

SUMMER 7 - Damascus Road and After

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Preacher: Andrew Reid

[0 : 00] Well friends, please sit down and I'll pray. Father, we thank you again for this wonderful book that you have given us, about people who proclaimed your word in a world long before this one, or long before us in time.

And yet, Father, we thank you that the world that they spoke to is a world just like ours, and they are people just like us. We thank you for this passage tonight. We thank you for this passage tonight, which also introduces us to a person like us.

So Father, we pray that you'd help us understand this passage tonight, and understanding it, that you'd help us to grasp what you are saying through it, but also live it. We pray this in Jesus' name.

Amen. Friends, I need to tell you tonight that this is not strictly speaking an exposition in the sense that we're going through this passage verse by verse. Rather, I'm concentrating, I've come back, we'd moved on to the end of chapter 11, you'll remember, and I've come back to chapter 9.

And I've done that because really I think it's such a crucial chapter for understanding Paul the Apostle. And therefore I want you, and not only Paul the Apostle in Acts, but Paul the Apostle in the epistles as well.

[1 : 16] And so I want to help you try and understand Paul as much as one can, but understand the man who was converted here and what led to his conversion and so on.

So that's why we started with that very strange reading. Let me explain. I want you to imagine that situation. There are God's people in the wilderness. In Numbers 25, we saw them there and camped at a place called Shittim.

And they had been wandering for some time now. They'd grown tired of Moses. They had grown tired perhaps of his God. And they had grown quite interested in the young women, the young local women.

And they were young. They were apparently quite verbiatious and sexually active and available. And the temptation was too much. And so the Israelite men took Moabite women into their tents.

And they ate together. They drank together. They partied together. And they slept together. And they worshipped the God Baal together. And the Lord God, the Holy God, reacted.

[2 : 18] And Numbers 25 verse 3 says that the Lord's anger was kindled against Israel. And in verse 4, God speaks to Moses and says these words.

The Lord said to Moses, Take all the chiefs of the people and impale them in the sun before the Lord, in order that the fierce anger of the Lord may turn away from Israel. We're not sure whether the word is impale or lift up or hang or whatever it is.

But it's not nice, whatever it is. That is, it's not a very pleasant punishment. And it's very significant. It's the heads of tribes and so on. And in verse 5, Moses relays the command to the faithful judges of Israel.

And he says, And so the judgment began. Verse 8 indicates that some sort of plague also came and swept through the people.

Verse 6 tells us that the Israelites began to weep at the entrance of the tent of meeting. Presumably they were greed-stricken because of their sin. Perhaps they were mourning because of the death or prospect of the death of their friends.

[3 : 20] And then just then, just then in the sight of Moses and the grieving Israelites, while they are there before the tent of meeting, just then under their very noses, an Israelite, I can imagine him in the corner of their eyes, there he is, he walks across the camp, enters into the camp, walks across behind them.

Everyone looking on knows that his bringings can see with him a Midianite woman. Together they walk toward the family tent. There'd be no doubt what would happen.

Their intentions appear to be very obvious. This man would do what so many other Israelite men were doing. He would have sex with this woman. And he would welcome her into his house, this foreigner, this Gentile.

And he would do so in open defiance of the law. And in open defiance, not only of the law, but of the God who stood behind the law. Now, all of this was just too much for one man.

One particular man, Phinehas, son of Aaron, the high priest, grabbed a spear off one of the men standing nearby. And while everyone looked on, he marched toward the man's tent.

[4 : 33] And he killed both the man and the woman. Later Israelite tradition says that he found the two of them in the very act of sexual intercourse and drove the spear through their coupled bodies.

At this point, we're told in the text that God's anger was abated and the plague stopped. And the Lord said to Moses these words.

You can read them in chapter 25, verses 10 to 13. Phinehas, son of Eliezer, son of Aaron, the priest, has turned away my wrath from the Israelites by manifesting such zeal among them on my behalf, that in my jealousy I did not consume the Israelites.

Therefore, I hereby grant him a covenant, my covenant of peace. It shall be for him and for his descendants after him. It'll be a covenant of perpetual priesthood because he was zealous for his God and made atonement for the Israelites.

Now, from this day on, Phinehas became a model of all good, zealous, God-fearing Jews. God loves, and we're taught by this text, God loves people who honor him.

[5 : 43] God looks with great favor upon those who are zealous for him. God rewards those who seek his glory and his honor. Men and women like Phinehas keep Israel pure.

