

New Convert

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[0 : 01] Over the last few months, during the COVID experience, my wife Evie has gotten really into home conversion. She just loves to be able to go home and just sort of move things around so that it feels like a new space.

And particularly in a time like COVID, where there's so many things that we realize we don't have control of. When we're stuck at home, perhaps more than we would like to be, there's something really appealing about being able to experience some kind of change.

Evie is like a Tetris wizard with this. Somehow, when we first got married, we had one bookcase. Now we have three, and yet somehow our home feels more spacious. So she is both gifted at this and a regular practitioner of it.

But there's something appealing, isn't it? When we're at home, when we're stuck at home, knowing that there is a change that we can experience, that we aren't just stuck the same, unable to change or do anything in a strange season like this.

And so some kind of change is really appealing. But other change can often be uncomfortable, perhaps even confronting. I wonder what kind of thoughts and feelings come to mind, not when you think of home conversion, but what about when you think about people being converted?

[1 : 30] What kind of things come to mind? Perhaps, and I think what's a common thought for our world and culture is that the thought of people being converted can come across as mean or arrogant, perhaps even just narrow-minded.

Maybe even for some of us who are Christians, it can still be an uncomfortable thought. The thought that there might be real cost to relationships, to friends and family, the fear of rejection, the relational costs that can come when sharing the good news of Jesus.

But if people being converted is so uncomfortable, if our world thinks it is so uncomfortable, if we feel uncomfortable about it, why do we bother doing it?

Why do we bother persevering for it? I mean, why do we bother trying to convert people at all with the good news of Jesus, if it just brings discomfort? Well, as we come to our passage this morning in Acts 9, we encounter one of the most famous conversion stories in the history of the world.

And as we actually walk through Saul's conversion account, how he goes from being an enemy of God to a loved child of his, God wants to teach us three things about the nature of conversion, three reasons why it is worth persevering in, and that it is a good and right thing that God has put before us. So three things that God teaches us about the nature of conversion.

[3 : 07] First of all, that conversion is uncomfortable. Conversion is personal. And that conversion is essential.

It is uncomfortable, it is personal, and it is essential. So first of all, conversion is uncomfortable. Now, as we look at Saul's mission at the start of Acts 9 here, we see he is on a very specific mission.

In verse 1 and 2, it describes Saul as heading to Damascus, breathing out murderous threats against God's people. He has a very clear mission and purpose.

He wants to round up those of the way, those who follow Jesus at this time, and he wants to have them rounded up, persecuted and imprisoned. And he believes that he's doing this for God's good and his honor, that these people are blasphemers, those who follow Jesus.

And yet in verse 3 and 4, as he sets out on this mission, he experiences a radical encounter with Jesus, which is described as Saul being knocked to the ground by a light from heaven, and he hears a voice, Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?

[4 : 25] Now, clearly, clearly this is not the plan that Saul had set out for himself. I mean, he's going to Damascus to confront the Christians, those of the way, and yet now he himself is being

confronted by Jesus.

But conversion, it's an uncomfortable process. You see, the very nature of conversion, the very idea of it, says that it begins with God, God seeking us out, rather than us seeking God.

Begins with God seeking us out, rather than us seeking God. And it is no different with Saul. You see, he's confident in his understanding of the truth.

I mean, he's a guy with vast knowledge of the Old Testament. He's a guy of position and status. He has great authority that he comes with as he heads to Damascus. And he believes that he is honoring his God as he seeks to crush this rebellious uprising of Christians.

And yet, what is his response? In verse 5 and 6, the only words that Saul says in his encounter with Jesus, who are you, Lord?

[5 : 43] See, for all his knowledge and confidence and his power and authority, when he's confronted by the living God, it reveals that he doesn't even know who he is. He didn't even know the God that he thought he was serving.

And we see in verse 7 and 8 following this, that Saul, having been confronted by this Jesus, he's left blinded, he's now relying on his traveling companions, simply just to guide him to the city that God has instructed him to go.

I mean, how disorientating that must have been for Saul. He's come with a purpose, he's going to persecute the Christians, he's confronted by Jesus himself, whom he realizes he does not know, and now he's blinded.

He is a picture of humiliation. He's been humbled, his power, his authority, all that makes him who he is, and now he can't even travel without being guided by others.

You see, Saul's new reality, when you experience that kind of radical change, when it's that uncomfortable, it forces you to think. You're sort of jolted into trying to make sense of this new reality.

[7 : 01] And that can be a really uncomfortable process. I've got to be honest, it was a really uncomfortable process for me in my own life. I became a Christian midway through high school in January of 2010.

