods, try and resist that conscience that tells them, maybe you're not all that. Maybe I do need Jesus. Maybe I do need forgiveness. Maybe there is a God. A conscience isn't a bad thing. It's a way that God can bring us to him. And the more we try and kick against him, the more we will try and fight. And like Paul, we will hate. But God is working, and that is part of his grace. I'm sure Paul would rather have not had that life kicking against the gods. But God was still working in his grace. And so Saul comes face to face with Jesus. The hound of heaven gets his man. He comes. And Jesus reveals himself to Saul. And he says to Saul, I am Jesus whom you are persecuting. Rise and enter the city, and so on. He's saying, I'm the son of God. I'm here.

You can't deny it. I'm right here before you. And again, that grace is working. Jesus is working to get his people to save Saul. This is grace in action. It is God working, sovereignly saving us. Jesus had a plan. And that plan was to save Saul, to rescue him, to see his eyes opened. Saul's blinded at this moment as he goes into Damascus. For three days, he'll be blind. And we'll see a bit more of this later. But even this being blinded in himself is grace. Saul wasn't going to open his eyes by himself. He wasn't going to see he was wrong just from his own brilliance. By blinding him, Jesus shows him something, that he is in the wrong. There's a story in John's Gospel where Jesus heals a man born blind.

[18:35] And the man goes to the Pharisees, and they argue with him, who healed you? They kind of put him on trial. And then when they meet Jesus, the Pharisees, they come to be told, basically, by Jesus that really they are the ones that are blind because they think that they see. And Jesus is telling them that because they think that by their rule keeping, by their position, that they are the authorities, that they know God, that really they are blind. Well, Paul's a Pharisee. And this is what he's being shown in that very vivid way. He himself is being blinded so that he can forget about himself, so that he can forget about his view of himself, so he can be blinded to good works saving him, and so that he can see Jesus more clearly, so he can have his eyes opened. And what Christians can testify is, along with amazing grace, that I was blind, but now I see. That we were blind to God, that we were blind as we lived for ourselves, as we tried so hard to make it, to either fit in with the world or to be super religious in the negative sense. And yet God opens our eyes. He does it. And here he does it through Ananias.

We read the story. He lives in Damascus, and he's told, go put your hands on Saul and he will regain his sight. And of course, Ananias is unsure. Who wouldn't be? The guy who's there to possibly kill him. He's now being told by God, go to this guy, put your hands on him, see how it goes, that kind of thing. You can imagine, Ananias, please know anything but that. But God has worked in his grace, and Saul is a completely different person. We'll get to that in a minute. But in verse 15, Ananias is told, go for he is a chosen instrument of mine. God has selected him, has chosen him, has rescued him. He has pursued him and will save him. This is what God does. This is how he saves. It's not that we must improve ourselves, as religion says, and reach a higher plane of living. It's not that we must remove ourselves from the world, as monks and other religions might do. It's not that we work hard to make ourselves pleasing to God, acceptable to him. It's that God chose us, that God rescues us, that he is the one who actually intervenes in our life, that he is the one who rescues us. It's not because we're good people in the world's eyes. It's not because we've done anything, but because he's chosen, because in his grace he intervenes, as he does here so amazingly, on this Damascus road. Paul describes it in Galatians chapter 1. He says how he was advancing in Judaism beyond many of his own age. He was so extremely zealous, he said. But he also says he received the gospel from Jesus Christ, and he says, But when he who had set me apart before I was born and who called me by his grace was pleased to reveal his son in me in order that I might preach him among the Gentiles. What Paul says, writing years later, telling the story again, was simply that God had saved him, that Jesus had revealed himself to him.

This is exactly what happened. Jesus appeared. And now you might be thinking, well, that's great for Saul. He's on the Damascus road. A light shines. There's a blinding light. He's blinded. It's so

visual. It's so incredible. And to be honest, there almost certainly won't be a blinding light in all these things, and a man to come and lay his hands on you and heal you. But there is people telling you about Jesus. There is God's word before you where Jesus himself is. There are all these things there to show, to reveal Jesus. And every single believer is saved in the same way. There is no Christian who can come, well, I worked really hard and I then became a Christian because I was doing good enough.

So I thought God must love me now. That's not Christianity. No, we're all saved in the same way. God intervenes as he does with Paul or Saul, whatever you want to call him. God intervenes, reveals himself. And we trust in Christ alone for salvation. That's the only way that we are saved. And even the desire to become a Christian, that comes from God's intervening.