However, they atone for the sins of other Israelites. And friends, it is an odd place to start this talk, isn't it, on Acts? However, what I want you to do is keep it in the back of your minds, this particular text.

You see, I think this story will perhaps shed some light on and help us understand some of what we will see happen. With that said, turn with me to the book of Acts.

And let's go to chapter 9. And as we do, let's refresh our minds as to what we've seen so far. Remember in our second talk, we looked at Acts chapter 1, verses 6 to 8. And we heard that God's people were given a job description that they were to be witnesses from Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria, and even to the ends of the world.

In Acts 2, they were given the spirit who would enable them to do and to fulfill this charter from God. And in subsequent chapters, this same spirit helps them get on with this very task.

[6 : 52] Now, the first thing the spirit does, you might remember, is to drive them to reach out to their Jewish countrymen and women. And they do this in Acts 2 and thereafter. The second thing that the Holy Spirit does is to drive them to reach out to Greek-speaking Hellenistic Jews.

This begins to happen right away, right from the beginning. But it reaches a climax in Acts 6 and 7, which we looked at last week. The next thing the spirit does is he drives them to reach out to Samaritans.

This happens in Acts chapter 8. And fourthly, the spirit drives them to reach out to social and religious outsiders, such as the Ethiopian eunuch, that we looked at last Sunday night.

Now, therefore, at the end of chapter 8, there is a question that waits to be answered. And the question is this. What will happen now?

Where will the spirit drive the people of God now? He has taken them to Jews, Hellenistic Jews, Samaritans, social and religious outcasts. Where will he take them to next?

[7 : 56] Now, of course, the answer is obvious when you put it that way, isn't it? And it's hinted at by the conversion of the Ethiopian eunuch, who was in all likelihood a Gentile. The Gentiles are next.

But this, in turn, raises another question. How will the spirit do it? And that's the question that Acts 9 through to 11 addresses. Chapter 9 prepares us for God's push to the Gentiles by talking about the man who will be his instrument for reaching them.

It talks about, in other words, Saul, the persecutor of Christians, the man who will become God's emissary, God's apostle to the Gentiles. And in Acts 10 and 11, we're told about the conversion of Cornelius and the pouring out of the spirit upon the Gentiles.

Now, we looked at Cornelius last week. Today, we're going to look at Saul. Or last Sunday, today, we're going to look at Saul. And let me say, I think it is very hard for us to imagine Saul in his pre-Christian days.

It is very hard. Because our thinking is so coloured by reading his Christian writings. Not his Jewish ones, if there were any.

[9 : 09] We know very little, in one sense, of his Jewish life. However, his own letters do give us enough information to enable us to put together what we could say might be a composite picture of Paul the pre-Christian Jew.

I want to try and get inside this pre-Christian Paul or Saul tonight. I want to try you to understand the man who set out for Damascus in Acts chapter 9. And my source for putting together this composite picture of Saul, or Paul, is the various bits of information and autobiographical bits of information in his letters.

I'm also going to use various bits and pieces of information about Jews gathered from the time of Paul. Now, in your outlines, I've given you the sources for that information. So later on, you can go and check it out yourself.

However, for the moment, I wonder if you'd just sort of sit back, relax a little, and see if you can imagine with me the man Paul, or the man Saul, we meet in Acts chapter 9.

To make it even more graphic for you, I want you to imagine that you are Saul. That is, you are this man. That's the name Paul was known by before he became a Christian.

[10 : 19] Imagine that you are him for a moment. Now, the first and primary part of your makeup is that you are a Jew. However, let me tell you that you are not only a token Jew.

You are a Hebrew of Hebrews. Philippians chapter 3, verse 5. In other words, what you are is an untainted Jew. You may have been born in Tarsus.

You may be a Roman citizen. You may speak Aramaic. You may speak Greek. You may have been around. However, you are untainted by the world that you live in.

You are unstained by Greek and Roman culture. You know where your roots are. You are not a Greek-speaking Hellenistic Jew. You are a real Jew.

That is a descendant of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, born of one of the pure tribes, Benjamin. A speaker of Abraham's language, Hebrew. A preserver of your ancient heritage.

[11:15] You are committed to your ancestors' customs and have been from the day you were born. You are a Hebrew of Hebrews. And you are proud of it.

But more than that, you are from a special breed of traditional Jews. You are from the Pharisees. And being a Pharisee meant that you are committed to preserving Jewish faith.

