

The Name That Changes Lives

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[0 : 00] Good morning, everyone. My name's Jeremy Graham. Big thanks to Will and Benjamin, Jacob, Verity, and Addy for that wonderful conversation about our story today where Saul meets Jesus.

Now, boys and girls, it's your turn to respond to our story, and you're going to need art supplies for this. So if you're on our children's ministry mailing list, you'll have received an email this week from Will with some instructions for some of the response options for the children.

Boys and girls, there's a map showing Saul's journeys that you can color while I speak to you now. There's also a template for a comic strip if you'd like to retell the story as a comic strip.

And finally, if you just want some good old-fashioned blank paper, get some crayons and some markers. And I'd love to see you draw a picture of the transformation that takes place in Saul to Paul.

How could you show the before and the after when Saul meets Jesus? How could you show that in a picture? And we're looking forward to seeing your artwork in the breakout rooms after our service.

[1 : 01] And if you're a teen, I hope that you will pay attention to my sermon. I think you'll get a lot out of it because Acts chapter 9 is a fantastic scripture for where you're at in life right now.

So, Will did ask us a great question today. Can you teach an old dog new tricks? What do you think? Can you? I know that when my wife Kimberly was pregnant and she was starting to show in the front, we had a three-year-old child over at the house and he asked her about the baby in her tummy.

And then he looked at me and he said to me, your tummy's getting pretty big too. Do you have a baby in your tummy? Ouch.

Time for some exercise. Well, I started exercising and I decided to go gluten-free as well. And my gluten-free lasted for 36 hours.

36 hours. Yeah, I was gluten-free for 36 hours. It was incredibly hard. But I guess that's one trick that you can't teach this old dog. We all know that change is incredibly hard.

[2 : 11] Whether it's changing your diet or breaking a harmful addiction. Whether it's changing long-term bad habits like grumbling or losing your temper. And there's an entire industry that's been built up of self-help books and motivational speakers who are supposed to help us to make these big changes to become our best selves.

And these changes never seem to last though, do they? There's one type of change that the Bible describes which is utterly unique to human experience. It's the change called Christian conversion. And it happens from one source only. The name that changes lives and that's Jesus Christ. Meeting Jesus, listening to him speak, and then receiving the gift of life that he offers.

And the most famous Christian conversion in all of history is our story today, Saul of Tarsus. And Saul's story isn't really meant to be an instruction manual, sort of a how to become a Christian guide.

It's more of a testimonial. A living illustration of how the risen, when we meet the risen, reigning Lord Jesus, he transforms every part of our life.

[3 : 21] And if you're watching and you're not a Christian, I invite you to pay attention to the changes that we see in Saul's character. What do you make of them? And if you are following Jesus, let me remind you that Christian conversion is a lifelong journey.

It's a lifelong journey. And I invite you to listen for the Holy Spirit's direction, for how you might continue to grow and be transformed by God's Word today.

So Saul's conversion is definitely unique. We're not all going to see bright lights and get a vision of the risen Lord. However, however, there are at least three significant moments in Saul's conversion

that are crucial for anyone who turns to Christ.

And these are foundational for any person who's going to follow Jesus. And each moment, you'll see, begins with this private, this personal conversion for Saul. But then it quickly spills over and it leads to transformation in relationships all across his life.

That's how conversion works. So let's take a closer look. And the first moment we'll find in verses three to six. And it's a personal encounter with Jesus Christ, which leads to a new relationship with God the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.

[4 : 40] Because every Christian conversion must involve a personal encounter with Jesus Christ. For Saul, the climax of that encounter, it happened on the road to Damascus.

But did you know that Jesus had been pursuing Saul for quite some time already before this story? I hope you didn't think that Saul's conversion was instantaneous.

In fact, in Acts 26, we learn that Jesus actually said to Paul in this encounter, Saul retells the story again in Acts 26. And Jesus says, in addition to saying, Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me? He says, Saul, why are you kicking against the goads? Kicking against the goads, what does that mean? Well, it's a farming picture. And you want to imagine that a young ox is being broken in. And it's being broken in for the plow using these sharp sticks that are sticking into its side called goads. And the ox, it would kick and it would fight against the sharp sticks for a while.

[5 : 41] But sooner or later, it would realize that it's better to accept the farmer's direction and to follow where the plow would lead him. And that was Saul. And he couldn't get Jesus out of his mind, though, even as he was dedicating his life to snuffing out the church.

