

# An Unlikely Encounter with Jesus

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[ 0 : 00 ] So let's turn back to the passage we read in Acts chapter 9, to the conversion of Saul. Now in Matthew 7, the Lord Jesus Christ gives us a very, very stark warning.

He says, It's amazing to us that so many preachers and so many churches seem to have this belief that everybody, regardless of what they've done and their relationship with God, will one day be in heaven.

And so many ministers at funerals usher people into heaven regardless of how they have lived their lives. But Christ himself taught very, very clearly that there is such a thing as a genuine Christian and there is such a thing as a counterfeit or a spurious Christian.

When I was very young, as a young teenager, I went to a banner of tree conference and the title was An Epidemic of Spurious Conversions.

And as a young man, I remember being rocked by the Reverend Alan McNabb preaching from the Bible on lots of different examples of people who claimed to be followers of God, but were counterfeit or spurious Christians.

[ 1 : 41 ] There are many examples in the Bible of people who were genuinely called out of darkness into light, both in the Old Testament and the New Testament.

In the Old Testament, we can think of people like Abraham, who was called out of sun worship and paganism. We can think of the prostitute Rahab.

We can think of somebody like Ruth, who was a Moabitess, who followed the covenant God. We can think of people like David, who was a Moabitess, who was a Moabitess, who was a Moabitess, who was a Moabitess.

We can think of people like the New Testament of people like Levi or Matthew, Zacchaeus or the Philippian jailer, people who were wonderfully converted from darkness to light. But the Bible also sets before us examples of people who claimed to be followers of God, but who were fake or counterfeit followers.

We can think of people like King Saul. King Saul did many, many good things. He was obedient in many ways.

[ 2 : 51 ] He passed many good laws. Back in 1 Samuel 15, we read that he prophesied and that the Spirit of the Lord came upon him powerfully.

To all intents and purposes, he was a follower of God. But yet, when we go to 1 Samuel 28, we have that disturbing and unsettling passage where on the night before he died, he consulted a medium and a witch, the witch of Endor.

In the New Testament, we have the supreme example of Judas Iscariot. We don't know a huge amount about Judas Iscariot, but it would appear that not only did he deceive the disciples that he was a Christian, but he perhaps even deceived himself that he was a true follower of Christ.

We have the example in Acts 8 of Simon the sorcerer. It said that he believed on Christ, that he believed what Peter was preaching.

But yet, later on in Acts 8, Peter says to him, when he tried to buy the power of the Spirit, he says, May your silver perish with you because you thought you could obtain the gift of God with money.

[ 4 : 08 ] You have neither part nor lot in this matter, for your heart is not right before God. Repent of this wickedness of yours. And pray to the Lord that, if possible, the intent of your heart may be forgiven you.

For I see that you are in the gall of bitterness and in the bond of iniquity. Peter was able to get right to the heart of his profession.

He thought he could buy the power of God with money. And of course, the supreme, or one of the great examples that's given in Scripture of a counterfeit profession is Demas.

I always thought before I was preparing for this that Demas was only mentioned once in the Bible, but he's mentioned three times. Paul mentions him in Colossians and Philemon. Presumably, he's mentioned him because he is a faithful follower.

He had deceived Paul that he was a faithful follower. But then we read these words in 2 Timothy 4 verse 10. For Demas, in love with this present world, has deserted me and gone to Thessalonica.

[ 5 : 17 ] It's a very, very solemn subject that there are people in this world who look like Christians, who profess Christianity, but their profession is counterfeit or spurious.

It's a very solemn thing for ourselves to consider that subject. So this morning I want to ask the very simple question, what is a true Christian and what is a true convert?

What does biblical conversion to Christianity look like? And I want to use Saul's conversion as the basis for that. Now you immediately say, well, Saul's conversion was unusual.

It was dramatic. But I think there are lessons that we can take from Saul's conversion. There are principles that we can take, that we can apply to all true conversion.