Committed to protecting true Jews from foreign influences. Committed to stopping Jews from relaxing any religious obligations. You are, in other words, a Bible-believing Jew.

You take the greatest care to follow the laws given to God by Moses. You are a Pharisee. But then, you are not just any old Pharisee.

You have been educated under Gamaliel. That is, you are a pupil of one of the greatest Pharisaic educators of the first century. You have been his student. And under his training, you have advanced beyond many your own age.

[12:20] You are a deeply, deeply religious man. The sort of religious man that people look up to. A purist. An up-and-coming Pharisee. And you are proud of it, too.

Now, as a Pharisee, you know the law back to front. You know its ins and outs. You know all its details. You know it in its original language. You know it. And you know what it says.

And as you examine your way of life, you are aware that your life is blameless according to the law. You know the law.

You know you have kept the law. And as you look at the righteousness the law demands, you are blameless. In other words, if God is going to judge people according to the laws set out by Moses, then he's going to find you blameless.

You're record clean. In terms of living rightly according to the law, no charge will be able to be levelled against you. So all in all, you are a man of zeal.

[13:27] You know you're a Jew. You know your ancestral traditions. You know the laws of Moses. You're determined that people know and obey and love God. That the religion that they practice is pure.

And true religion is untainted by false religion. And you're not like so many of your ancestors who mixed worship of the true God with worship of gods of the surrounding nations. No, you won't have anything to do with that.

You are like Phinehas in Numbers 25. You will seek out impurity, both in yourself and in the lives of other Jews. And you'll deal with it quickly and thoroughly.

You are zealous for your God. However, your zeal is directed in your first century world. It is directed towards God's glory.

After all, you're a seeker of God's glory. And you know that God will be glorified when people hold unwaveringly to his laws. That he'll be glorified when people who love righteousness, people love righteousness so much that they will root out apostasy and heresy in the final days.

[14:30] You're committed to God, his laws and bringing glory to him. You are zealous. Now, as a zealous Jew, you have found an obvious target for your zeal.

The new sect. The followers of Christ. It is bearable when Christians opened up ranks for Hellenistic Jews. That could be managed.

But then they began speaking out against the temple. Then they began letting Samaritans join up. The thin edge of the wedge had opened up to this gaping hole that would cause the unclean and the impure to come flooding in.

The purity of your faith is under threat now from outsiders. But there's much more at stake than this. You see, your concern is with the new beliefs that these Christians bring. You see, Christians are self-evident heretics.

They are wrong. They are mistaken at the very base of their faith. The most fundamental point of their belief is fatally flawed.

[15 : 34] The most fundamental point of their belief, you see, asserts that Jesus of Nazareth was the Messiah. And you and everyone else in Jerusalem knows that Jesus of Nazareth was crucified by the Romans.

Well, Messiahs do not die. And if they do, they certainly do not die on crosses. For the law makes clear that whoever hangs on a tree is under the curse of God.

To take a condemned criminal who died an ignoble death that put him under the curse of God and say he's a Messiah is a horrible blasphemy.

A crucified Messiah is worse than a contradiction in terms. It is an outrageous blasphemy. And the perpetrators of such must be removed, sought out, punished, purged from the community of Israel.

The teaching of Christians, therefore, represents a malignant growth that calls for drastic surgery. And the sooner it happens, the better. So, you're volunteered.

[16 : 41] The chief priests and their associates may be operating out of jealousy and vested interest. Not you. Your motives are religious. You will root out apostasy like the heroes of old.

And you'll preserve God's glory and the purity of your religion. You are a modern-day Phinehas, a man of zeal and of truth. And like your great predecessor, you accept God's favour.

Like Phinehas, you'll deal drastically with this impurity. And you expect that God will look on this favourably. Perhaps the words of Numbers 25 might reverberate around in your brain as you make your way toward Damascus.

Phinehas, son of Eleazar, son of Aaron the priest, has turned back my wrath from the Israelites by manifesting such zeal among them on my behalf that in my jealousy I did not consume the Israelites.

Therefore, I grant him my covenant of peace. It shall be for him and for his descendants after him. A covenant of perpetual priesthood. For he was zealous for his God and made atonement for the Israelites.

[17 : 45] This is you as your head for Damascus. Jew, Hebrew-speaking Jew, Pharisee, zealous Pharisee, persecutor of God's new enemy, persecutor of the believers of Jesus of Nazareth.

That's the context for Acts chapter 8. Now keep an eye on your Bibles now as we work through the text. I'm going to keep using the second person narrative to help you get a fearful might have gone on in Saul's brain.

