

The Conversion of the Chief of Sinners

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[0 : 00] Well, let's turn again to Acts chapter 9, Acts chapter 9, and particularly focusing on the first nine verses of Acts 9, where we read and read of the conversion of Saul, conversion of the, as he would later describe himself, the chief of sinners.

You know, there are times when the evil of the persecution of Christians, when that evil really takes your breath away, and you wonder how can evil steep so low in the barbarity of cruelty and the sin of that utter hatred against those who profess the name of Jesus.

Now, I say we wonder, but of course we shouldn't really wonder, because we know that the Lord Jesus, the sinless Saviour, was crucified by those who hated him, who rejected him, as Peter said of Jesus, killed by the hands of lawless men.

But the prevalence of evil that is constant in the hatred of those who hate, who despise and reject the Lord Jesus, that prevalence is there, it's perpetrated across the world.

On Wednesday evening at our prayer meeting, we were told of an atrocity in Burkina Faso, when just this, well, this last Sunday, Sunday the 16th of February, last Sunday, we were told of extremists, Islamists, jihadists, storming a Sunday morning worship service in a church in the north of the country, immediately killing 10 Christians in that service and abducting the pastor and some of his family on that day just a week ago.

[2 : 08] And we were told that after that church attack, the death toll rose to 24 when these militants murdered a further 14 people, including the pastor, the abducted pastor and some of his family.

And we listened in silence as we heard of that atrocity. And we prayed for the bereaved. And we prayed for those who carried out that murderous act, those who perpetrated that wickedness.

We prayed that they be converted. And it's really that latter aspect of praying for those who persecute the Lord's people, indeed who persecute the Lord.

It's that latter aspect that we, I think we can often neglect, you know, when we hear of such cruelty. In fact, on a daily basis, we hear and see of such, such contempt for the gospel, that contempt that we might even see elevated to such a status that, you know, views against the Lord Jesus, against his people, against his church.

It's so publicized even through the media and publicized unquestioningly. Just a few days ago, reading of a comedian in the national newspaper who declared that her mother is anti-marriage.

[3 : 23] And as she said that, to her credit. Any questioning of that in the paper? No. Or the politician who declares that at birth there's no biological gender.

Do we see any condemnation of that in the media? No. Or the authors of a website that mock our denomination. Or the media that gives scant reporting to the atrocities that are happening, even such as in Burkino Faso.

And yes, we grieve that such anti-Christian, anti-God words and actions are before us. But we have to ask ourselves, as I have to ask myself, are we praying for those who persecute persecute the church, whether it be by murderous actions or murderous words?

Do you have that confidence in the power of God to change sinners, even the chief of sinners? Do you have that belief that, you know, the same grace that saved Saul of Tarsus?

Do you have that absolute assurance that that same grace can save those who breathe out cruelty in the name of a false god? And surely it's for the Lord's people to have that faith and to believe that all things are possible with God.

[4 : 42] And that's why we're turning to this portion of Scripture in this evening service, when we look again at the conversion of Saul of Tarsus, the Saul, of course, who became the Apostle Paul, this man who was once the cruelest of persecutors of Christians, this man who became the great apostle and servant of Christ.

So what about this man, this once great persecutor of Christians, Christ persecutor? Well, that's why we read in chapter 7 into chapter 8 and chapter 9, we read there of that cruelty.

It's a very, we can say, brief extract, but certainly the language that's used is so descriptive. Luke, the author, is giving us here that speaks of Saul in his days of persecuting Christians, but again, I think we do have to focus on the way that Luke tells us, Luke shows us just how deep, how extreme this persecution was from Paul, or Saul.

You can start with chapter 9, again, look at the language, Paul still breathing threat and murder against the disciples of the Lord, breathing threats.

But it's not so much that, these words themselves that really we should focus on initially, but it's that little word still, but Saul still breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord.

[6 : 17] And that's important that we focus on that little word still. Because that word still tells us that Paul was continuing in his severe work of persecuting Christians.