And this morning what I want to do is I want to look at two elements of conversion and one evidence of conversion. And I want to do that under these three headings, a supernatural intervention, a supernatural revelation, and supernatural obedience.

[ 6 : 33 ] So first of all, a supernatural intervention. Saul's conversion was totally unexpected.

The last thing that Saul was going to do as he travelled north to Damascus was, in Saul's mind, was to meet with this Jesus who he hated.

It was an unexpected supernatural intervention. What was Saul's condition before he was converted?

Was he a military? Was he an anarchist? No, he was a Pharisee. Nobody obeyed God more than Saul.

Chapter 1. I advanced in the system beyond many of my contemporaries. Philippians 3 verses 5 and 6, he says, He's the eighth day of the stock of the truck.

[ 7 : 46 ] Bearing the righteousness which is in the law, blameless. Saul was the last person who needed to be changed. His eyes.

His eyes. He was the last person who needed to be changed. He was the last person who needed to be changed. And he was righteous. Just like so many people today think that they are a good person.

They live a good life. They don't need to be saved. And what did Saul say? We read in verse 1. Saul was the last person who needed to be changed.

To threats and murders. Saul was an angry man. He had an anger management problem. Like so many people, he got up in the morning and he went to bed at night.

And the first thing on his mind was violence and persecution of Christians. To harshness and to judgmentalism.

[ 9 : 04 ] If we had known Saul in the community or if he was one of our neighbours, we'd have stayed clear of him. I don't know if you've ever had a neighbour like that. We had a neighbour once like that.

You saw him in the street and you immediately steered well clear of him because he was an aggressive and violent man. Saul was the last person you'd want to get on your radar.

Imagine being a soldier reporting to Saul. You wouldn't have want to get anything wrong. He would have had an explosive temper.

It's amazing to think of Saul as this dedicated Pharisee.

He would have known the scriptures inside out. And yet he was blind to the mystery that was spoken about in so much of the Old Testament scriptures. Anger led to blindness.

[ 10 : 03 ] His religion was completely unexpected. He was completely lost. But yet he was unaware of his lostness.

Because he was wrapped up in religion and good works. And that is an incredible lesson for us, isn't it? It doesn't save us.

Good works don't save us. In fact, they can blind us. They can make us very angry and judgmental and twisted. But then the second thing under this heading of a supernatural intervention is that Saul's conversion was overwhelming.

This supernatural intervention in his life was overwhelming and glorious. We're talking about Saul's conversion. He was drawn from heaven.

A light from heaven. Now we can assume, I think fairly accurately, that if somebody was traveling north to Damascus, that the Middle Eastern sun was pretty bright anyway.

[ 11 : 17 ] But yet we're told that this sun, this... In other words, Christ appeared in all his glory and all his divinity to Saul.

This theme in scripture, don't we, of light, of Christ being light. We see it in Luke chapter 2, when the angels appear before the shepherds.

The light of the world had just been born in a dark world, in a stable. And the angels declared the wonder and the glory of this event.

And whenever the glory of the Lord appears in the Bible, there is light and there is glory. And the glory of Saul's journey of Saul's in this overwhelming and glorious light.

And just like Moses and Jacob and Samuel... Saul, why are you persecuting me?

[ 12 : 25 ] It's a very personal message to Saul. This supernatural intervention is glorious and overwhelming. But then thirdly, under this heading, we also see that this supernatural intervention was irresistible.

It was irresistible. When God comes to a Christian in biblical conversion, he doesn't come to plead or negotiate with us.

When God's grace comes to us, it comes irresistibly. You think of Saul, he was at the zenith of his power.

He swept everything before him. He was unstoppable. And yet when he's called Christ, reduced to his knees, he is crushed.

And the grace of Christ comes to him irresistibly. And that's what happens in biblical conversion.

When God comes to us, when we are converted, there is nothing we can do to resist.

