

# A Converted Jew

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[ 0 : 0 0 ] This is the evening service on the 8th of August 1999 at Holy Trinity.

The preacher is Warwick Grant. His sermon is entitled A Converted Jew and is from Acts Chapter 21 verse 37 through to Chapter 22 verse 30.

Probably the most disturbing thing I've ever seen on television was a few years ago on a news report. It was when tensions were really, really big in Northern Ireland.

I mean, they're still pretty substantial, but I mean, people were really hot with rage in the opposing sides in the Northern Ireland problem. I can't even remember the circumstances surrounding this particular incident, but it was very clearly televised.

Maybe you saw it yourself. It was probably Catholics attacking Protestants or Protestants attacking Catholics. I'm not even sure who was attacking whom. But tempers were really high and the TV news story showed this car carrying a policeman or a soldier from one of the sides.

[ 1 : 1 4 ] And somehow it had gone into the wrong part of a certain town and this mob of the opposing side surrounded the car. And what was shown next was quite ugly and quite disturbing as the crowd smashed the windows of the car, dragged out the occupants and there and then killed them.

All on our TV news screens. Well, you remember from the end of last week's reading and what we just saw then at the start of the video, that something similar was about to happen to St. Paul.

Paul was accused of giving teaching that was against the Jewish people and against their law. And he was actually accused of bringing non-Jews into that part of the temple only reserved for Jews.

An offence punishable by death. Of course, all Paul had been doing was preaching about Jesus. That's what he was on about since he became a Christian.

We're told in Acts chapter 21 verse 31 that Paul was seized and he was dragged out of the temple and they were trying to kill him. Indeed, he would have been killed had it not been for the fact that the Romans arrested him.

[ 2 : 3 3 ] The Romans actually rescued him. And you could see the violence was so bad, the Roman soldiers actually had to carry him up those stairs so the crowd couldn't get to him.

The crowd simply wanted him dead. Well, none of this perhaps should surprise us because Jesus himself warned us in the Gospels, doesn't he, that we should expect to be persecuted as Christian people.

Now, in Australia, we don't face persecution such as that that Paul faced. But in many countries of the world, you can be killed because you follow Jesus today. Well, we come to tonight's reading, which we saw in the video.

If you want to follow it in the Black Bibles in front of you, it's page 906. Page 906. I'm going to start at verse 37, which is at the bottom of the column there.

And I'll read verses 37 and 38. Okay. Just as Paul was about to be brought into the barracks, he said to the tribune, that's like the commanding officer, may I say something to you?

[ 3 : 46 ] The tribune replied, do you know Greek? Then you are not the Egyptian who recently stirred up a revolt and led the 4,000 assassins out into the wilderness.

Paul was an educated guy. He could speak a few languages. He was a brainy guy. And he was able to speak Greek. Not everyone in that part of the world in Jerusalem could speak Greek.

But he was educated and he could. And he immediately grabbed the commander's attention. Sort of, wow, you speak Greek. I thought you're just some rabble rouser. But you obviously are an educated person.

And the commander was immediately reminded of an Egyptian rebel or terrorist who had led a revolt of several thousand people in Jerusalem in AD 54.

But the Roman soldiers who were really swift to crush any opposition. They were just expert at it. And they truly did it. They killed most of the followers of this revolt.

[ 4 : 44 ] But this Egyptian guy had escaped. Well, they thought that Paul was this Egyptian guy come back. But that was a case of mistaken identity. And Paul goes on to make his defense, explaining that he's very much a Jewish man from a place called Tarsus.

And he seeks permission to speak to the crowd. And this was granted. I suppose given the attitude of the crowd towards him, it's surprising that they gave him any attention. But they did.

And he began his defense in the language of his hearers. He immediately didn't speak Greek, but their own language, Aramaic. Or I think our Bibles say Hebrew. And that really got their attention.

We're told they went very quiet. They thought, this guy can speak our language. Well, perhaps we'll give him a hearing. We'll listen to what he's got to say. Well, Paul goes on at the beginning of chapter 22 at the top of page 907 to basically give his resume.

He says, here's my resume. This is what I want about. This is my history, my personal history, my educational history. Listen to this. He wants to show them he's very much a zealous Jew, someone who's really cranked up about following God and following the Jewish law.

