

The Name That Changes Lives

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[0 : 00] Wow, that was brilliant, wasn't it? One of my most favourite things to do back in the old country, New Zealand, down, was going on road trips with friends.

And New Zealand is a great place to road trip because it's so geologically diverse. You're driving and you turn a corner and everything changes. You have fjords and deserts and rainforests and rolling hills and streams and lakes and rivers and flatlands and white sand beaches right beside black sand beaches.

And it's all mashed into this tiny little country. Saul in the book of Acts has been road tripping. And like my road trips back in New Zealand, he was loving it.

He was on a road trip to find Christians though, so a different sort of road trip. And his great goal in life was to annihilate Christianity actually. In his mind, Christians and this dead Jesus character were ruining things.

You see, Saul's life was built on all these religious achievements and he had this brilliant spiritual resume and this new Christian religion of grace would make all his good works worthless.

[1 : 15] So he wanted to get rid of it. Saul hated Jesus and Jesus' people and he's on this road trip finding out where these Christians were and dragging them away. In fact, in verse, in chapter 8, the chapter before the one we're looking at tonight, chapter 9 and chapter 8, it says, it describes his activity as ravaging the church.

And it's a word, it's in Greek and its original meaning meant, it's the kind of thing that a wild animal does with a dead carcass. In verse 2 here, it says, he breathed, he breathed threats like we breathe air.

Destroying Christianity was not a, it wasn't a side hustle for him, it wasn't a hobby, it wasn't merely a job. It was central to who he was.

He wanted the name of Jesus extinguished, eradicated. That's the first part of our chapter. By the time we get to the end of the chapter, Saul is on another sort of road trip.

He's traveling around the country proclaiming Jesus. Verse 22, proving that Jesus was the Christ. So, you know, what happened to this guy? Well, the short answer is, he met Jesus and everything changed.

[2 : 32] Jesus changed his life. Now, there are obviously some pretty unique things about his conversion, obviously, but there are some things that all Christians share.

And we're going to look at those things that we share with Paul. So what are the essential experiences of conversion that all Christians share with Paul?

Well, first, conversion. First, conversion starts with divine initiative. Saul couldn't wait to put his boot through the first Christian door he came to in Damascus.

But on the way there, Jesus interrupts his life. And Paul is confronted by the very stubborn fact that Jesus actually rose from the dead and that Jesus is God.

He is the Lord. And he's speaking to him right now. And he's going to commission Saul to tell the whole world about him. So what does God want us to see in this story, in this conversion?

[3 : 37] Well, Saul came to Christ because God wanted him to. And this should make us tremendously hopeful people because it means no one is beyond God's grace.

Saul was the kind of person that nobody expected to be converted. His opposition was so deep and so articulate and he had so much to lose.

Friends, status, a job. No one would have said, ah, yes, Saul, he's a real seeker. He's a seeker. He wasn't ripe for the picking.

His heart was dry and shriveled. It wasn't even like he was in the midst of a crisis looking for a crutch. No, he hated Jesus. But God moved towards him.

God initiated and Saul surrendered his life to Jesus. What happened to Saul can happen to others. [4 : 39] And it has. I am, was, I was the only person of faith in my entire family as far as I knew. My brother, my older brother messaged me a few months back and said, just, just, he just, I just got this message one day and it said, hey, I've started going to church.

It's great. It's like my local Anglican church. It's kind of mostly older people, but I really love it. And then he messages again and he goes, I've been invited to do something called Alpha. Have you heard of it?

And then I asked him after his first Alpha session how it was and he said, it was great. It was all about Jesus. Isn't that wonderful? Isn't that amazing? Folks, this came out of nowhere.

My brother is a lovely guy, but I was not expecting this. I mean, you might know some people who you don't think are particularly lovely and you were thinking, there is no way they would come to faith.

They are an intellectual snob. They are a racist. They are a person from a different faith altogether. Folks, no one is too far gone. No one is beyond God's grace.

[5 : 50] So keep praying for them because all of us are products of God's grace. And now you might be thinking right now, yeah, but I actually sort of grew up in a Christian home.

I never really had a choice. I never really had a conversion really. Folks, God put you in that home. God calls you to be born in that family. It was his initiative.

It was his idea. All conversions are products of God reaching out to us. It's divine initiative.