And prior to that point, I was really sure that I had the good news of Jesus all figured out. It was not for me. And more so than that, I had an older brother, a really nice, sort of actually annoyingly nice, older brother, who was a Christian, and I just could not make sense of this guy.

Like, he was so nice, so caring, and if you've had anything to do with teenage boys, those are not usually the words you would associate to them. And I just couldn't understand him at all.

And that lack of understanding created a lot of frustration. From me to him, I just could not make sense of him. And so I took out that frustration on other Christians.

You know, other people who would be foolish enough to believe that Jesus was who he claimed to be, that he really was this Lord and Savior. Now, just to clarify, just in case people are watching at home, when I say I sort of taunted and make fun of Christians, it was not in the same sense as Saul.

[8 : 20] I did not threaten anyone's life. Just got to make that nice and clear. But I was particularly rough to one of my school chaplains. I took a special kind of delight in making his life difficult.

I liked to ask annoying and uncomfortable questions, not for answers, just to see him squirm. I would have been a great friend if you knew me in high school. I hope you're getting that picture. So as I was sharing life with this guy, I would just continually try to sort of irritate him.

I would try to make him uncomfortable. I'd try to make him think that his job and his time and his efforts were wasted. Until he actually, well, he ended up having to quit his job.

He ended up having to quit his job. And I like to think that I was involved in that process, you know, that it was because of how annoying I must have been. It's always fun when families sit in and hear this stuff as well.

Thinking about how annoying I must have been. And as I saw him, quite literally, finishing up his job, I saw him carrying a box of his stuff from his office to the car, and I thought here was a chance to get one last jab in, you know, to really make him feel bad.

[9 : 33] And so I went up to him and sort of just tauntingly said, where are you going, sir? And I'll never forget what he said. He looked at me, and perhaps in a moment of weakness and frustration, he said, I have better things to do than waste my time on crappy little kids like you.

Now, to me at the time, that really felt like a victory. You know, it showed, I showed this guy for the ridiculous beliefs that he had. You know, what a waste of his time to go to a school and share the good news of Jesus.

However, over the following six months, all of the things that I thought made my life happy and meaningful, playing football, spending time with friends, over the next six months, I started to get quite sick, and I had to stop playing football.

And that meant that I started to see my friends less. And it was really disorientating to think how quickly my life and the purpose that I had from it started to unravel.

All of a sudden, my comfortable, cruisy life, I was stuck at home going, who am I? What is my life without these things? Where am I going to find fulfillment?

[10:55] And it was in this season that very much against my own wishes, my parents sent me to a Christian camp that the same annoyingly kind older brother was leading on. This was particularly fun, saying as my brother sat there at the nine o'clock service.

He enjoyed it. Now, when I went on this camp, I had one goal in mind. The only thing that I was focused on was do not listen to the talks.

Don't humor them by showing that you're interested in Jesus. That'll just make them more keen.

And yet, over the course of the week, there was one specific thought that I just could not get out of my head, no matter how hard I tried.

And it was a thought that I tried to run from, but it just kept piercing my mind. I was reminded that, what if I'm so stubborn that I actually needed to have something taken from me to hear this message seriously?

What if I was so stubborn that I needed to have something taken from me to hear this message seriously? You see, my conversion began with this uncomfortable realization that I am a proud and stubborn person.

[12:13] And it was only through having something taken from me that I actually realized how little I am, how frail my life actually is. And similarly with Saul's conversion, it begins with a very uncomfortable reality when he's confronted by the God that he thought he was serving, only to realize he didn't know him at all, only to lose his sight to realize how frail his life was.

I wonder what kind of discomfort God has been bringing about in your life, perhaps during this COVID-19 season. What have you been learning through this uncomfortable season?

Could it be that God is using this discomfort to bring you to a new perspective on who Jesus is?

Could it be that this is a process of your own conversion as you come to a humbling realization that your discomfort, your own weakness, your own lack of control, your own frailty is brought to the very surface?

You see, conversion begins as an uncomfortable process. It is God breaking into our life, challenging our assumptions and perspectives, breaking down the illusions of control and the craving for comfort that we create for ourselves.

It is uncomfortable. But it isn't just uncomfortable. You see, conversion is also personal. Have a look at the beginning of Jesus' interaction with Ananias with me.

[13:59] It's in verse 10. It says, In Damascus, there was a disciple named Ananias. The Lord called to him in a vision. Ananias! Yes, Lord, he answered.