[23 : 12] That is God working, pursuing us. But it is all by grace. It is all by what he does. And that means none of us can be proud or look down on others because it's simply that Jesus has intervened in our lives. It's divine intervention. We've all been blind, or some of us perhaps currently are.

But he will open our eyes. He can do it and he does do it. And this is what makes the gospel so good. Because it doesn't depend on me. It doesn't depend on you. It doesn't depend on any of us. It depends on God. And he is the one who rescues. And that's not an excuse just to sit back and wait. We're to look for him. We're to come to him. We're to turn from sin. But see how secure our forgiveness is. See how certain it is that it is God who does it. And we will never lose it. It will never be forgotten. And all we must do is simply trust that he does it. And that it's not dependent on us. Placing our faith in him. As Paul would later say to the Philippian jailer, believe in the Lord Jesus and you will be saved. You and your household. That's what it takes. Just seeing Jesus, believing in him. And that is God working. Intervening. Saving. All we must do is believe. Not in ourselves. Not in the good that we've done. Not even in the strength of our faith.

But simply believe in Jesus himself and place our faith in him. That is what Saul does here. He meets Jesus and all he can do is bow before him and place his faith in him. And that is what transforms.

[24 : 50] Not all Paul's previous hard work. That was worthless. It is believing in Jesus, the one who has pursued him. The one who has intervened in his life and rescued him. God has the power to do that for every single one of us. And that is what God wonderfully, mercifully, graciously chooses to do to rescue sinners like me and you. And that does transform. That's our final point. Third of all, transformed. It really does make a difference. And in fact, in Paul, we see that immediate change in his attitude, his priorities, his whole life. What most people do when they realize they need a change, it'll be the self-help books, whatever the bestseller is. We'll speak to friends.

We'll get affirmation. Oh yeah, you should do that. Oh, you're completely right. You do need to change this. And of course, friends can be helpful and so on. But what really transforms is what some have called the expulsive power of a new affection. And that simply means just our love for Jesus motivating us in all that we do. This transformation is done by God. Ananias, as we read, goes to Saul. And what Ananias has told us is not that he's chosen. What he's chosen for is to carry God's name before the Gentiles and kings and children of Israel and to suffer. This is God working in his life to transform him.

But when Ananias goes, we see that transformation beginning immediately. It already started. But when he goes, he calls him Brother Saul. That sounds minor. You know, that's what Christians might call each other, brother and sister. But that's exactly it, isn't it? Because this guy hated Jesus. This guy hated Jesus' people. This guy wanted to kill Ananias. This guy's Ananias' brother now. They have been united in Christ's family, in Christ's body. The persecutor and the persecuted have come together as brothers. That's transformation. That's something only the gospel can do. And Saul becomes part of that family. He becomes one of God's people and he belongs as one of God's children.

Imagine how it must have felt for him to just be reminded of the amazing grace of God of that experience. Imagine Saul thinking, this guy's calling me Brother. I wanted to kill him. And he's calling me Brother. This is transformation. And we're told as well that he's going to be filled with the Holy Spirit. He's one of God's people and he has God's presence within him. He's transformed because God is within him and his sight is regained. So he's a brother. He's got the Holy Spirit. And thirdly, he can see again. The scales fall from his eyes. And it's that picture of the transformation

that God's grace has worked. And though he was blind, though he was blind his whole life thinking he was good, thinking he'd done enough, thinking that his religion was the way instead of Jesus, Jesus. Now he sees. And of course, we're left to infer that he sees that what he needs is the Son of God, is Jesus himself. That's what it is to see. And that is transformation when we're able to see that, that we don't need ourselves. We need Jesus and his death and his whole life of righteousness and his resurrection from the dead. That's what we need. And that's what it is to be transformed and to have your eyes opened. That we're not relying on ourselves. It's not self-reliance.

[28 : 38] It's Christ-reliance. And we mentioned it earlier. It's worth just reading a bit of it. Paul writes to the Philippians, whatever gain I had, I counted as loss for the sake of Christ. I count everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus, my Lord. For his sake, I've suffered the loss of all things and count them as rubbish in order that I may gain Christ and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God that depends on faith. Isn't that wonderful? Doesn't it just sum up what we've been saying? A righteousness not of his own that comes from the law, but that which comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God that depends on faith. Everything else is rubbish.

