

A Wild Animal Tamed

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[0 : 00] We'll turn back to a reading in Acts chapter 9. As we look here at the conversion of Saul,! We're going to focus mainly on verse 10 down to verse 20.

! I just want to read again at verse 15. But the Lord said to him, he was saying to Ananias, Go, for he is a chosen instrument of mine to carry my name before the Gentiles and kings and the children, of Israel.

He is a chosen instrument of mine. We hear the word testimony used in church, and particularly maybe as we approach a communion season, we hear people talking about their testimony.

But what does it mean? Perhaps many of us know what a testimony is. Maybe we've told our testimony. Maybe we've heard others sharing what we call their testimony.

But perhaps we're not sure just what it means. The word testimony itself has two real meanings. One can be, and they're both related to evidence.

[1 : 11] One is when you think of a testimony given in court. So in a legal setting, someone will give a testimony. That's an account of something that they've maybe done, or something that they may be seen happening.

So they give a testimony. It's spoken. It's giving evidence. But the other testimony is speaking about the Christian's experience.

And again, it's making something public. And it's speaking about evidence. It's speaking about something that's happened. But it's the work of God's grace in our lives.

So instead of when we're giving evidence in court, we're looking maybe at the accused, or maybe at ourselves. That's giving testimony to a person. When we're thinking of the Christian's testimony, it's not just looking at ourselves, although it's telling about our experience, but it's looking to God, and telling of the wonder of what God has done in our lives.

So what's your testimony today? When you think of the two ways that we can give a testimony, one is kind of giving evidence about ourselves.

[2 : 27] That is a testimony of some, where the focus is on what we're doing, or what we've done in life. Is that your testimony today, when the focus is on what you are doing?

Or is your testimony today to the experience and the work of God's grace in your life? That you're able to say that the Lord has helped me, that the Lord has been with me, that the Lord has taken me from the mighty clay and put my feet on that rock that is Jesus Christ.

That he's taken me from darkness into his marvelous light. Is that your testimony today? And is your testimony a public one?

Is it one that you are delighted to show to others? Whether you think of the selfish way we can boast in ourselves, or whether it's a public way we're able to profess Christ as our Lord and as our Savior.

Well, every testimony of God's grace is a reason to rejoice. It doesn't matter who it is. It doesn't matter what they've done.

[3 : 36] Young or old, male or female, boy or girl. It doesn't matter. It doesn't matter what kind of conversion it's been. Whether it's been a dramatic one. Whether it's been a major change, as we see here with Saul.

Or whether it's just the quiet way that God has worked. Maybe from your childhood, you've always known and loved the Lord. And then you come to a point where you make that a public profession.

A testimony is a wonderful thing. It's a beautiful thing to hear and to see the way the Lord works in so many people's lives.

But what do we do when we hear of someone becoming a Christian? When someone gives their testimony, do you rejoice? And do you give thanks to God for that work?

Or do you maybe begin to question it? Is it real? Is it true? Can it really be right that that person is converted? Well, think of the conversion of Saul here, the testimony of Saul.

[4 : 38] What do you see? We think of Saul, who became known as Paul. We think of him and all that he did for the Lord. And all the letters that he wrote to the churches, the places he went.

And we think of him as a great evangelist in the New Testament, going out proclaiming the wonders of Jesus Christ. But what was he before he came to that?

Before he came to trust in the Lord Jesus Christ. Well, all you have to do is look at the first verse of Acts chapter 9. And you see what he was.

But Saul still breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord. This is what he was. He was a persecutor of the church.

And the more we look at the scriptures, the more we see the wonder of God's grace. Saul's conversion is one of these high points in scripture, where we see the wonder of grace towards one who was literally killing Christians, arresting them, having them put to death.

[5 : 46] And the history of the church and the change that would come through his conversion, it's remarkable. And we think of Saul here. But there's another name mentioned, just as important in the midst of Saul's conversion.

Not as well known, little is known of him, but this man, Ananias. He is mentioned here too. And as a reminder to us, yes, there's dramatic conversions, and the wonder of Saul's conversion.

But there's also the way God works through all his people. Ananias being one. God is able to transform anyone.

And here we're looking at Saul. And really, he was like an animal, and a wild animal. But God tamed him. John Calvin uses that kind of illustration in his commentary on Acts.

He says, Luke tells how the Lord not only brought him under control when he was like a wild animal, but made him a new person. It wasn't like taming an animal and putting him in a cage because they were still dangerous, but this wild animal was a new creation.

[7 : 01] Saul, who was breathing out murderous threats, is now going out, proclaiming the wonder of the grace of God. He's a new person. He ever tried to tame a wild animal?