[ 13 : 41 ] God's grace is irresistible. We fall to our knees and we receive with empty hands the finished work of Christ. That's why Paul says in 1 Timothy 14, And the grace of our Lord was exceeding abundant with faith and love, which are in Christ Jesus.

The grace of our Lord overflowed. He says, Jesus came into the world to save sinners, of who I am chief. The proud Pharisee had been reduced to saying that he was the chief of sinners, because the grace of the Lord had overflowed into his life.

Grace is overwhelming and it is irresistible. God elects his people from an eternity past. He has an eternal plan of salvation.

And when he calls a sinner savingly, his grace is irresistible. God is not weak. God does not make salvation possible.

He doesn't put a divine spark into us so that we can choose Christ for ourselves. Ephesians tells us that we are dead in our trespasses and sins, that we are spiritual corpses.

[ 15 : 03 ] And in conversion, God breathes new life into us. So conversion is a supernatural intervention. It is unexpected.

It is overwhelming. And it is irresistible. But then secondly, we see a supernatural revelation. We see that Saul had a supernatural revelation.

Conversion involves an intervention from God. It involves an awakening. It involves a regeneration. It involves, but it also involves a fresh understanding.

When somebody becomes a Christian, they understand new things that they didn't understand before. That's why the catechism says, effectual calling is the work of God's Spirit, whereby convincing us of our sin and misery, enlightening our minds in the knowledge of Christ, and renewing our wills, he doth persuade and enable us, as Christ freely offered to us in the gospel.

When Christ comes to us in conversion, our minds are enlightened in the knowledge of Christ.

When we are converted, we understand things that we didn't understand before.

[ 16 : 18 ] We see Christ in a new way. Suddenly we believe the Bible is an inspired book, where before we used to ridicule the Bible, we didn't take it seriously. Suddenly we love the people of God in a new way, where before we ridiculed them, we despised them, we didn't want to be at church or the prayer meeting.

We understand new things. Conversion isn't just a change of direction, it's also a new understanding. How much did Saul understand about Jesus when he was converted?

Very, very little. Saul couldn't have given us an intricate sermon on the person and work of Christ. But what did he know?

Well, he knew that Jesus was God. Look at verse 5. He said, Who are you, Lord? Who are you, Lord?

And you see, when somebody becomes a Christian, when somebody is converted, they understand the divinity of Christ. Saul immediately understands that he is dealing with Christ and that Christ is divine.

[ 17 : 34 ] He doesn't need to go through a discipleship course. He immediately understands that Christ is God. And that's what happens in conversion. Saul immediately understood that Jesus wasn't the leader of some Jewish sect.

He wasn't part of some splinter cult. He was none other than God in heaven. And what Paul came to understand so clearly is that when you touch God's people, you are touching God.

It says in Matthew 10, 16, He who hears you hears me, and he who rejects you rejects me, and who rejects me rejects him who sent me.

That's why Jesus says, Saul, why are you persecuting me? He's persecuting God's people, but he's also persecuting Christ himself.

Christ is so identified with his people that when we persecute the people of God, we are persecuting Christ himself. And what Saul came to was a realization that the followers of the way were in fact the followers of the second person of the Trinity.

[ 19 : 01 ] And when God deals with us in conversion, we cannot fail to understand the divinity of Christ. We might not understand it very well. We might understand it very, not in a very clear way, but we understand that Christ is God.

You can't have Jesus as saviour without knowing him as Lord. When we're converted, Jesus becomes our prophet, our priest, and our king at the moment of conversion.

Jesus not only saves us, but he rules over us in his sovereignty. So Paul saw that Jesus was God. He also understood that Jesus was holy and merciful.

We read that Paul was trembling and astonished. He was trembling and astonished.

When we come face to face with the glory of Christ in conversion, we understand the holiness through the beauty and the love and mercy of Christ and true conversion.

[ 20 : 22 ] Christ is not less than God. Colossians 1 says, He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation, for God was pleased to have all his fullness to dwell in him.

