

# Arrested by God

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[ 0 : 00 ] Well, you'll find it helpful if you take your Bible and open to page 120 to Acts chapter 9. And congratulations in that hymn on all ending up in the same place.

I wasn't sure we'd do it through it. Acts chapter 9 on page 120. Someone kindly lent to us the Disney film Finding Nemo.

And I want to say it's a very fine film. Not just because all the sharks speak with Australian accents. And if I can just have a comment here.

Since I've been in North America, why is it that when Australians or when a company wants to make an advertisement and use an Australian accent, they don't use an Australian? They always use someone who sounds a third cockney, a third gibberish and a third like they have been soaking in a vat of gin for all their life.

It's a special skill. Finding Nemo. Where were we? Ah, yes. The story concerns a frightened little fish, a crown fish, who's looking for his son.

[ 1 : 15 ] And in the early scenes on the way through the ocean, he and a friend, a fish of his, are taken by a shark into a sunken hull of a submarine where there's a couple of other sharks waiting.

And we think and they think they're going to be eaten until one of the sharks, who's appropriately named Bruce, moves to the front of the compartment and says, Right then, this meeting has officially come to order.

Let's all say the pledge. And the sharks put their fin on their hearts and they all say together, I am a nice shark, not a mindless eating machine.

If I am to change this image, I must first change myself. Fish are friends, not food. It's a wonderful scene.

It's worth seeing the film for that. Now, the sharks, this meeting is a kind of a fishaholics anonymous. And until one of the smaller fish has a nosebleed, everything goes well.

[ 2 : 26 ] But as soon as Bruce gets a sniff of the blood, his eyes glaze over. And I don't want to spoil the film for you. But the point is that the nature of the shark has not changed despite his 12-step program.

Now, as we come to this passage in Acts chapter 9 today, it is one of the most lovely and most earth-shattering passages in all the Bible. It is so important that it is recorded by Luke in Acts, not once, not twice, but three times.

The conversion of the fire-breathing, death-dealing, Christ-hating Saul into a humble, Christ-preaching Paul has given hope to Christians in every generation since.

It gives hope to every parent who despairs of their children ever coming back to Jesus Christ. It gives hope to every Christian who has faced those who seem to just hate Jesus irrationally.

And it gives hope to every single one of us who think we have sinned too drastically and wandered too far away from God and are too lost for God's grace to really do anything about.

[ 3 : 45 ] And the story, of course, is not really about Saul. It's about the person of Jesus Christ. And we see something of his fierce beauty as he confronts this merciless opponent.

And he takes him from being a cruel wolf and makes him into a humble sheep. And then takes the humble sheep and makes him into a suffering shepherd. We first met Saul back in chapter 7.

If you just turn back to verse 58 in chapter 7 on page 119, you see in verse 58, As the crowd is pelting the life out of Stephen with every rock they can find, there is Saul holding the cloaks, endorsing every rock that crushes Stephen to death.

In chapter 8, verse 1, that hardly does justice to the original. Saul is not really consenting to the death of Stephen. He's loving it. And so in verse 3 when we read, Saul was ravaging the church, entering house after house, dragging off men and women and committing them to prison.

The word ravaging is a word for what a wild animal does with a carcass. It just demolishes it and shreds it. That's why when we come to the beginning of chapter 9, although there has been a whole chapter of the gospel going forward, people coming to faith in Jesus Christ, miracles being done, the good news of Jesus going into Samaria and going into Judea and even to Ethiopia, we read this verse 1.

[ 5 : 21 ] But Saul, still breathing threats and murder, literally slaughter against the disciples of the Lord, went to the high priest and asked him for letters to the synagogue at Damascus, so that if he found any belonging to the way, men or women, he might bring them bound to Jerusalem.

He wants to do more than intimidate Christians. He wants to do them violence. And he is so keen, he takes the initiative upon himself to go to the high priest and get letters and chase the Christians who mostly have left Jerusalem 150 miles up the road to Damascus.

Caiaphas, of course, is only too delighted to sign the forms and get someone else to do his dirty work. Saul is committed to eradicating the name of Jesus Christ and he wants to do that by annihilating every last Christian.

And so hungry is he to shed blood. He doesn't care whether you are male or female. He will arrest you and drag you back for execution in Jerusalem. Some years later, when Saul was known now as the Apostle Paul, he writes in Galatians, You heard of my former life in Judaism.

I persecuted the church of God violently. I tried to destroy it. And it was around midday, when the sun is brighter even than it is now, as they approach Damascus, a light from heaven flashes around Saul, he falls to the ground and he hears a voice, Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?