I'm sure many have had pet lambs over these last months. They're not exactly wild animals, but by nature, they want to go and do their own thing. But you can.

You can feed them, and they can come very close to you. The closest I ever came was catching two baby rabbits out in the garden. Again, not exactly wild creatures, but by nature, they just want to be out.

But I thought I could look after them. I thought I could care for them and make them love me. But the first opportunity they got, they were away. They ran away.

And that's just the way we are. We are by nature a people who God needs to tame. But by nature, we are a people who run away. And it's amazing when you see truly wild animals tamed.

[8 : 04] Lions and those who can work with them and get alongside them. But the worst of sinners in the hands of God can be changed and tamed and made into new creations as well.

And this is what this passage reminds us of. The power of God to change. And that God is in control. And that when we trust him, he is able to help us.

When we think of that thing that we need to do as we're talking about with the children, the bravest thing we've ever said, help. That is what we need, to say help to the Lord.

And there's just two things I want us to look at this passage, two headings we want to look under it. And the first is looking at the taming that takes place. And then secondly, we're going to look at the tamer, the one who does it.

So first of all, we see the taming. So we think of Saul breathing out murderous threats. He's like a wild animal. So what changed? Do you believe in miracles?

[9 : 16] You might say yes, because we see them in the Bible. We read about miracles that Jesus performed in the Bible. We read about the miraculous works of God throughout the scriptures.

But what about today? Do you believe that God does miracles today? There's a psalm, Psalm 77, verse 14.

In the St. Sam's version, it says, you are the God of miracles, whose power the nations view. Other translations use the word wonders, but it means the same thing.

You are the God of miracles. And today we still view God in that way, that he is the God of miracles, because God still does wondrous works.

God still takes people from darkness to light. God still takes people from anger and a rage against God to love the Lord.

[10 : 17] He is the God of miracles. But we can be scared of what God is doing as well.

Think about it for yourself. Maybe you've been out on a walk, walking around the castle grounds, perhaps, and you're on a narrow path and coming towards you is someone with a dog and the dog is kind of straining at the leash to come towards you.

And if you're a little bit scared of dogs, you're quite hesitant to go towards them. But the owner very often will say something like, don't worry, it won't bite you. But you're still not sure, are you?

You're still a little bit wary, especially if they start barking. You're still a little bit wary and sometimes rightly so. Well, think about Saul here then.

He's like a wild animal. He was ravaging the church, breathing out murderous threats. But now the grace of God has taken hold of him and he's a new creation.

[11 : 21] He is tamed. Now, had you heard or known of Saul at this time, what would your reaction be?

Especially if you're told, go and see him. Go and speak to him. Well, we see it with Ananias here how he responds in verse 13.

The Lord has told him to go and lay hands on him that he might regain his sight. In verse 13, Ananias answered, Lord, I have heard from many about this man how much evil he has done to your saints in Jerusalem.

That's his initial reaction. And that would probably be our reaction if we were in his shoes as well. Think about it in this way. Every year, the Christian organization open doors.

They work highlighting where Christians are persecuted around the world. And they produce a world watch list every year. the top 15 countries where Christians face persecution, the most extreme persecution.

[12 : 30] The top three countries in the world are North Korea, Somalia, and Yemen. And you can see the list for yourselves online. And they recorded that last year, 4,476 Christians were killed for their faith.

Imagine being asked to go to one of these places. To North Korea, Somalia, or Yemen. And being told to go and speak to one of the main people who have been persecuting those of the Christian faith.

And to say to them, I have a word from God for you. Would you go? Would you go immediately? You would be hesitant, I'm sure, same as myself.

There would be that fear, that natural fear. And that's the natural fear that Ananias has here. He has heard about Saul. He's heard what he's doing. And he's told to go and see him and lay hands on him.

And he's saying almost to the Lord, are you sure? I have heard about this man. And yet, Ananias here is one of those special people who almost just steps onto the scene of the Bible for a few moments and then quickly disappears again.

[13 : 49] But so important. One of these unsung heroes of the faith. But Ananias is a picture of what faith does. It trusts God.

Faith trusts God. And in verse 14, we see, and here he has authority, so he's still speaking about how he's come to arrest the people.

But the Lord said to him, go, for he is a chosen instrument of mine. And so with these words from the Lord, Ananias goes.

And look at the way he describes Saul then. He departed, and it says in verse 17, and entered the house, this is where Saul was, and laying his hands on him, he said, brother Saul.

Not just at a distance, carefully, saying Saul, but laying his hands on him, saying, brother Saul. Acknowledging the work of God's grace.