And that's what Saul saw. He saw he was dealing with the holiness of God himself. And just like Moses and Isaiah and Daniel, he falls before that holiness and that mercy.

His immediate reaction is to fall down with fear and trembling. And that's what happens in biblical conversion. We see God in all his holiness.

We see him in all his mercy and we fall down. We see that Jesus is not something to be messed with. It's not something to be manipulated.

We fall down in fear and trembling and we worship. Response to the revelation of Jesus Christ in the Bible is reverential fear.

[ 21 : 31 ] It's not a slavish fear but it's a loving reverential fear. We're dealing with Christ in his godness.

And then the third thing we can say under this heading is that he knew without doubt that he was a sinner. And anyone who is converted genuinely and savingly has at some level a sense of their sin. Saul was a self-righteous, proud, arrogant, hate-filled Pharisee. But he's broken on the road to Damascus. All his zeal and all his righteousness are eclipsed by the glory and majesty of Jesus. And for the first time in his life Saul sees himself as he actually really is. A blasphemer, a persecutor and an insolent man. All his perceived holiness is consumed by heavenly righteousness that appears on that road to Damascus.

And of course this is the madness of thinking that our righteousness will get us to heaven. Our righteousness is the last thing that will get us to heaven. People say these strange things at funerals, don't they?

[ 23 : 02 ] He was a good person. The Bible from start to finish shows us that our goodness will never be good enough to get us to heaven.

That's why we need to be converted. We need to come to Christ. We need his righteousness. And that's what Saul saw on the road to Damascus. He saw that his perceived pharisaical righteousness was filthy rags.

And we see this powerful soldier lying in the dust. In a moment of time he sees his unworthiness and his sinfulness and he understands the divinity and holiness of Christ and he sees himself as the utter wretch that he is.

The proud Pharisee becomes the humbled sinner. And then lastly we see that Saul was given a supernatural obedience.

In biblical conversion there is a supernatural intervention. We can't save ourselves. There is a supernatural revelation of who Christ is and who God is.

[ 24 : 30 ] One of the evidences, one of the main evidences of biblical conversion is a supernatural obedience. What's Saul's first thought after he's converted?

Well, he says, Christ said to him, but rise and enter the city and you will be told what you are to do. So all the modern translations have just those words of verse 6, the AV, it's in an extra verse, which says, and he, trembling and astonished, said, Lord, what will you have me to do?

And I'm no Greek expert, but those words are not in the original translation. But whether he said those words or not, there was some willingness on the part of Saul to serve.

And Christ said to him, these words, but rise and enter the city and you will be told what you are to do. Within seconds of seeing the glory of Christ and being biblically converted, Saul immediately says, what do you want me to do?

There's immediately a spirit of service when somebody is converted. And that's the first thing we notice. Conversion leads to a spirit of service.

[ 26 : 00 ] There is immediate humility in Saul's demeanour. He wants to serve the church. We read that he waits for three days for this temporary blindness.

And I think the most beautiful thing in this passage is that Ananias is called by Christ to go and lay hands on him. And what do we see in verse 17?

He says, Brother Saul, these people who were sworn enemies, if Saul had got his hands on Ananias, goodness knows what you would have done to him.

But he says, Brother Saul. Saul. Saul went on to be perhaps the greatest preacher that the New Testament saw or experienced.

He wrote half the New or most of the New Testament. Think of what Saul and Paul eventually achieved for the church. Saul's life became a life of service.

[ 27 : 10 ] He experienced untold suffering and persecution and danger. What does he boast of in 2 Corinthians chapter 11? We have that incredible passage where he says, From the Jews, five times I received forty stripes minus one.

Three times I was beaten with rods. Once I was stoned. Three times I was shipwrecked. A night and a day I have been in the deep. And journeys often in perils of water, in perils of robbers, in perils of my own countrymen, in perils of the Gentiles, in perils in the city, in perils in the wilderness, in perils in the sea, in perils among false brethren, in weariness and toil and sleeplessness.