[ 6 : 57 ] In each of the three accounts through the book of Acts, the people who are with Saul hear something and see something, but they can't make it out clearly. It's only Saul who hears the voice of Jesus Christ and has the impersonal encounter with Christ.

But the reason we're told these things is because it's not just a subjective experience. He's not just got an overwrought conscience. There's something objective taking place here. And at first, Saul does not know who this is.

He knows it's not a human encounter. He knows he is dealing with some supernatural heavenly person who is speaking to him. So when he says to him, Who are you, Lord?

It's a real and genuine question. And then he hears the answer. Of all the answers, he does not want to hear.

The voice comes back, I am Jesus. You are persecuting. And he says, Oh no. And his fellow travellers scrape him up from the ground and he opens his eyes and all he can see is total darkness.

[ 8 : 01 ] He's completely blind. And the one who is going up to Damascus to drag Christians back to Jerusalem is now led by the hand into Damascus.

And for three days he does not eat or drink. And we're told for a second time in verse 9 that he has no sight. Then in verse 10 we meet poor unsuspecting Ananias.

Ananias. You have to feel for Ananias. He's called simply a disciple of Jesus. It may be that he fled Jerusalem to escape the heat of persecution. And now Jesus appears to him in a vision and instructs him to go to where Saul is staying to lay hands on him.

Because we are told for a third time Saul is blind and needs his sight. And Ananias understandably does not think this is a very good idea. And he wonders if he's got his vision wires crossed here.

He wonders whether Jesus knows which Saul he's talking about. And you know how it goes. He says, Lord, I will do anything. I will write a large check to the church. I will volunteer in the toddler room.

[ 9 : 07 ] I will go on a mission to Guatemala. But don't ask me to go and see Saul. He hates Christians. And then we read these words. Verse 15.

It's interesting how Jesus deals with his fears. The Lord said to him, Go. He is a chosen instrument of mine to carry my name before the Gentiles and kings and the sons of Israel.

I will show him how much he must suffer for the sake of my name. So Ananias departed. He entered the house. This is lovely.

Laying his hands on him, he said, Brother Saul, the Lord Jesus who appeared to you on the road by which you came has sent me that you may regain your sight.

He filled with the Holy Spirit. And immediately something like scales fell from his eyes and he regained his sight. And he rose, was baptized, took food and was strengthened.

[10:02] And I don't know if you noticed, but four times again we are reminded of his blindness and his sight. And it's only after he receives his sight is he baptized into the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and receives the Holy Spirit.

And so Saul, the brutal anti-Christian, becomes Saul, the missionary apostle. Now this is a very important story for us at a number of levels.

And what it does is it showcases for us some of God's deepest concerns through the book of Acts. And I've chosen three. Three of God's concerns.

But I noticed Harry left his sermon from 7.30 here. And if you get sleepy, I will go down and pick up the book and give you a few more.

I also noticed that Harry's sermon is only five pages and mine is 15. So let me mention three. The first, and very obviously, is that God's concern is for our salvation.

[11:07] It's for our conversion. It's easy to look at Saul and say, well that's not relevant to me. I've never persecuted Christians. Even if I've treated Jesus with casual indifference, I'm never going to have a Damascus road experience.

And it is true that there are some elements in this story that are unique. I take it none of us have had the heavens open and the risen Jesus knock us off our horse as we're travelling to Damascus. But the reason the story is told three times is not to give Paul or Saul an opportunity to give his testimony or just because of the importance of Saul. It is told three times because his conversion is a template of every true Christian conversion.

It doesn't matter whether you've been raised in a Christian home and have always named the name of Jesus Christ or whether you've run away as far as you can from God and have been dragged kicking and screaming back to him.

It doesn't really matter. It is the same Jesus Christ who we encounter. It is the same grace of God that works within us. And the essential elements of conversion which appear in bright lights in Saul are true for each of us.

[12:25] For every single one of us, conversion begins not with our seeking God but with the risen and real Jesus Christ revealing himself to us.

This is very important. It's not something we initiate. Jesus isn't hiding in a corner and we have to go searching for him. He comes and he searches for us.

It is God's sovereign grace in us. Conversion is not something we deserve and it's not something we were looking for. Saul did not decide for Jesus.

Jesus decided for him. Saul is not rumbling along. He's in no mood to rationally consider the claims of Jesus Christ but the living Lord Jesus Christ confronts him.

And it's very important, I think, to dispel the myth that Saul's conversion was instantaneous. It wasn't. When Jesus appeared to him on the road, he wasn't instantly and automatically zapped into being a Christian.

[13:25] He was blind for three days and he didn't receive his physical sight back until he was baptised and until his spiritual sight came to him. Conversion, even for the apostle, was a process.