He doesn't tell us. But there's enough hints in the text. You're on your way to Damascus. You have authority to bring captive Christians to Jerusalem, chapter 9, verses 1 to 2.

And just as you get close to your destination, a light flashes from heaven. Now you fall to the ground and a voice rings out. And your rabbinic schooling has taught you that these such voices can only come from God.

They can only mean, one, rebuke. Two, instruction. And you listen because you know what's coming. Not rebuke, but instruction. And the surprises come thick and fast for you.

[18:50] They're shattering. They leave you in pieces. They blast aside your understanding and your assurance. And the very first surprise is that the words that come from God are those of rebuke, not instruction.

You see, what God is saying is you have not earned my favor. On the contrary, you have earned my rebuke. You have understood me and you need to be straightened out. And you are flabbergasted.

There must be some mistake. The only people you've been persecuting are Christians. You're not persecuting God. You're defending God and his laws. How can God say you're persecuting him?

What could you have done that could be the persecution of God? The confusion strikes you. You wonder what on earth is going on here? You can't even express your confusion. All you can do is stumble out these few words, which are, who are you, Lord?

And if the first set of words you heard from God were confusing, the second are beyond belief and they blow you away. Disintegrate you. Leave you in this numb, smouldering heap.

[20:06] They're words that will reverberate in your mind for the rest of your life. I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting.

Now, try and understand this. This is packed with things that will shatter your belief system. You have just been told that your whole way of life up to this point has been misguided.

And not only that, you've been told by the very person you thought it was in honor of. You are utterly traumatized and numb. You're let off to the city and blind.

For three days you'll fast and pray, trying to make sense out of what has happened. Verse 9. But you're no fool. And you begin to sort it out and think it through. And you put two and two together.

And perhaps your thinking might go something like this. You know Jesus existed. That can't be denied. You know Jesus was crucified. Again, that cannot be denied.

[21:07] You know Jesus is alive, just as Christians have claimed. Again, that cannot be denied because you have seen him yourself and heard from him. You know that Jesus is linked with God.

Again, that cannot be denied because God made the connections himself. You know that Jesus is indissolubly linked with this group of Christian people.

The voice made that crystal clear for you. Persecuting Christians equals persecuting Jesus equals persecuting God. So what can this mean?

And already the shattering implications begin to hit you. Or I imagine they must have begun to hit Saul. The crucified, cursed Jesus must be the Messiah.

The Son of God. Now if you want to see how Paul works that out, go and read it in Galatians 3. He spells it out there. The crucified, cursed Jesus must be the Messiah, the Son of God.

[22:11] Two. Despite your zeal and your sense of doing God's will, your previous way of life and your previous understanding of how to relate to God stand under his rebuke.

In other words, keeping laws does not so much relate you to God. Being Jewish does not so much relate you to God. God is to be related to, at least now, through relating to Jesus.

Now if you want to see how Paul works this out, read Romans 1 to 8. You can see him just gradually working through this. Three. God is a God of grace, mercy and forgiveness.

Now up until this point, you knew this from reading your Old Testament. It's throughout the Old Testament. But now you knew it intimately. You knew that you had opposed God, that you'd persecuted God and his people, that you were a blasphemer, that you knew that even while you were pursuing this course, God reached out to you.

And now your understanding of God is one that rests utterly on having met the God of grace, mercy and forgiveness in the person and work of Christ. Now, if you want to see where Paul works that out, you just have to read any page of his letters.

[23 : 30] It's just saturated in his letters. His letters are saturated with that. Fourth. A new way of thinking about the Old Testament must be engaged in.

And central to this must be an understanding of who Jesus is and what he has done. He is the key to understanding what the Old Testament is about and where it is going.

Old frameworks for understanding and interpreting must be done away with. And a new framework with Jesus at its center must be put into place as you read the Old Testament.

Five. There is a task to be engaged in. You had directed your zeal toward the law and ancestral traditions. Not anymore.

Now your zeal has found another target. For now you know that God is most glorified when Jesus is proclaimed and known. So zeal must be directed toward what?

[24 : 33] Making Jesus known. Zeal must be aimed at declaring that Jesus is the Messiah. And this must be so even if it means suffering and death.

And you can see Paul get started on this as early as Acts chapter 9 verses 20 to 25. They are the things he says. Okay. Now I hope this little exercise has helped you get into the mind of this man Paul later to become Saul.