And so it goes on. He dedicated himself to a life of sacrifice and service once he was converted. Some of you know that I go into the prison regularly and I'm involved with prison fellowship.

And one of the mistakes that we have made in the past when people become Christians or people profess to become Christians is that we immediately get them into the pulpit. We immediately get them into the limelight.

They become celebrity Christians. But what people need to do is when they become Christians, Christians, is the great mark of true and saving faith is service to other people.

[ 28 : 41 ] Quiet, humble, service. Not seeking the limelight, but seeking a spirit of service and humility to the church.

So conversion leads to a spirit of service. But then secondly, we see that conversion leads to a lifelong pursuit of holiness. This is where the rubber ultimately hits the road.

What is the evidence that somebody is a true Christian and somebody is a counterfeit Christian or a service Christian? It is the fruit of holiness.

Ultimately, this morning, do we love the things that God loves? do we love the law of God?

Externally, but internally, do we love it in the inner way?

What are we like when nobody else is watching? Do we love righteousness? Do we love obedience? Do we love the word of God? Do we shake our puny fists at God and do everything to erase his image from our lives or do we embrace God?

[ 30 : 01 ] Do we want God's pattern for our lives and for the people around us? When we are converted, our appetites change, our habits change, our affections change.

Instead of running after sin, sin runs after us and sometimes it catches us but we don't love it, we don't live in it anymore. Hebrews 12 says, pursue peace with everyone in holiness, without it no one shall see the Lord.

This is where the genuine and the spurious conversions are exposed. Do we love what God loves? Do we love holiness? You can't be a Christian and wallow in the world like Demas did.

You can't love the Father's house and the far country. We have to make a choice, we have to make a decision. Are we going to follow God or are we going to follow the world?

Conversion leads to obedience. And then thirdly and lastly under this heading, conversion leads to love of Christ's people. What was the first thing that Saul wanted to do?

[ 31 : 18 ] he wanted to be part of the church of Christ. He didn't go off and be a lone ranger.

He wanted to meet with the people of God. We read in verse 26, it was a pretty shaky start when he tried to join the church in Jerusalem. When he had come to Jerusalem he attempted to join the disciples and they were all afraid of him, understandably, for they did not believe that he was a disciple.

Saul was not a freelance Christian. He immediately joined himself to the church. As soon as he was converted he wanted to join the church.

And we cannot be converted as biblical Christians and not have a love for the church. We can't become a Christian and then spend our lives not loving the church.

1 John 3 14 reminds us, we know that we have passed from death to life because we love the brethren. He who does not love his brother abides in death.

[ 32 : 34 ] So, what is biblical conversion? It's a supernatural intervention, it's a supernatural revelation and it leads to supernatural obedience. Saul was heading in one direction and because of the intervention of God he went in a completely different direction.

He turned around 180 degrees and that's what we see in conversion. We see people who are wonderfully and sovereignly amazingly converted.

Some of you know that the friend that I go into prison with once a month, quite a character. Thirty years ago I met him and thirty years ago his sister-in-law came up to him and said, my brother's gone mad, he's in Schott's prison and he's gone mad, he's delusional, talking about Jesus.

And my friend's brother had in that prison, the heating was broken and he decided to go along to the prison fellowship group because there was nice biscuits and tea and coffee and for the first time this violent drug user heard about the Lord Jesus Christ and my friend said he went in to visit him this day in Schott's prison and he said he looked across at the visiting area and he said for the first time in my life I saw my brother at peace and he said I tried to talk him out of this new found faith and the more I tried to talk him out of it the more I came to believe it myself and my friend who is a violent guy is now running his own business he's going to prison to preach to others about Christ that's what happens in conversion the most surprising people the last people think about become Christians and God works in their life in an amazing way let's just finish off with four points of application about biblical conversion I hope this morning that you've been convinced that conversion is a sovereign work of the spirit of God we have spent the last 50 or 60 years I think trying to manipulate people into the kingdom of God conversions can't be whipped up they can't be manipulated they can't be engineered conversion is a sovereign work of the spirit of God for too long we've put our faith in celebrity Christians a footballer becomes a Christian a sportsman or woman becomes a Christian they're immediately on the TV and the message is if they're a