[ 5 : 59 ] And he doesn't do this to show off and say, aren't I good? Look at all the stuff I've done. But to convince the audience who are at the point of lynching him that he wasn't anti-Jewish. But very much as far as Jewish things were concerned, he was full on.

Well, let's have a quick look at this speech and what he said about himself. I'll start at verse 3. He says, I am a Jew, born in Tarsus in Cilicia, but brought up in this city at the feet of Gamaliel, educated strictly according to our ancestral law, being zealous for God, just as all of you are today.

Well, who's this Gamaliel guy that he refers to? We're told that Paul was brought up in Jerusalem at the feet of Gamaliel. Well, that's a figure of speech to say that he sat at Gamaliel's feet.

Gamaliel was his teacher and the students sat at the teacher's feet. And Gamaliel taught him about the Jewish law. He was probably the most highly respected Jewish teacher of the first century.

He was known and respected as an expert on religious law. So Paul had the best Jewish teacher around and he was zealous for God.

[ 7 : 15 ] He's got pretty good credentials for someone who claims to be a Jew. God meant everything to him. The Jewish law meant everything to him. And he was full on about it. It made me think, could we say the same thing about our own relationship with God, with Jesus?

Are we as cranked up about God as Paul was? Now, as a Jewish person before he became a Christian, there were a few things in which Paul was misguided. But he was cranked up and desiring to serve God.

Do we have that same desire in our lives? Or are we mediocre, lukewarm in our attitude towards God? Paul was 110% committed to God.

Verse 4 and 5. Well, Christians or followers of Jesus at this time weren't known as Christians.

That came later. They were known at that time as followers of the way. So if you followed the way, oh, you're one of those people that follows that Jesus guy. So Christianity was known as the way.

[ 8 : 43 ] And in verse 4, Paul admits that he actually persecuted Christians so far that they were persecuted and sometimes even killed. Verse 5 tells us that the Jewish leaders even gave Paul some letters, sort of letters of reference, which he took to Damascus, which is still the present day capital of Syria.

And these letters assisted him in his search for Christians so he could round them all up and bring them all back to Jerusalem to be punished. That's what he was cranked up about, grabbing Christians and getting them and stopping them and crushing them.

In verses 6 to 16, Paul recounts his amazing experience of meeting the risen Lord Jesus, which caused him to become a Christian person.

And this event you can read in chapter 9 of the book of Acts. And we get a couple more details as he tells this story in tonight's reading. But I thought rather than read this account in chapter 22 in front of us, I thought you might like to see the video of Paul's conversion experience, which he describes.

So I hope you can see the TV and we'll look at the account from chapter 9 of the book of Acts of Paul's conversion. Meanwhile, Saul was still breathing out murderous threats against the Lord's disciples.

[ 10 : 13 ] 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 him flashed around him.

He fell to the ground and heard a voice say to him, Saul, Saul. Saul. Saul. Why do you persecute me?

Who are you, Lord? Saul asked. I am Jesus, whom you are persecuted.

He replied. Now get up and go into the same. We will be told what you must do. Saul. Then traveling with Saul, stood there speechless.

[ 11 : 32 ] They heard the sound, but did not see any. 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, where he is praying.

In a vision he has seen a man named Ananias come and place his hands on him to restore his sight. Lord, Ananias answered.

[ 12 : 45 ] I've heard many reports on this man. And all the harm he has done to your sins, senior. 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 carry my name before the Gentiles and their kings and before the people of Israel.

I will show him how much he must suffer for my name. Then Ananias went to the house and headed.

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 arm and he could see it. He got up in his back times and after taking some food, he redeemed his throne.

[ 14 : 28 ] 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 it were astonished and asked, Isn't he the man who raised havoc in Jerusalem among those who call on this name?

And hasn't he come here to take them as prisoners to achieve priests? Yet Saul grew more and more powerful and baffled the Jews living in Damascus by proving that Jesus is the Christ. After many days had gone by, the Jews conspired to kill him.

But Saul learned that they're fine. Day and night, they kept close watch on the city gates in order to kill him. But his followers took him by night and lured him in a basket through an opening in the wall.

Day and night, they kept close watch on the wall. When he came to Jerusalem, he tried to join the disciples, but they were all...

You'll notice that before Saul was a Christian, his name was Saul.