But I want you to think about the time between the road and between the baptism. After Jesus has revealed himself to Saul, Saul is free to decide what he is going to do and how he should respond. Because when Jesus Christ reveals himself to us, he doesn't obliterate our choice and override our will. It's just that left to ourselves, we would never have chosen Christ.

Our conversion begins with the grace of God. But when he reveals Christ to us, he doesn't crush our decision. He strengthens us to make the right decision.

And I think all of us, at some level, have to come to the place of recognising, as Saul did, that our deeply cherished views of who God is and who we are, are fundamentally wrong and fundamentally offensive to God.

[14:32] And each of us have to come to a place of decision where we allow ourselves to be changed by the encounter with Jesus Christ or we have to then try and change Jesus Christ.

That's the only other choice. He will reveal himself to us. He will do it in the right way and at the right time. But so long as we hold on to our own favourite view of God in the face of his word and scripture, we will be blind to the beauty of Jesus Christ.

Because it takes humility before the change can begin. And I think Saul's experience shows us a true conversion.

It's not a light brush with religion. It's not something you can keep neatly and safely in a corner over here. When you meet Christ, he turns your world upside down.

It's a total and radical and eternal reorientation of the soul. I've quoted this before. Tolstoy describes his conversion in these words.

[ 15 : 40 ] He says, Five years ago I came to believe in Jesus Christ's teaching and my life suddenly changed. I ceased to desire what I previously desired. I began to desire what I previously did not want.

What had seemed to me good now seemed evil and what seemed evil now seemed good. He said, It happened to me as it happens to a man who goes out on some business and on the way decides the business is unnecessary and returns to home.

Everything that was on his right is now on his left and everything that was on his left is now on his right. That's what Christian conversion is. It's more than a change of mind.

It's more than a shift in your belief system. It's more than adding something into the spiritual mix. It's meeting the real person of Jesus Christ and realising that he is life and he is the purpose of my life. And it's the most massive change. And when I meet Jesus Christ I come to realise not just that I've done things that are wrong but I am wrong. And I need to turn to him for forgiveness and for a new life.

[ 16 : 47 ] That's why those three days in Damascus are so important. On the road Saul had a very clear idea of the majesty of Jesus. He may even have been able to say that he was the son of God but he was not a disciple.

He is not a disciple until his pride is tamed. And it's the same for you and me. It's one thing for us to declare that we believe Jesus to be the son of God but until we come to the place of heartfelt repentance we do not know what conversion is.

Until we cast ourselves on the mercy of Jesus Christ and say to him what would you have me do?

And my guess is that none of us here have made a career of violently opposing Christ.

But the Bible teaches that we are infected with the same disease that the apostle is. Our hearts are infected with the same disease. It is called pride and it will show itself in different ways but it's all of the same species as Saul's pride.

And the real test of our pride is whether we have come to the place where we see our sin as a monstrous and hostile attack on the glory of Jesus Christ.

[ 18 : 01 ] Left to ourselves we are not one hair more ready to obey Christ than Saul was until our pride is humbled. That's why in the years ahead whenever the apostle Paul referred to his conversion he said it was God's grace from the beginning it was God's grace in the middle and it's God's grace right until the end.

And this is God's first concern for us our conversion. But there's a second concern in the passage it's a wonderful concern for God is also concerned for his people.

Did you notice the central question that Jesus asks Saul on the road is this Saul why do you persecute me? And then just in case Saul misses it and he says who are you Lord he says I am Jesus who you are persecuting.

It's a remarkable connection isn't it? Saul could have turned around and said I have nothing against any heavenly person I'm just persecuting Christians. Jesus is saying when you persecute my people you persecute me.

Which means that Jesus has more than a casual interest in our suffering. Do you remember when Jesus was alive in his earthly ministry he said he who hears you hears me he who rejects you rejects me.

[ 19 : 25 ] But now he is saying more than that. He is saying that he literally shares our suffering. he is saying that our sufferings belong to him in the same way that his suffering belongs to us.

In 1 Corinthians he later writes the Apostle Paul do you not know that you are God's temple that God's spirit dwells in you and if anyone destroys God's temple God will destroy him for God's temple is holy and that temple you are.

We get this lovely sense here as we have had throughout the book of Acts the church is very important to God and in Ananias we have a glimpse of how Jesus wants the church to operate.