Go to the house of Judas on Straight Street and ask for a man from Tarsus named Saul, for he is praying. In a vision, he has seen a man named Ananias come and place hands on him to restore his sight.

Now, we don't actually know much about Ananias except for this particular encounter, except for this description in Acts. In fact, he's mentioned nowhere else in Scripture except in relation to Saul's conversion.

All that we know of him is that he was a Christian in Damascus, that he very clearly knew who Saul was and his reputation, that he was not good news for Christians, that him coming to Damascus would spell trouble for him.

But we also see him as a picture of faithfulness. But if you think about the very little that we actually know of Ananias here, it seems strange that he would even be involved in this story at all.

[15:11] I mean, he doesn't seem like the kind of go-to guy for someone like Saul, of great power and authority, one who comes to threaten his very life. And so it feels like a reasonable question to ask, why is Ananias involved at all?

I mean, Jesus has already humbled Saul to see who he is and he's now prayerfully seeking God in his discomfort. Is it really necessary for God to bring Ananias into this?

It just seems like an unnecessary obstacle towards God's plan and purposes here. And yet, God consistently shows us that conversion is personal, that God delights to work through his people. And he delights to work through the weakness and faithfulness of his people. You see, there is something just so profoundly beautiful and encouraging about the picture of Ananias' witness here. And it's something really encouraging for us as Christians to look at and see God's power displayed in his weakness. Since it's the only time that we get to encounter Ananias, the only things that we see, he's fearful and he is faithful.

[16:34] Right? We see that he's fearful of encountering Saul and yet, when God confronts him that Saul is going to be his chosen instrument, his chosen mouthpiece to proclaim the good news of Jesus to the nations, he is willingly obedient and faithful.

He goes and meets with Saul and he greets him as brother. You see, for someone of no real significance in human history, God uses Ananias in this defining moment as he declares that Saul is going to be his chosen instrument for the nations and yet ties Ananias' faithful witness to this incredible world-changing encounter.

And all we know of Ananias, a weak but faithful servant. Do you remember the faithful servants and faithful witnesses who have shared Jesus with you?

Can you think of those that God may have given you the privilege of sharing Jesus with? You see, it could well be that there is no one else who knows of the witness of the opportunity that God gives you to testify to the good news of Jesus.

It is likely that none of us will have the role that Saul had to be a mouthpiece to the nations. But like Ananias, God desires faithfulness.

[18:04] He desires faithful witnesses and he sees your faithfulness. He delights in the faithful witness of his children. It's a little bit like a guy named Mordecai Ham.

Now, that is just an outstanding name and I feel like I'm appreciating it more at the 11 o'clock service with Ham. I feel like it's really close to lunch. Anyway, could you just get a quick show of hands?

Does anyone know who Mordecai Ham is? Still no? Okay. I feel like you're cheating, Evie, since you're here at the 9 o'clock service. Mordecai Ham was an American evangelist in Kentucky that lived over 100 years ago and it would have seemed laughable to him that his name would be mentioned over a century later on the other side of the world.

And yet, he is the man that God worked through to bring a certain Billy Graham to a faith in Jesus. A man who became a global mouthpiece for the gospel as many people around the world heard the good news of Jesus were brought to their knees as they realized that he offered life and forgiveness.

But if it wasn't for Mordecai Ham's faithful witness, the gospel impact around the world would have been so much poorer. See, we don't know the names of people like Mordecai Ham, but God, in his goodness, intrinsically draws them in to be part of his plans and purposes for the kingdom to go forward.

[19:41] And so, St. Paul's, be encouraged in your witness. God does not demand a global audience for each of us, but he does desire us to be faithful to those he places around us.

He does desire us to testify to the hope that we have in Jesus in the hopes that they too might be welcomed into God's family. Because God's primary method of conversion is personal.

He uses weak, fearful, uncertain people like Ananias, perhaps like you and me, to proclaim the good news of Jesus so that others would be converted and welcomed into God's family.

Now, I want to just take a step back for a moment. It could be that what you've heard so far today is that conversion is uncomfortable and that conversion is personal in how God works through his people to bring others into his family.

But it's possible that you can hear that and it might just make sense of a really fascinating story of how Saul has gone from persecutor of God's people to all of a sudden a proclaimer of Jesus.

[21:03] Maybe it even helps you make sense of some Christians that you know in your life. But all of us, all of us need to hear the most offensive and the most uncomfortable truth that is revealed to us in Saul's conversion.

conversion. And that is that conversion is essential. It is essential for everyone. You see, as we read more about Saul's journey as the mouthpiece to proclaim Jesus, he reflects on the meaning and purpose of his own radical encounter that's described in Acts 9.