[ 15 : 44 ] And when he became a Christian, he became known as Paul. But it's the same person. Well, that's from Acts chapter 9. And that's how he became a Christian and how he met the risen Jesus in that amazing...

You'd have to describe it as supernatural experience, I suppose. But it was an experience from God where he met Jesus Christ for himself. I heard a Jewish guy who became a Christian speaking once and he said...

And I'll never forget this as long as I live. He said, The most Jewish thing a Jew can do is not to go to Jerusalem, not to have a B'mitzvah, not to go to the synagogue regularly, not to do anything like that.

But he said, The most Jewish thing a Jew can do is to trust in Jesus Christ. The Old Testament is like a great big arrow that points to Jesus and pointing us to him.

And the most Jewish thing any Jewish person can do is to put their faith and trust in the Lord Jesus Christ. That's the mark of a true Jew. That's what Paul had done.

[ 16 : 56 ] He'd been educated in all the Jewish law and all those teachings quite rigorously under Gamaliel, this great teacher. And he'd seen that Jesus was the one. Jesus was God's son.

Jesus was God. And he had to put his faith and trust in him. And as we saw from that, he did. And became a follower of Jesus. You'll notice in verse 14 of chapter 22, on page 907, that one of the things Ananias says to Saul is that God had chosen him to know his will, to see the righteous one, that's a reference to Jesus, and to hear his voice.

So Paul actually saw the risen Lord Jesus. Now, after Jesus rose from the dead following his crucifixion, he remained on the earth for about 40 days and appeared to a number of people, even on one occasion to 500 at one time.

I don't know if you've been watching the TV news or reading the papers in the last week, but we've heard some comments, or I've read some comments, from some various church leaders, even very high-up church leaders, like the Archbishop of Canterbury, saying that they understand that people find Jesus' resurrection a very difficult thing to believe in.

They say that the fact that Jesus died a very horrific death on a cross is, we can understand that, you know, someone would die such a horrific death, but that he rose from death is quite hard to believe.

[ 18 : 28 ] I think that's utter nonsense and certainly not the sort of thing we should be hearing from the leadership of our churches, particularly people as high up as that.

Now, some church leaders have said, and no one from this church, I might say, that we can't prove that Jesus rose from the dead. And I suppose if you were to push me into a corner, I'd agree with that.

We can't prove it. We can't prove that Jesus rose from the dead. But there is just a great big pile of evidence which makes an overwhelming case that Jesus did in fact rise from death.

So while we say, well, we can't prove it, and who knows, maybe we can prove it. I just don't have all the information. We might not be able to prove it, but we can be confident about it.

We have the eyewitness reports of people written in the scriptures for us, even reports from people who are in non-biblical sources, non-biblical documents, documents outside the Bible, who say that, yes, this guy Jesus did rise from the dead.

[ 19 : 35 ] Now, I don't now propose to give a list of arguments for Jesus' resurrection, but I am confident, and I am certain, that it indeed did happen. As Jesus said to one of his disciples, Thomas, remember Thomas, he was the guy who refused to believe that Jesus had come back to life unless he could see Jesus and put his finger where the nails had been.

And Jesus said to Thomas, have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and have yet come to believe. That's from John's Gospel, chapter 20.

So our church leaders shouldn't be going around saying, we can't prove Jesus' resurrection. What they should be saying is, yes, the evidence is overwhelming and we can be confident and certain that it is true.

To repeat Jesus' words from John's Gospel, blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe. Isn't that what faith is all about?

I suppose what I'm saying to you guys is that Paul had had a vision of the risen Lord Jesus and he knew that Jesus had risen from the dead.

[ 20 : 52 ] And we know from verse 16 that Paul had become a Christian, was baptised and was calling on his name. And this gives us great hopes for our own evangelistic efforts.

Think in your own mind of the most hardened, stubborn, red-necked, obnoxious person that you know that resists Christianity. And if God can convert St. Saul to Paul, the Christian, he can convert anyone.

So don't give up on praying for your most stubborn non-Christian friends. God can touch the hearts of anyone. Let's go on to verse 17. Paul continues speaking and says, After I had returned to Jerusalem and while I was praying in the temple, I fell into a trance and saw Jesus saying to me, Hurry and get out of Jerusalem quickly because they will not accept your testimony about me.