And it was Carl Jung who said that fanaticism is only found in people who are actually compensating for secret doubts. And many of us have friends and loved ones who have rejected Jesus.

And Saul's conversion is actually a tremendous encouragement to us in our prayer life for loved ones who, on the surface, seem to be so bitterly opposed to the gospel.

It shows us that there are no lost causes and that Jesus lovingly pursues each of us by name. So Saul was a fanatic. He was zealous for God's rules and God's laws.

Yet even as a devout Jew, he did not have this personal loving relationship with God. He could never call Yahweh Father the way that Jesus taught his disciples to do.

[6 : 49] Not until the conversion experience on the road to Damascus, where we find a blind Saul going for three days without food. And what was he doing during those three days blinded in Damascus?

Well, he was praying. He was praying. And I imagine that Saul had never spoken to God the way that he did in those three days. And then Ananias comes and he takes Saul and he baptizes him. And Saul receives the Holy Spirit. What a gift. What a picture of the new and intimate and eternal relationship that's opened up to us in Christian conversion. And the second conversion moment that we see in our story is a personal surrender to Christ in repentance and faith.

And this leads to a new relationship with God's family, the church. For Saul, it meant hearing those crushing words in verse 4. Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?

Imagine for a moment, Saul believed that he was doing the will of God in arresting and killing followers of Jesus. And now before him stands the very man that was crucified on a cross only about one year ago, Jesus of Nazareth.

[8 : 05] But now he's shining with the glory of God and speaking with authority and power. What's Saul to make of this? Well, Saul was made physically blind to show him that he had actually been spiritually blind the whole time.

You see, repentance and faith, they always go together as two sides of the same coin. And on one side we have repentance, which means simply turning away from our old life and going in a new direction.

And on the other side of the coin we have faith. And faith means putting our whole trust in Jesus and the rescue that he won for us on the cross. And this is how the blind Saul spent those three days in Damascus.

Wrestling with God in repentance and faith. And the true gift of repentance and faith we see in this story is that Saul receives a transformation of relationships.

So my favorite sentence in this whole story has got to be verse 17. So Ananias departed and entered the house and laying his hands on him he said, Brother Saul.

[9 : 11] Brother Saul. What beautiful words. From breathing threats and murder against Jesus' followers back in verse 1 to being called brother by one of those disciples.

This is the power of Christian conversion. It is the miracle of new beginnings, of new belongings. Not based on something like paying your dues until you get promoted. Not based on who you know or making friends with the right people. But based on God, our Heavenly Father, adopting us into his family through the radical generosity of his son's death and resurrection.

And then thirdly and finally we see this moment in Saul's conversion where we discover that Christian conversion is always a personal invitation from Christ to serve him. Which leads to a new relationship with the world. Christian conversion will always grow us beyond ourselves to love others.

[10 : 11] It will grow us in this way by growing us to love others the same way that Jesus Christ loves others. The same way that Jesus Christ loves the world. Saul's call is described for us in verse 15.

Jesus says to him, He is a chosen instrument of mine to carry my name before Gentiles and kings and the children of Israel. For I will show him how much he must suffer for the sake of my name. And Saul's service was unique as an apostle to the Greek-speaking world. But for each one of us, my service and your service, it will also be unique according to the gifts and the personalities that God has given us.

However, however, there are always two facets to this serving in every Christian experience. The first one is witness. Witness, which is sharing the transforming good news with those that we meet by our words and actions.

It's passing on the amazing transformation that we've experienced, the miracle that's happened in our life of God's actions. Passing that on in our words and actions in witness. And the second facet of our serving is suffering.

[11 : 21] It's expecting that our new intimacy with Jesus and with his church will put us at odds with the world. It's acknowledging that our choices to obey Christ will attract negative attention from those who oppose and reject Jesus.

So, Christian conversion is a personal encounter with Jesus Christ marked by repentance and faith and a call and invitation to serve Jesus in all areas of our life.

And it leads to this complete transformation, first in our personal relationship with God, second with the church, and finally with the world. And there's nothing formulaic about conversion.

I mean, it's really more like a roller coaster than a Ferris wheel. And it's a lifelong process of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit making Jesus Christ my first love and my most treasured possession.

And Jesus is ready today to take a step with you in this conversion journey. So let me close with these words from the transformed Saul himself. Saul makes this promise to us in prayer.

[12 : 31] I am sure of this, that he who began a good work in you will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ. Amen.