It is lovely isn't it how God embraces Ananias into this story and into the conversion of Saul I mean if you think about it Christ is the eternal wisdom of God he does not need Ananias to help him with Saul but he uses Ananias and what he does is he connects two men who would never want to

connect with each other in a million years it is a great picture of the church it is a big lesson for Ananias of course do you know what his only qualification is in this passage he is simply called a disciple and Ananias is convinced that there are some people who are too lost who are too far gone for the grace of God and yet we have that lovely scene where he enters the room where Saul is staying and he puts his hand on him and he begins to see Saul as Jesus sees him as a blind man full of pride who is being humbled and he says brother

Saul and it is a big lesson for Saul as well isn't it I mean in sending Ananias he makes God makes the great Saul subject to a common disciple it is very important you see Saul needs to see that the church is the kind of place where you can have all the education and all the distinctions and all the brilliance in the world and with all those things you still need the spiritual humility required to listen to common disciples who have nothing to commend themselves except they are speaking a word from God so this reveals God's concern for his people as well as his concern for our conversion and thirdly and finally let me finish quickly with God's big concern and it's this God is concerned for his son Jesus Christ since Jesus came from heaven to seek and save the lost since he died and rose again from the dead we are told there is salvation in no one else but

[ 22 : 24 ] Jesus Christ it was Jesus Christ who appeared to Saul on the road from heaven with all the glory of God the Father and now salvation comes from calling upon the name of the Lord which is not a general name for God but is the name for Jesus Christ that's why Saul's conversion is so striking he has the most impressive Jewish credentials as a young child he was taken up to Jerusalem where he was trained under Gamaliel II who was the son of Hillel Hillel was one of the founders of the two rabbinical schools within Judaism Saul was thoroughly trained in rabbinical studies he was educated beyond just about anyone else in Judaism of that time he says in Galatians I advanced in Judaism beyond many of my own age among my people so extremely zealous was I for the tradition of my fathers and you know what all that added up to it was all blindness because it had not brought him to see the glory of

God in the face of Jesus Christ that that very light that knocked him off the horse had its source in the one he was persecuting and you know in the background to these words is the prophet Isaiah do you remember how God said in Isaiah you shall be my witnesses and he looks around amongst his people but they are blind they have closed their eyes and he says I will send to you my servant who will come and he will come as a light to the Gentiles who will open the eyes of the blind but until that servant comes Isaiah tells us we look for light and behold darkness we look for brightness but we walk in gloom we grope along the wall like those who have no eyes we stumble at midday as though it was midnight and here the great apostle stumbles at midday as though it was midnight and all his knowledge was ignorance because it had not led him to put his faith in

Jesus as the Christ it's very helpful for us isn't it all his rabbinical understanding all his great sincerity had led him to blindness and darkness because you see the issue is never how much you know or how sincere you are but whether the eyes of your heart have been opened to see the glory of God to look at Jesus Christ and say there is the son of righteousness because at the heart of conversion is the person of Jesus Christ and whether you and I have come to see him as God does it's the most drastic change that can happen to a person and everything else flows out of that and every time in the book of Acts when God opens the eyes of someone to see the light of Jesus Christ they become a new person and through them God begins to shine to other people despite their reservations Saul who had stopped the mouths of Christians is now made a mouthpiece for the gospel because

Jesus' desire was not just to stop him and humble him but to include him in this magnificent mission of spreading the light of the gospel of the glory of Jesus Christ very interesting to me later in the book of Acts when Saul is standing in front of King Agrippa he tells us that when he was on the road flat on his face Jesus said this to him he says I send you to open the eyes of the Gentiles that they may turn from darkness to light from the power of Satan to God they may receive forgiveness of sins and a place among those who are sanctified by faith in me and this is God's concern that we move from preventing the glory of Christ to promoting the glory of his son so it's a wonderful passage and I hope you take it away and think about it there are three central concerns God's concern is for our conversion God's concern is for his people but ultimately

God's concern is for his son and all of this God's work in us and God's work for us and God's work through us lead us to the place where the most important question for us is whether we have met Jesus Christ you see we may not meet Christ in a sudden flash of light but we can ask ourselves

whether we have the signs of meeting him in the desire that has been placed in our hearts to serve him for Jesus Christ is the chief cornerstone and everything that God is doing in the world is built upon Jesus Christ that cornerstone and becoming a Christian isn't just a bit of interior redecoration you know taking a wall down here adding a new coat of paint to the kitchen it means that we have built our houses in the wrong place it means dismantling the house picking it up and rebuilding it on the foundation of Jesus Christ we have been building on the wrong foundation doesn't matter how beautiful the building was it must be taken down and rebuilt on Jesus Christ and part of that rebuilding is that we place ourselves at his disposal because we have come to see something of his beauty and his glory and his power and nothing can compete with that because no one is as precious as he is and a new desire arises in us to worship him and to love his people and to spread his name it's prudent it's ■■■■ it's seen him so these people need to explain the weight of these people that understand the people that they understand the time that anything and who and who are they you you this