It's faith in Christ and it's transformation to see that. And that is the work that God does. Saul is a completely different man. It can only come from Jesus intervening in his life and from Paul putting his faith in Jesus. No works, only faith in Jesus. And that's a very freeing thing, actually. You know, what Paul was doing before, it must have been exhausting. Having to live with all these little specific rules, having to live with the pressure of being a Pharisee, of having to do this and this and this, and everyone's eyes on you. Exhausting. Religion, in the negative sense, is exhausting. What doesn't come from faith is exhausting.

And as Christians even, those of us who believe, we default to this way of thinking where we have to reach some sort of standard before God will love us. And I worry sometimes that I'm thinking in terms of, even as a Christian, I've got to, you know, the years I've got left, got to reach some certain standard. But no, we are saved once and for all. And it's not that we don't do good, but we do good out of this appreciation for that, out of that love for Jesus and knowing that we have been loved. But non-Christians as well live to please something, whether it's some sort of idol, some sort of ideal, whether it's the ambition, whatever it might be, career, money, family. These things never match up with our expectations. How many things have we wanted so badly and then we get them and they're fine, but they're a little disappointing. And even when we do get what we think we're looking for, it's never enough. People never seem to be satisfied, do they? But the gospel frees us because it tells us that whatever gain we had, it's rubbish. But there's something far, worth far more, and that is knowing Christ and being found in him and having his righteousness. And that is what truly matters.

[31 : 44] It's transformation. It's freedom. And so Paul will show his transformation as he goes and he proclaims Jesus, saying he is the Son of God. He shows that transformation. It's obvious to all.

They must have been so confused. How's this happened? How's Saul become such a Christian? Wasn't he here to persecute? How's he done this? There in Damascus, though, straight away, he's telling people, Jesus is the Son of God. You need him. You need to believe in him. Immediately, he does it and the people notice. People see that Saul has changed. And maybe that's the most challenging part of this. Believing in Jesus does make a difference. It transforms what we live for, our whole outlook. It shows us we're spiritually blind sinners, but it shows us a new way of life. Living life with the power of the Holy Spirit under grace.

And yet, I challenge myself with this first and foremost. Will people see that transformation as I live my life every single day? Will they see someone brought from self-reliance, from sin, to trusting only in Christ, to counting everything else as rubbish and living for him?

I don't know. We must live that new life. And it affects every part of our life. Those of us who believe, we're not called just to attend church, to consume, to listen to the sermons, to sing along with the songs. Good as that is, don't misunderstand me.

[33 : 25] But we are called to live out that transformed life wherever God places us. Wherever we find ourselves, we are to live as one of his people, living out the gospel in our work, in our families, in our hobbies, wherever they take us. We live for Jesus. We live for him. Every single one of us, not just the ministers, not just the elders, the deacons, the Bible study leaders. Every single one of

us for him. Why? Well, because of what we just said. Because he has rescued us. Because he has saved us. And we don't do it out of a slavish fear. We don't do it because we think it will make us right with God. We do it because we're basking in the grace of God that has rescued us. We're doing it because we love Jesus and we count him as far greater than anything else in this whole world, anything else that this world can offer. See that Jesus truly does love. Even those who have spent their whole lives going against God, he will save, he will intervene, he will accept any who come to him in faith and he will never turn away. And he will show that grace, place that faith in him, be transformed, live for him. See Saul's example. If you read the rest of Acts, you'll see just what an impact the glorious gospel of Jesus Christ had on his life. How he lived for Jesus because he counted knowing Jesus as being worth far more than anything else. May God bless that to us. Let's pray to him.

Heavenly Father, we do pray that we would never move on from the gospel, that we would never think we're too advanced for the good news of grace. And Lord, that we would never see others as too far away from your grace, but as those you can rescue, as those you can save, as those you can draw to you in your love.

Lord, give us the humility that knows that we are only saved because you have loved us, because you are God. Not because of anything we've done, not because of any worthiness in ourselves, simply because of your grace and mercy. Lord, help us to have our faith purely on Christ Jesus, our Lord, and not in anything else. Lord, we thank you that you accept even the weakest faith, as long as it's placed in Christ. Lord, we thank you that we have Christ's righteousness, and that is what you see. Lord, we pray that these things would never be taken from our minds and hearts, but the gospel is what we would always stand in and never lose sight of. Pray all this in in Jesus' name and for his sake. Amen.