[14 : 53] that he is accepted by God. Ananias is calmed by the grace of God, and Saul is transformed by the grace of God.

And God is able to tame. And that's the wonder of everyone's testimony. Whether it's the quiet testimony, still with the fear and anxiety and an element of how am I going to go on.

Or whether it's those who are brought from a background of very publicly disrespecting or cursing the Lord. Turning your back on the Lord that the Lord is able to tame.

There's two examples here. Ananias, the one who knows and loves the Lord, and Saul, breathing out murderous threats against the Lord. And yet we see the wonder of the grace of God.

And so it reminds us how we are to deal with one another. How we are to look at one another. And to see that God is able to change anyone.

[16 : 10] God is able to take the vilest of sinners and make them a new creation. salvation. And we are challenged by Jesus himself when we look at Matthew chapter 16.

Chapter 6, verse 14 and 15. And this is at the end of the Lord's prayer where it says, For if you forgive others their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you.

But it goes on to say, if you do not forgive others their trespasses, nor will your Father forgive your trespasses. And there's an example for us here of that in Ananias, where he's saying initially, I've heard about this man.

I've heard the things he has done against his people. but he is able to forgive and to call him Brother Saul, to see that the Lord's grace is a powerful thing.

So we are to forgive others. Because if we're not able to, it says, your Father will not be able to forgive your trespasses.

[17 : 22] So there's that serious warning. God tames his people. And we're shown just how he does it with Saul. How does he change?

Well, we see three things very briefly here. We see Saul is praying in verse 11. And the Lord said to him, rise and go to the street called straight.

And at the house of Judas, look for the man of Tarsus named Saul. For behold, he is praying. Immediately, Saul is praying. He is looking to God.

He knows he can come into that relationship with God. As Gordon was preaching on the last couple of weeks, the importance of prayer in our personal and our corporate life.

Here it is shown to us, Saul immediately is praying. You see, Saul is humble before the Lord. Saul would have gone on and said, I can do it myself previously and everything, but now he can receive that help from Ananias.

[18 : 23] us. And so we are to be humble before the Lord ourselves as well, to humble ourselves under the mighty hand of God. That's what we need to do.

And you see then also, Saul is living for Christ. A transformation has come in his life. He's baptized. He has fellowship with the disciples.

And then he goes on to proclaim Jesus in three verses, 18, 19, and 20. What a dramatic change. Baptized, fellowshiping, and proclaiming Jesus.

And it leaves people amazed. He has been transformed. He has been tamed by the grace of God. And so what is God saying to you today?

Do you believe in miracles? Do you believe that God is able to save you? He can save anybody if we but look to him, if we ask him for help.

[19 : 30] Saul and Ananias, two very different kinds of people, but both under the grace of God, used in amazing ways.

And so can you be. Every one of us can be used by God by coming to put our trust in the Lord Jesus Christ. And what makes the difference here?

Well, the second thing we see here is the tamer. I just want to think briefly on this. The tamer. What made the difference to Saul? What made the difference to Ananias?

Why was Saul so changed? Why was Ananias in his fear able to go to Saul and put his hands on him and say, Brother Saul, well, it was all of God.

You see, testimony, it's not about us. Ananias wouldn't go and say, oh, well, I got strength in myself to go and speak to Saul, look at me.

[20 : 35] No, he would testify to God. God spoke to me. He said, I have this man Saul, but he is an instrument of mine to carry my name.

It's all about God. And the same with Saul. Saul, in his pre-conversion life, had believed Jesus was dead and his mission was to destroy any lingering thought that this religion, this Christian faith, would go anywhere.

He was going to get rid of it. But now he's an instrument in God's hand. The tamer is God and God is able to use in them to proclaim the wonder of this Christ far and wide.

God had other plans. And the Bible is full of these chosen instruments in his hands. People who were brought from different backgrounds, people who others would have looked down on, yet the Lord used.

Because if we start comparing ourselves with others, we always end up in difficulty. Because we always end up thinking, I'm not as good as that person. I can't be used like that person.

[21 : 54] And yet many of us have different personalities, different characteristics, and the Lord can use them all for his glory. What we see as a weakness, God can use as a strength.

And Paul goes on to speak about that in his letter to the Corinthians. 1 Corinthians chapter 1 verse 26, he says, For consider your calling, brothers.

Not many of you were wise according to worldly standards. Not many were powerful. Not many were of noble birth. But God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise.

God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong. God can tame. He's the one who has power and the one who uses his people.

Because God is in the business of taking people and using them in ways they never imagined possible. When you look through scripture, you find that again and again.

[22 : 57] You think of Esther in the Old Testament who had set off for such a time as this. She was an instrument in God's hand who saved her people at that time.