He continued where Luke left off in the account here of the early church, as Luke gives us these short descriptions of Paul, or Saul, at the end of chapter 7, beginning of chapter 8.

Because in that little section there, we read that after he had approved of the death of Stephen, Saul was on a violent rampage against the church in Jerusalem.

We're told that he was ravaging the church, and it's that sense of seeking to destroy the church, to obliterate it, and doing so through a, you would say, a relentless determination.

Wipe out the church in Jerusalem and every Christian in the church. And it's the language that Luke's using here, brings out the sense that Saul was acting like a wild animal.

[7 : 24] He's so ferocious in his act of hatred for anyone who claimed the name of Jesus, who claimed Jesus as the Christ, the Messiah. And as we saw there in chapter 8, he goes from house to house, he's dragging off men and women, putting them in prison.

And later, if we read in Acts 22, another of Paul's own account of his conversion, he admitted that he was persecuting the followers of Jesus to their death. He was so fanatical.

He was so fanatical in his hatred of Jesus. And in another account in Acts 26, he says he was so utterly convinced that he ought to do what he was doing to oppose the name of Jesus of Nazareth.

He'd do anything to eliminate, to destroy the church, to eliminate those who follow Jesus, whether that was in Jerusalem or in other cities.

Paul hunting down, mercilessly hunting those who follow Jesus. He's putting them in prison. And then even when they're on trial, casting his vote, so that they'd be put to death.

[8 : 35] And remember, as we read there in that earlier section, that we read, this is a relatively young man. And even in his young years, establishing a reputation, as we might say a hunter of Christians.

And as we read on in chapter 9, certainly as we read beyond the account of his conversion, you know, when Paul appears in Damascus, you notice the reaction of the people of Damascus, the Christians in Damascus.

They're unsure of, you know, this Saul, is he really changed? I mean, they'd heard of his violence against Christians, the evil that he'd done against the saints there in Jerusalem.

This fanatic that the Jewish authorities certainly delighted in, and Christians in the very fear of their lives. I mean, even the very mention of the name Saul would have, you know, triggered this response of fear and almost terror.

I mean, Paul later would describe himself as the chief of sinners. So here's a man who, you know, in his desire to eliminate the church, to destroy the church, stopping at nothing to harass believers and hunt them down and imprison them, assent to their execution.

[9 : 56] And not just doing it in Jerusalem, but even having that fanaticism to go out of Jerusalem to travel far and wide to destroy the church.

It's such hostility to the name of Jesus, hostility to those who claim the name of Jesus. And you might think, well, isn't this the last person who's going to be a Christian?

You know, someone who hates Christians so much that he's, you know, just so fanatical in his hatred of the Saviour and those who profess the Saviour.

We would say nowadays a terrorist. That terrorist mentality and a terrorist who isn't afraid to use violence. And someone who's so ferocious that even his name, you know, would spur feelings of fear.

This man who was, you know, active in terror in Jerusalem and beyond. But as we said at the start of chapter 9, that word still tells us that this was ongoing.

[10 : 58] That what he was doing in Jerusalem wasn't just a one-off thing. It's ongoing. That's what we see there at the start of chapter 9. When he's going to Damascus, still in that campaign, he's still got this campaign against the Lord's people.

He's got that same mindset that they're going to seek to destroy the church. Forever, you know, humanly speaking, with a man less likely to follow Jesus, it was Saul of Tarsus.

He had all the credentials, this violent man who thought it was right and proper to put to death those who professed faith in the Lord Jesus. But this same man who breathed out cruelty against the Lord's people, this man was converted.

He was saved. He was rescued. He was delivered. Delivered from the sin. And his life utterly changed. Utterly transformed.

Utterly turned around. But before we think even of that conversion, you've got to ask. Ask and ask yourself sincerely and directly.

[12 : 12] Would you pray for those who, like Paul, like Saul, breathe out threats and murders against the Lord's people? Will you have it in your heart to pray for the murderers of Burkino Faso believers?