So that's one of the things we share with Paul's conversion. So what else do we share with Saul's conversion? And I'll use those names Saul and Paul just sort of randomly, just so you know.

So, okay. For Saul, two key relationships were changed as a result of his conversion. And these are key markers of your conversion.

[6 : 48] They are proof, actually, that you've been converted. So we'll look at these relationships one at a time. So two relationships. The first one is Saul's relationship with the church. That obviously changed very dramatically.

Let's think for a moment about the interaction Saul had with Jesus because it's quite interesting. Jesus says, Why are you attacking me? Isn't that interesting? He doesn't say, Why are you attacking them, the Christians?

He says, Why are you attacking me? What does that mean? It means that Jesus is inexplicably linked to his people, the church. He's saying, When you hurt my people, you hurt me, which means when you love my people, you're loving me.

See, before conversion, Saul commits his life to destroying the church. And then he meets Jesus and commits his life to loving and growing the church. And this could maybe be where Paul got his theology about the church as the body, which he talks about later on in some of his letters.

Jesus is so linked to his people. He says, This is my body. When you hurt them, you're hurting me. Okay, so what does this mean for us? Well, I mean, it means this.

[7 : 58] I cannot claim to love Jesus and refuse to love his people. That's a big one. I cannot claim to love Jesus and refuse to love his people. I can refuse to be part of a bird watching community and still be a good bird watcher.

But that won't fly with Christianity. A key mark of conversion is you love God's people. Your attitude towards Christ shows itself in your attitude towards people.

Look at the Ananias story. So Ananias had this vision. Jesus says, Go to Saul and pray for his sight to be restored. And Ananias cannot get his head around this.

He's going, What? Paul? Saul? That guy? The guy that kills Christians? But something happens in Ananias.

Because when he sees Saul, remember how he greets him. He says, Brother Saul. Now you might say, you might be sitting at home and you might be saying, and you might not be going to church right now.

[9 : 08] You're just kind of checking out online stuff. And you might say, Listen, the thing is, I just don't like Christians. I just don't like Christians. That's a natural response.

Sometimes we're annoying. Sometimes I'm annoying. It's natural. But it's not Christianity. This mark of conversion says, Jesus has called you to be a family, to love one another, to serve one another.

And that means a lot of things. For example, it means we don't bounce around different churches. And it means we don't default to always complaining about the church.

I remember at Regent College, lots of students were super angsty and had lots of church hang-ups. And they would say things like this in lectures. They would say, the church in the West is dead. And I don't want anything to do with this brand of Christianity or that brand of Christianity. And a wise professor one day said to us, We must be careful how we speak about the bride of Christ. [10:17] We must be careful how we speak about the bride of Christ. And I've never forgotten that. You cannot love Jesus and say you don't want to have anything to do with the church.

And don't get me wrong. You can have struggles and you can have questions. But we do the hard work of being a family. We do the hard work of being a community.

We do not sit in the arena and just throw rocks at the players. We love. We do the hard work. As I said, Saul's conversion changed two relationships.

For Paul and us, it changes our relationship with God's people, with the church. And secondly, it changes our relationship with the world. After his conversion, Paul, he would go on to travel around 10,000 miles, like 15,000 clicks, hitting up Asia Minor, hitting up Europe.

It's two continents, two continents, as Jacob said, telling people about Christ. And we share Paul's mission. Something that comes with knowing Jesus, with meeting Jesus, is a sense of great grief for those who don't know him.

[11:36] Something that demonstrates our conversion is the belief that the most needy people in the world are those who are cut off from Jesus. Before our conversion, we might say things like, you know, it doesn't matter what people believe as long as they're happy or as long as they're sincere about it.

Folks, when we come to Christ, we can't say things like that anymore because we realize that people who are cut off from Christ are in the worst sort of danger. Let me finish up here.

When we meet Jesus, it's because Jesus has reached out to us and as a result, there's a deep transformation in our life.

It changes the way we relate to the people of God, the church, and it changes the way we think about the world. I want you to consider these things and I want you to ask yourself, does the Holy Spirit need to do some significant work in our hearts around these things?

Let's go, Let's go, Let's fill in. What we're doing when somebody's trying to parce is the challenges of someone who's trying to create few examples and struggle with others that pull the place and how to get stressed and struggle and things like that.