And I said, Lord, they themselves know that in every synagogue I imprisoned and beat those who believed in you. And while the blood of your witness, Stephen, was shed, I myself was standing by, approving and keeping the coats of those who killed him.

So Paul had this vision of Jesus while he was praying in the temple and Jesus warned him to get out of Jerusalem, leave Jerusalem. But Paul thought, But hang on, I'd be the best person to tell the Jews about Jesus.

[ 22 : 17 ] I mean, they know that I'm a really zealous Jew and I'm pretty full on about all that stuff. And I've met you now, Lord. Why don't you send me to tell all these Jewish people about you? But he had to obey Jesus and Jesus said to leave Jerusalem.

What really got up the noses of the Jewish people who heard Paul speaking? And we see this in verse 21 where it says, Then he said to me, this is Jesus speaking to Paul, Go, for I will send you far away to the Gentiles.

That really irritated them. A Gentile is simply someone who isn't a Jew. And God had intended that the Jews with their faith would eventually share God's love not just with other Jews but with the whole world to even non-Jewish people or Gentile people.

We know this from Genesis chapter 12 where God calls Abraham and says, Through you, all the peoples, all the nations of the world will be blessed. The Jews had forgotten this and they just kept God's life to themselves and didn't share it with anyone else.

They looked down their noses at anyone who wasn't a Jew. That's why they were so upset when Paul mentioned that Jesus had said to go to the Gentiles to tell them about him.

[ 23 : 34 ] Look at their reaction in verse 22 and 23. Up to this point they listened to him but then they shouted, Away with such a fellow from the earth for he should not be allowed to live.

And while they were shouting, throwing off their cloaks and tossing dust into the air, the tribune directed that he was to be brought into the barracks. So these funny things they did, throwing off their clothes and throwing dust in the air were signs of disapproval.

Well, the commander, the tribune guy, well he'd probably had enough and this Roman guy, the commander had probably no idea what it was all about because he wasn't a Jew. He was just sort of a spectator watching this religious discussion go on and thought, I have no idea what all this is about.

This guy looks like a troublemaker. I'm going to take him inside and interrogate him. And he was to be brought into the barracks to be examined by flogging. What do I mean by flogging?

What I'm talking about here is torture. Paul was to be tortured. He was going to be whipped but this was no ordinary whip. This was a whip with pieces of metal or bone embedded in the tail of the whip.

[ 24 : 41 ] And from such a beating, from my preparing for this sermon, I've read that some people even died and many were left cripples. So basically Paul was to be interrogated under torture.

But let's look at what happens in verse 25 and 6. When they had tied him up with thongs, Paul said to the centurion who was standing by, is it legal for you to flog a Roman citizen who is uncondemned?

When the centurion heard that, he went to the tribune and said to him, what are you about to do? This man is a Roman citizen. Well, the Roman Empire in those days spread all around, well, North Africa, a lot of Europe and the present day Holy Land.

And right around the Mediterranean Sea, the Romans were in control. And to be a Roman citizen gave you special privileges. And one was that you couldn't be whipped without trial.

Wasn't that nice of them to afford you that privilege if you were a Roman citizen? Well, the centurion freaked out when he heard that he'd bound up Paul and was about to whip him. He realized he was doing something illegal by binding this guy who was a Roman citizen.

[ 25 : 52 ] And in verse 27, we read, the tribune came and asked Paul, tell me, are you a Roman citizen? And he said, yes. The tribune answered, it cost me a large sum of money to get my citizenship.

Paul said, but I was born a citizen. Immediately, those who were about to examine him drew back from him and the tribune was also afraid for he realized that Paul was a Roman citizen and that he had bound him.

He'd tied him up. Well, there were three ways you could get your Roman citizenship. One was, if you'd done some outstanding service to the Roman Empire, you were conferred Roman citizenship, which give you all sorts of privileges.

I suppose it's a bit like, you know, if you come as an immigrant to Australia, you become an Australian citizen, you have privileges that non-Australian citizens don't have. You could buy your citizenship at a considerable price.

Now, theoretically, money wasn't exchanged to become a Roman citizen, but I expect that bribes had to be given to various officials if you wanted to. So ultimately, it cost money and you could bribe your way to become a Roman citizen.