Will you pray for the politicians who seek to remove biblical truth from every area of society? Will you pray for the academics and the students who seek to silence the voice of Christians and universities in the so-called name of protection from offence?

Will you pray for the media that promote unbiblical practices and condemn biblical values? Will you pray for the conversion of a relative who mocks you for your faith in Jesus?

Will you affirm and will you practice that command of Jesus to love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you? And I would say this and go so far as to say this, that that praying for those who persecute persecute the church, who persecute the Lord Jesus.

Surely that has to be seen as a test of your commitment to serve the Saviour. Think of Jesus on the cross. Remember what Jesus cried out on the cross?

[13 : 33] Father, forgive them for they don't know what they're doing. And you know, even if you were focusing here on this account of Saul's conversion, as we're focusing even on that command to pray for our persecutors, well yes, even now in the quiet of your heart as God directs you so to do, pray for those whom God brings before you in your heart.

Pray for those who are even now persecuting the church of the Lord Jesus. and as God leads you, as God leads you to that individual, that group even, that come into your mind, well yes, someone like Saul before his conversion, well yes, do so, do so even now and be encouraged to pray for that person.

And we might say this, that if God could save one such as Paul, this blasphemer, this persecutor, this violent man, this man who is more like a wild animal than a human, this man who raged against Christians, if God can save this blasphemer and persecutor and violent man, then he can save the other, another blasphemer and persecutor and violent individual.

Maybe it's someone you've practically given up on, maybe even someone you've despaired of, maybe someone for whom even the name of Jesus, when it's mentioned, there's a reaction of utter contempt.

But if Saul of Tarsus could be saved, then so can the person that you're praying for even now, a friend, a relative, a spouse, a neighbour, a colleague at work, a writer, a professor, a broadcaster, a politician, whoever.

[15 : 24] We don't give up and somebody just because appearances would suggest that somehow they have no hope of salvation. Absolutely not. There is hope and that hope rests in the grace of the Lord Jesus because that's what we see here in this conversion, Saul's conversion.

Yes, he was strong. Paul was a strong man but Christ's grace was infinitely stronger than Paul's heart and that's what we want to consider for the rest of this service, the amazing grace that saved a wretch like Paul, that amazing grace that can save a wretch that's brought to know Jesus as Lord and Saviour and brought to know Jesus by grace, the saving grace of the Saviour.

And that's really what we want to focus on as I say for the remainder of the service, particularly as we focus on verses 3, verse 3 down to verse 9. I'm not going to read it all but you see the account of the conversion and as you see, we're looking at the account of the conversion, see throughout the grace of the Lord Jesus.

Because you see, if you're going to exclude anyone from the kingdom of God simply because of who they are, then we're minimizing the grace, the power of the grace of the Lord Jesus.

But, you know, as we'll see, as we'll see here, the grace that saved Saul, it's the same grace that saves every sinner. It's the same grace that saves every sinner who comes to Christ by faith.

[17 : 05] Now, it might not be by a dramatic Damascus Road experience, not generally how people are brought to the Savior, but it's the same grace that saved Saul of Tarsus, that saved you who know him by faith.

It's the same grace that saves all who come to Christ by faith. And it's that grace that we're going to focus our hearts on now, that grace that saves, that grace that continues to save, and that grace that will keep on saving until Christ returns.

It's that grace that will save the persecutor and the blasphemer and the Christ mocker as it saved the persecutor, the blasphemer, the Christ mocker that was Saul of Tarsus.

It's that free grace, the free grace that speaks of the wonderful, amazing work of God, that work that touches a person's heart, that touches a person's life, his life, her life, so that that person is never the same again.

Why? Because God's grace works in a person's life even, even when that person is giving, we might say, that appearance of just being utterly condemned.

[18 : 30] You see that with Saul, as we read there at the start of chapter 9, let's backtrack a wee bit, he's still breathing out murderous threats against the Lord's people, he's still in that mission to destroy every remnant of Christians who belong to the Lord Jesus, as we're told here, who belong to the way, the Lord Jesus, the way, the truth, the life.