You think of how God used an unknown shepherd boy called David to become one of the greatest kings of Israel. You think of how God used a blind beggar named Bartimaeus begging at the side of the street and yet who cried out for help to God and taught the disciples in a large crowd such a powerful lesson, an instrument in God's hand.

You think of the Samaritan woman who was rejected by many who Jesus met at a well one day, an instrument in God's hand who went back into her town and told people that she had met this Messiah, the Christ.

Could this be the Christ? You think of the disciples who were called by God, various walks of life, and yet it was said these men have turned the world upside down because they were instruments in God's hand.

There's a book with the title Ordinary People, Extraordinary God. It's a book that's told of the hundred year history of the church in Roskeen, the free church in Roskeen.

[24 : 23] Ordinary People, Instruments in God's Hand, an extraordinary God who can do great things. And shouldn't it be exciting for us to think, well, what can God do with me?

If we were to put our lives, our hearts into the hands of God, what can he do with me? Instead of thinking, but I'm weak, I've got nothing to offer, God is able.

Ordinary people, extraordinary God. Formerly, Saul had a mission, but it was all about self, persecuting, eliminating the people of God.

He was advancing, as he says in Galatians, advancing beyond many of his contemporaries. He was on the ladder to success as he saw it, but he was brought down and to realize that that was nothing compared to the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord.

And what does Paul put this down to? The work of God. You see Paul, Saul, sharing his testimony throughout the book of Acts.

[25 : 43] In chapter 26 of Acts, verse 14, again we're told some more of Paul's testimony there. When we had all fallen to the ground, I heard a voice saying to me, in the Hebrew language, Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?

It is hard for you to kick against the goads. It's reminding us there of the tamer, how God is able to tame because that word goads, or as in another translation it says, kicking against the pricks, it's all about what is used to direct animals, the stick that is used to push them in the right direction.

You hear that phrase goading them on. That's what it means, it just means pushing you, prompting you on in a certain direction. And Saul is fighting against it.

The Lord is goading him, but he's fighting against it. And he's saying to him, why are you kicking against me? Is that you today?

Are you feeling these goads, the Lord's prompting you in a certain direction, and you're trying to fight against it, you're trying to push in a different direction, but the Lord is still pushing you.

[27 : 11] Is it time to stop kicking against him? Is it time to stop fighting against that and just say, Lord, help. Lord, help.

The bravest thing we can say is, Lord, help. I've done it long enough, going against you.

Help. Help me go in the right direction. Paul was fighting, but he still a chosen instrument in the hands of God.

Maybe you are today too, but it's time to stop kicking against him and just to let him come and have your life and live for him.

Paul would see himself as weak, and so do we, but that's a good thing, God. Because it's only then we see the strength of God.

[28 : 24] Charles Spurgeon put it like this, grow in the root of all grace, which is faith. Believe God's promises more firmly than ever.

Allow your faith to increase in its fullness, firmness, and simplicity. Don't over complicate it, but by grace, grow through faith.

believe. Stop kicking and believe and be an instrument in God's hand that your testimony would be, not look what I've done, but look at what God has done to me and to many more, and give glory to him.

Let us pray. Lord, our gracious God, we do thank you that you are one who is patient and merciful. You know, as we think of Saul kicking against the goads, and how often we find ourselves like that too, when we are just kicking out against you, turning into our own ways, but yet by your grace, by your love, you guide us, you help us, and we pray that you will continue to do that, and to help us to give that testimony of glory to your name, as we ask all with the forgiveness of our sin, in Jesus' name, Amen.

We'll conclude by singing to God's praise in Psalm 73 in the Scottish Psalter version, page 316, we'll sing from verse 23 to 26.

[30 : 15] And this is a psalm where you see the psalmist initially questioning the Lord, but then you see this great change in verse 23, nevertheless continually, O Lord, I am with thee, thou dost me hold by my right hand and still upholdest me, thou with thy counsel while I live, wilt me conduct and guide and to thy glory afterward receive me to abide.

Let's sing these four verses to God's praise. miracle.

my right hand, and still thou holdest me.

Though it I counsel while I live, will be conduct and guide, and to thy glory afterward receive me to abide.

Whom have I in the heavens high, but thee, O Lord, alone, and in the earth through my desire, besides thee there is none.

[32 : 40] My flesh and heart doth paint and fill, but God doth fail me never.

For of my heart, God is the strength and portion forever.

After the benediction, I'll go to the door to my right. We'll close with the benediction. Now may grace, mercy, and peace from God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit rest upon and abide with you all now and forevermore.

Amen. Amen.