[ 27 : 00 ] The other way is that you could be born into a family of Roman citizens, sort of like an hereditary thing. So if your granddad was a Roman citizen and your dad was, you could be one as well.

Well, that was the way that Paul was a Roman citizen. We don't know how, whether it was his dad or his uncle or his grandfather or whatever, but he had it and he hadn't had to buy it like this Roman commander.

And the fact that this Roman commander was about to order that Paul was whipped made him realise just how close he'd come to doing something illegal. Well, the final verse of today's reading is verse 30 and I'll read it now.

Since he wanted to find out what Paul was being accused of by the Jews, the next day he released him and ordered the chief priests and the entire council to meet. He brought Paul down and had him stand before them.

So, Paul was released. He didn't get whipped and that's a great thing because Paul could have been killed by that process. And the following day, I think it was, the chief priests and Jewish council were ordered to meet with Paul present.

[ 28 : 07 ] And next week, we'll see what happens in chapter 23. Well, as I was preparing this, I thought, well, it's a really interesting story, but goodness, what on earth does that have to say to us?

How does that apply to us in 1999? I suppose the things that I thought of, three things. One is, would we be as bold as Paul in that situation?

If we had a whole lot of opposition facing us from school, our peers, workmates, whatever it is, neighbours, family members who are not Christians, would we be as bold in giving a defence of our faith?

And Paul, remember, had a mob in front of him that were about to kill him. And he still asked for permission and was able to give a defence of his faith. Would we be as bold as that?

Would we have the guts to do that? Second thing is, would we know what to say? If someone confronted you and said, well, what do you really believe? Who is this Jesus? Would you go, blah, blah, blah, blah, I don't know, I've never sort of had to talk about it before.

[ 29 : 12 ] Have you been equipped to share your faith? Have you sought to perhaps do a course, a simple course, like some of the ones we offer here at Holy Trinity, about how to share your faith with others? They're very simple and you can speak to me about those later if you'd like to find out about them.

Would you know what to say if you were confronted? And the last one is, would you have the guts, the courage? A bit like the boldness issue, I suppose. The last thing I'll just mention is a thing that happened to me only yesterday.

Opportunities for us to share our faith come at the most inconvenient times or what we perceive to be inconvenient times. I think if you're about to be killed by a mob, I'd call it an inconvenient time to share your faith, wouldn't you?

Well, yesterday we had a youth group outing to Weasley College and there were a whole lot of other youth groups and I felt like death warmed up. I mean, you can tell I've got a, I don't want a medal for this story, I don't want any rewards or anything like that.

I'm just telling you because it just was very recent in my own weekend, I suppose. And, yeah, I felt really awful. I felt quite sick and I'm feeling better now but there was a girl who'd been coming to our youth group for the last three weeks and we knew that she was going back to Hong Kong later this week.

[ 30 : 28 ] She's flying back and she'd just been in Australia for three weeks but she'd come to youth group with a friend. And, yeah, her name was Victoria and I thought, we should share the gospel with her.

We should tell her about Jesus because we may never see her again. So I was sitting next to Katie, another one of our youth group leaders who's here tonight and I said, Katie, I feel awful and this is not what I really want to do right now but I think we should share the gospel with Victoria.

And she looked at me and said, okay, okay. She didn't say, okay, I said that then. And so we did and it was very difficult because it was a very noisy situation but we attempted to share the gospel and I'm not saying this to show off and say, aren't Katie and I wonderful?

But I just felt it was a very inconvenient time. I felt dreadful but we did and we gave her a little tract and hopefully Victoria will think and pray and accept Jesus as her Lord and Saviour. So perhaps it was a lesson for me that we need to be ready at all times to share our faith in Jesus with others and Paul did that even when he was about to be killed.

Let's say a prayer. Lord God, thanks for your servant Paul. God, he was a really gutsy guy and I want to thank you for him and his great example.

[ 31 : 42 ] God, I really pray you'd give us courage to speak up about our faith in a sensitive and appropriate way that you would help us to be equipped to speak of Jesus to our friends, perhaps doing a course of some sort.

Lord, we just want to be agents of your love and of your good news, of your forgiveness the eternal life that you offer everyone. Lord, we pray that we can be like your servant Paul and follow your leading and share the good news wherever we go.

We ask it in Jesus' name. Amen.