[ 35 : 38 ] Christian Christianity must be okay so you should become a Christian and how many times has that been an absolute disaster I remember when I was a young man Glenn Hoddle came out as a Christian and within years he was denying the faith let's not put our faith in celebrities or in celebrity preachers or in sportsmen or women let's preach the gospel faithfully let's support our local church let's live out the gospel in our community let's love our families let's present the gospel to our neighbors in a winsome and loving way and then let's pray that God would bless those efforts in West Lothian conversion is a sovereign work of the spirit of God secondly Saul's conversion reminds us of the great mercy and love of God Saul is a type he is held up as an example of how the most unusual and unexpected people can be converted we're not looking for lights from heaven we're not looking for spectacular things to happen most of us are converted in a very quiet way but

Saul Saul's conversion reminds us of the great mercy and love of God that anybody can be converted if anyone should have been cut down by God it should have been Saul for his persecution to believers but he wasn't he showed mercy to him and it's a great reminder to us of the love and mercy of God thirdly never give up on anyone if you had gathered the church in Jerusalem and said to them who should we pray for I think Saul might have been quite low on the list as somebody who was expected to become a Christian but surely the conversion of Saul reminds us that we should never give up on anyone God acted in a supernatural way to a blasphemer a persecutor and an insolent man like Saul and if he can do that to Saul he can convert anyone he can convert the foulest sinner in

Addyville prison or Shorts prison he can convert the politician that at the moment seems to be doing everything they can to destroy the word of God so if Saul's conversion teaches us anything it never give up on that child that you're praying for never give up on that work mate or that neighbour that seems to be a million miles from Christ never give up praying for that person because Saul's conversion is an example that we should never give up on anyone and the fourth and last thing that we can apply from Saul's conversion is just a very simple question to each one of us are converted this morning you have a genuine knowledge and faith in the Lord Jesus Christ Christ said assuredly I say to you unless you be converted and become like little children you will by no means enter the kingdom of heaven

Jesus was not a universalist he did not believe that everybody was going to heaven and he said it again and again and again there will be people in heaven and there will be people in hell and there will be people in hell as professor Cartwright used to say with the words of scripture and the shorter catechism and the psalms ringing in their ears because they knew them so well knowledge will not save us we need to be converted we need to have a supernatural intervention but the amazing thing is that Christ invites us into that relationship with him he says come unto me all ye who labor and are heavy laden and I will give you rest conversion is not far away from us it is near Christ's salvation is near this morning and if you're not a

Christian come to him today accept with the empty hands of faith the finished work of Christ Lord we thank you for your word to us this morning we thank you oh God for the great example of Saul's conversion we pray that you forgive us Lord that we have so little hope for some of our relatives and some of our neighbors and some of our workmates and some of our politicians but Lord we pray that you would help us to pray faithfully on for conversion for these people we thank you oh Lord that you intervene in our lives in a sovereign and in an unexpected way we have seen so many times oh Lord that the most unexpected people come to know Christ the prisoners and the prostitutes and the tax collectors and Lord we pray that you would do that in our community and in our circle of contacts and friends we pray Lord that you would bless us as we go out into this new week

[ 41 : 14 ] Lord help us to expect great things from you and to ask great things from you that you would give us opportunities as we go out on walks and as we talk to our families that Lord you would help us to speak about Christ and that Lord you would save those who are around us bless your word to us Lord we pray apply it to our hearts and would each one of us today be found one day in your kingdom we ask this in Jesus name Amen Anything time for holy fulfilling Lord meet and for our hearts and Lord meet and generators feel a smile of us as many as as well as we walk along with us the way we like 1400