And those five implications I gave you are just a few of them. They sprang out of Paul's encounter with Christ. You can see his theology arising from his experience on the Damascus Road.

He spent the rest of his life working out the implications of this. You can read more about it in his letters. But let's look back to Acts 9 and ask ourselves, why is this incident here?

What is the point of telling us about the conversion of this man? I told you one last week because he becomes a sort of model Christian. I think that the writer, and I want to add to that tonight, I think that the writer of Acts wants us to see Paul's encounter with Christ as not simply a private affair, but rather part of God's overarching plan.

[25 : 49] Remember how we started off the sermon by speaking about the progress of the gospel? Remember how we got to its progress? It was poised at the brink of a new stage. Remember how the next stage seemed to be the Gentiles?

Well, Luke wants us to see that that is what God has in his mind also. And in chapter 10 and 11, we will hear how a door opens for the Gentiles and how they respond to the gospel.

But here in chapter 9, we hear how God has prepared the man who will be sent to be their teacher and leader. And verses 15 and 16 record his commission.

Through this man, the gospel will go to the Gentiles. And through him, the gospel will eventually come to us. Because of God's action to him, we Gentiles, I don't think in the world you can probably get much further away from Israel than where we are now.

Because of his actions, because of his conversion, we Gentiles, who prior to this were without hope and without God in the world, can call upon the real God.

[27 : 00] However, let's finish up by looking past the book of Acts and past Luke's reflections on the conversion of Saul. And I want you to look at Paul's own reflection on his conversion.

So have a look with me to 1 Timothy chapter 1. So 1 Timothy chapter 1. For those of you who want a page number, it's 963.

And I want you to look at verses 12 to 14 with me. And I want you to look at what Paul says. He says, I'm grateful to Christ Jesus, our Lord, who has strengthened me because he judged me faithful and appointed me to his service.

Even though I was formerly a blasphemer, a persecutor, a man of violence, but I received mercy because I had acted ignorantly in unbelief.

And the grace of our Lord overflowed for me with faith and love that are in Christ Jesus. Now, can you see what Paul is saying? He's saying something like this. I was the most unlikely candidate for conversion.

[28 : 17] I was not favorably disposed towards Christianity. In fact, I was in open opposition to the gospel and all that it said. You couldn't get a person who was more antagonistic than me.

I was a man of violence as far as this group of people and this faith was concerned. Paul, you see, was a self-assured, confident, religious persecutor of what he perceived as a blasphemous sect.

And yet God reached out to him. And he acted in mercy. And he poured out his grace in abundance and brought him to respond in faith and love.

You can see the words there. God acted in such a way that where there had been disbelief and hatred, there became belief and love. In verses 15 and 16, Paul moves from his situation to make the point.

Look at what he says. Verse 15. The saying is sure and worthy of full acceptance that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners of whom I am the foremost.

[29 : 24] An earlier translation said, of whom I am the chief of sinners. You know, I'm the chief of sinners. Then he says, for that very reason I received mercy so that in me, as the foremost, Jesus Christ might display mercy, display the utmost patience, making me an example to those who would come to believe in him for eternal life.

Can you see what he's saying? He's saying, look, this is trustworthy, what I'm about to tell you. A trustworthy saying, Christ came to save sinners. That is, that was the whole purpose of Jesus coming. And I had been a chief of sinners, a leader of sinners.

And yet God saved me. If God can save the leader of sinners, an unlikely candidate, then he can save anyone.

And my conversion is a testimony to God's ability in this area. If it can be done with me, it can be done with anyone.

Can you see the point? We've imagined being Saul. We've imagined ourselves in his shoes. We've soaked up his background and religious heritage.

[30 : 38] Now think on it all for a moment. If you were Saul, would you have ever imagined you could have become Christian? If you were one of the apostles or Christians in Jerusalem or Damascus, would you have ever imagined that Saul could have been converted?

Could such a person become a Christian? He's not likely, is he? It's not likely you'd think that way. He is just not a very suitable candidate.

Yet he did. And if he did, you can. That's what the text is saying. That's what Paul's saying here. And if he did, so can your friends.

And if he did, not even your relatives are out of reach. And if he did, well, anyone can. For it is God who is at work here.

The God who can turn the hearts of kings. The God who can turn persecutors, turn the hearts of persecutors and rebels. If God is at work, then all things are possible.

[32:06] And this point is very important. You see, the Christian message is one you can have confidence in. It is worth preaching. And it's worth preaching because it has the endorsement of God. God is behind it.