He's still seeking to round up believers who believe in the Lord Jesus. I mean, he's gone a long distance from Jerusalem to Damascus, probably a week's journey, but he's gone there, he's going to bring them back to Jerusalem, he's going to imprison them and make sure that they are condemned.

And it's in that very scenario that we maybe see that cauldron of boiling hatred. In that situation, Paul is converted.

Just picture in your mind there, there's Saul and there's the men with him, they're on horseback, they're travelling to Damascus. As I say, for probably the best part of a week they've been on that journey.

I don't know what they were discussing on that journey, but certainly their intentions are clear. They're going to go to the synagogue in Damascus. They're going to find out who follow the Lord Jesus who are off the way.

[19 : 48] They're going to separate them from the other worshippers. They're going to drag them away. They're going to take them to certain imprisonment and death and they're focused fully on hatred, violence, hatred.

And only the grace, only the grace of God through Jesus will change that violent hater of Christ to become a follower of that same Lord Jesus.

And it's that grace that meets Paul, as you see there from verse 3. Suddenly, suddenly, just as Paul and his men are in sight of Damascus, what do we find?

We find that the light of Christ enters Saul's life. That man who'd expected just in a few moments' time to enter the city and triumph, he's now cast to the ground.

Why? Because that's the force of the light of Christ, that light that shone around him. And that man that had expected to stand over his victims and to do it in pride, he's now humbled before the Saviour.

[21 : 04] The Saviour whom he'd once hated with such violent hatred. That man who'd expected to enter Damascus and find his prey, he's still going to enter the city, but he's now going to enter that city by the hand of another.

He's been blinded by the light of Christ. And yes, his eyes will and one saint open, but they're open to see Christ, the one whom he was persecuting.

And his eyes open to see that that same Christ is the one who saved him from his sins. And that sudden change in Saul's life, how has it come about?

It's come about through the saving grace of the Lord Jesus, that grace that saved a wretch like Saul. And you see the evidence of that grace being effective and effectual.

It's there, as Luke tells us here in this wonderful episode of the salvation of this undeserving sinner. So, what's the evidence of the grace that saves that we see here in the passage?

[22 : 11] Well, what do we notice? We notice a personal encounter with Jesus. Notice the first action in relation to Saul's conversion.

What was it? It was the blinding light that stopped Saul in his tracks. I notice that the first word spoken in that dialogue, the first words uttered to Saul were words from Jesus.

Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me? So what are we seeing? We're seeing initiative. The initiative is from heaven. Yes, of course, the initiative in Saul's conversion, of course, it was eternal from all eternity.

Saul had been elected to know the Lord Jesus as Saviour. But in this moment of space and time, Saul's had that personal encounter with Jesus.

That's changed his very life. And we pray that the encounter, that personal encounter with Jesus is going to be known by those even now who are persecuting believers.

[23 : 19] Because at this very moment there are those who are even now plotting to carry out further acts of terror and atrocity against the Lord's people. We'll pray that the light of Christ's love will shine in their hearts.

Pray and pray in faith that those who are intent and persecuting the flock of Christ, that they'll be stopped in their tracks and that they'll fall at the feet of Jesus and the light of his love, his grace will shine in their hearts.

And pray that by faith that they will surrender to the Saviour, even as Saul here surrendered to his Saviour. Because if you look at the passage again, I mean, no longer after Jesus has changed his life, no longer is Saul intent in capturing Christ's people.

His mind is no longer set on going into Damascus to drag these believers out. Murder no longer is in his heart. He's now calling on Jesus.

Who are you, my Lord? Who are you, Lord? Jesus replies, I am Jesus whom you are persecuting. And notice, Paul doesn't resist. He's got no quarrel with Jesus.

[24 : 37] Paul's, Saul's been humbled. humbled. He's no longer the proud persecutor of Christ and his church. This is Saul who's now humbled. And he is humbled only to rise as a new man in Christ, to be led by his Saviour to do work for his Redeemer.

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