Later in the Bible, in the book of 1 Timothy, he reflects not just on what happened to him, but on what God is revealing about all people. So I just want to read to you two verses from 1 Timothy. It's from chapter 1, verse 15 and 16. And this is what it says. It says, here is a trustworthy saying that deserves full acceptance. Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners of whom I am the worst.

but for this very reason I was shown mercy so that in me, the worst of sinners, Christ Jesus might display his immense patience as an example for those who would believe in him and receive eternal life.

[22 : 32] You see, Saul's story reveals what is both personally true for him as an enemy of God as separated from him by his sin but it also describes a universal picture of humanity.

We are all sinners who need a saviour and that Jesus is that saviour, the one who can free us from the guilt and weight of sin.

But if Jesus is Lord and saviour, if he is Lord, it means that we need to be willing to hear uncomfortable things, that he might reveal uncomfortable things within us for our own good.

We might even find uncomfortable things that we find uncomfortable about him, things that we don't like. But this is the essential call of conversion and that what God desires for everyone in Jesus.

Not to choose the things that you like about Jesus but to surrender yourself to Jesus so that you might receive forgiveness and enjoy new life in his name.

[23 : 48] You see, what Saul's story is not saying, it's not saying that wicked and evil people like him who actively persecuted and sought to harm God and his people, that people like them need forgiveness.

No, what Saul's story is saying is so much more deep, so much more profound, so much more hopeful than that. You see, it says that even someone like Saul, even an enemy of God, someone who actively sought to hurt his people, that even someone like that can find forgiveness in Jesus. So that when you realize that you need forgiveness, you don't need to fear or doubt or worry if you will find it. That when you ask for forgiveness and life in Jesus, you can have confidence that it will be given to you.

If you're someone who already follows Jesus, is this what your heart yearns for? Is this what your heart desires? That God would use you and his people as we are, frail, weak, uncertain, to welcome in the sinner, to welcome in the outcast, to welcome in the enemy, realizing that that was our picture, that was our standing before God, but for Jesus.

Because conversion, conversion from death to life, from enemy to family, that is what God's heart beats for. God is in the business of conversion, of bringing people from death and separation into his family to enjoy life in Jesus' name.

[25 : 37] So for Saul, he was led through a series of uncomfortable moments before he was brought to his knees and saw Jesus as the Lord, as the only one who could save him from his sin.

For me, it involved a process of uncomfortable moments moments that ultimately meant that I sat in an outdoor gazebo with my brother confessing that Jesus was Lord, that he was Lord of my life, and that in that moment, what Jesus had accomplished by his victory over sin and death at the cross, it meant that I went into that gazebo, an enemy of God, separated from him because of my sin, and yet I left there as an adopted, loved, forgiven, child of his.

That is the gospel. But what about you? Maybe today is your moment. Maybe you've turned up today, or you are watching online, and you know that you are not a follower of Jesus, and you felt confronted by this uncomfortable reality that, like Saul, you are an enemy of God, separated by the weight of your own sin, and that the Lord Jesus is the only one who can convert you, who can change you, who can bring you in from an enemy and outsider to a forgiven and loved family member.

If that is you, then know conversion is essential, but it is also available. You can receive it here and now this morning, and God rejoices when a sinner turns to him to trust in Jesus as their Lord and Savior.

We're about to sing a song in a moment, and then Adrian is going to lead us through a prayer of repentance and faith, a prayer of surrendering oneself, surrendering the weight of sin, acknowledging that it's a weight that we cannot bear, but rejoicing that Jesus bore that weight when

he went to the cross, that we can have confidence in forgiveness, because just as Jesus died to sin, he was raised to new life, conquering sin and death.

[28 : 02] God brought Saul to his knees, and having spent several days prayerfully seeking God in his discomfort, he was welcomed into the family in a moment, and it's a beautiful picture that's captured by Ananias, realizing that Saul is an enemy, and yet when Saul arrives in front of him, he greets him as brother.

God in his kindness, in his kindness, may have impressed the uncomfortable need that you have for a savior this morning, but this is the gospel, this is the gospel, you may have entered here this morning only to be confronted by that uncomfortable reality, that you are an enemy of God, that your sin has separated you from him, but you could leave here today as family, you could leave here today as a forgiven, loved, and cherished child of the living God, that is Jesus promise to you, do you need that gift?

, will you wait I want to take care Karen yes I want to see it I want to