It can and will convert the inconvertible. The unconvertible. It will and it can convert the souls of this world.

It is able because God is able. And it is his word. Friends, the gospel we Christians preach is not a human invention. As Paul says in Romans 1 verse 17, the gospel is God's power to the salvation for all who believe.

For the Jew first and also for the Greek. It is God's gospel. Able to convert Saul. Able to convert you. Able to convert me. Able to convert our friends, our relatives, our contacts.

But let's push it even further if I may. And let me speak to those of you here who are from Holy Trinity, although others of you can listen in because you'll be in the same situation.

[33:13] Friends, we here at Holy Trinity are a gospel church. And in this last year, we've reaffirmed that we want to be a gospel-centered church. As individuals, we believe the gospel.

Together, we're committed to the gospel and preaching it. We're committed to doing this every week. That's why we systematically do what we're doing tonight. Work through the Bible, week in, week out.

That's why we're committed to evangelism. It's why we sponsor people to go to various places around the world preaching the gospel. That's why we constantly encourage people to consider gospel ministry as a way of life.

This is a gospel church. Committed to gospel priorities and active in gospel ministry. Well, and many of you, I know, belong to churches just like that.

Well, when we... Well, we need to know that when we preach the gospel, God is active. When we proclaim God's word, God is active.

[34:15] The gospel is the gospel about his son. It is promoted by him. It is promoted by the Holy Spirit. God is behind it. God is at work in it.

It is God's powerful salvation to all who believe. God promises that wherever the gospel is preached, it will bear fruit and increase. For it is his gospel. It is his power to convert the unconverted and build up the converted.

And that brings us to the crunch. Because I want to ask you tonight, if you really believe it, let me ask you, when you meet together with God's people wherever it is, when you meet here at Holy Trinity every week, do you come to church actually expecting God to be at work through the preaching of his word?

Do you expect that he will convert people? Do you expect that he will be here building you and others up through the proclamation of his word in preaching and in singing and in one-to-one contact?

Do you expect that God will confront you, teach you, convict you, rebuke you, train you in righteousness and equip you for ministry? Do you expect him to do that?

[35:39] Because that's what he promises he will do. Do you expect that God will speak with you, to you? Well, you want to.

Because after all, we are gathered in the name of Jesus Christ. And God the Father, God the God of all the earth is here with us. And God the Son is here with us.

And God the Holy Spirit is present in power and in his word. The God of all the earth meets with us. He is the God who spoke a word and turned chaos into order and darkness into light.

He is the God who uttered a word which turned nothing into something. And that God is present with us. He is speaking even now with us.

and his word goes forth to his world. And as it does, it turns Pharisees into Christians.

[36 : 47] Atheists into Christians. Hearts of stone into hearts of flesh. Makes new worlds in the hearts and lives of sinful people like you and me.

As Paul says, darkness. The God who said, let light shine into darkness. Has shone into our hearts to give us the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ.

He has created new worlds in us. That is what he is doing. He turns chaos and emptiness of meaningless lives into fullness and purpose of life with him.

This God is with us now. Here. when we meet with all of God's people. So let's come with some expectation that he's not asleep when we meet.

That he's not like the gods of the Baals. Remember with Elijah? Somewhere hidden in a back room. Not listening. Let's come with expectation that he's not asleep.

[37 : 55] That he will speak. That he'll be active. And then let's put into practice the things we believe in. Let's have confidence in the gospel.

And let's be God's gospel people in our thoughts, our expectations, our words, and our activities. We've been seeing in Acts, haven't we, that when this God speaks, things happen and change.

That world is our world. God speaks even today and does the same things in the lives of people. The God who said let light shine out of darkness has shone into our hearts and does every day to give us the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ.

Let's pray. Father, we thank you that you shone into the darkness of this man, Saul's heart.

you turned this chief of sinners into the apostle to the Gentiles, to the very people he would have thought the gospel could never have come to.

[39 : 13] Instead of being a chief of sinners, he was a leader of this group of people that he just could not have believed could be included with you.

Father, thank you for this incredible turnaround in this man's life. Thank you for his reflecting on this turnaround, his reflecting on you and your ways, and his writing it all down for us under your hand.

Thank you for all that he's taught us about you. But mostly, Father, we thank you for the great promise we see in his conversion.

That promise that there is no one beyond your reach. Please help us to believe this when we talk to our friends and our family.

When we meet with your people and hear your word, please help us to remember. And we pray this in Jesus' name. Amen.