

Paul's Conversion

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[0 : 00] And looking especially at verses 12 to 18, where we find the Apostle Paul, as he was on his way towards Rome, giving an account here to King Agrippa of his own circumstances, and particularly in these verses, of how he himself had met with the risen Christ, with the glorified Jesus, as he went on yet another episode of what he thought would be another successful mission against the Church of Christ.

And that mission that he had against the Church of Christ was turned, in that instance, into a mission to the Gentiles with the Gospel.

Now we're continuing here to look at a short series of studies that we began some weeks ago on conversions in the Bible, various accounts that you have in the Bible of conversions to Christ, people whose lives were changed and came to know the Lord from different kinds of backgrounds. And I suppose in many ways people associate the conversion of Saul of Tarsus to be the most famous conversion in history. We take from it these well-known words that describe now other, sometimes more common events as a Damascus road experience.

Something dramatic in a person's life, even if it's not actually a conversion as such. And you notice one thing that's important before we look at the details of this.

[1 : 41] As he's here giving a defense of himself before the group gathered here, especially before King Agrippa, who is in charge of these proceedings, it's very interesting that it's a testimony as well as a defense.

Because Paul is actually bringing not only his conversion before King Agrippa, but in doing so he's bearing testimony to this Jesus who has changed his life and turned it around.

And in fact, the conversion is far more about Jesus than it is about Saul himself. It's more to do with who Jesus is and what Jesus has done and is doing and will do in the life of this person.

It's much more about that Jesus than about Paul himself. And that's a reminder to us of a danger, if you like, in giving our testimony if we're asked to do so.

And it's always a privilege to do so. But there is a danger along with that, that we present more of ourselves in it and talk of our own experiences, which is not wrong for us to do, but to do so in a way that actually detracts from what ought to be the main feature of every testimony to a conversion experience and coming to know the Lord.

[3 : 10] And that is Jesus himself. It's about him.

And so there are two things tonight that we can look briefly at that rise out of this passage for us very plainly.

And as we say, the passage is really mainly about Jesus, though it brings in Saul's own experience as well. The first thing is that you notice here the glory of Jesus.

He's saying, in this connection, in connection with further attempts to persecute the church, I journeyed to Damascus with the authority and commission of the chief priests.

At midday, O King, I saw on the way a light from heaven, brighter than the sun, that shone around me and those who journeyed with me.

[4 : 32] Now, when did it happen? It happened at midday. The brightest time of the day, there or anywhere else. And yet he says that as this light shone around them that came from heaven, it was a light brighter than the sun.

And it happened at midday when the sun is in its height. That's sunlight. Whenever you have an eclipse of the sun or any other time that you need to look towards the sun, we are always warned, very seriously, never to look directly at the sun because the sun can actually blind you if you look directly at it for too long and it doesn't take too long for your eyes to be affected in that way.

So if you're looking at the sun, of course, there's always a need to have some protection for your eyes, for your eyesight, so that the strength of the light of the sun will not damage your eyes. And Paul is saying here what they actually experienced in this light from heaven was actually brighter than the sun which shone at midday.

And that is the glory of Jesus. Even the apostles find it impossible to find in human language and in descriptions that are borrowed by taking things that belong to the creation itself, such as here the sun at midday in the height of its light and power and strength.

[6 : 10] Even that is inadequate to describe the glory of this Jesus, the glory of this God, the immensity of this person. In fact, when you look at these words, this light shone from heaven that shone around me and those who journeyed with me, these words shone around me are used only one other place in Scripture in the New Testament, and that's in the other book that Luke wrote in the Gospel of Luke.

And in chapter 2 and in verse 9, he's describing there the time of Christ's birth and entrance into the world. The angels who were out in the, the shepherds who were out in the field, suddenly an angel of the Lord appeared, and the glory of God shone around them.

It didn't just say a light shone around them brighter than the sun. He says specifically there Luke does that it was the glory of the Lord that shone around. It's the same words describe what he's describing here, this light brighter than the sun at midday that shone around me.

In other words, it's the glory of this divine person. He's bringing before us the fact of Christ as God. The fact of this person's greatness, not only as the exalted saviour in our human nature, but now also as the God-man who is himself divine as well as human.

And it's that brightness that shines and strikes Paul and his companions to the ground on the way to Damascus.

[7 : 59] What's our view of Jesus tonight? Have we seen for ourselves, even if not literally, yet nevertheless in our experience spiritually, in our hearts have we come really to reckon with the fact of Christ's greatness and Christ's brightness and Christ's glory?

There's nothing anywhere in the creation that can actually adequately describe this glory. All that Paul himself can say, it was a light brighter than the sun.

Now you and I perhaps have never had that actual experience that Paul had, and you don't need to have that experience that Paul had in all its features there in order to come to know the Lord for yourself.

But everyone here who has come to know the Lord for themselves has come to know one who is majestic, who is bright in glory above anything that this world can possibly use to describe it.

Brighter even than the sun. What a great person Jesus is. What a magnificent sight it will be when Christ is revealed at His coming.

[9 : 23] His brightness is not going to be hidden from view the way it was as He was born and laid in a manger and a stable. Every eye shall see Him as He is in all the splendor of His glory.

Are you looking forward to that? Are you looking forward to that day when those presently and those who have in previous times come like Saul himself once did to persecute the church, to denigrate the name of Christ, to trample His name under their feet without any response as such from this glorified, this brilliant Jesus?

Are you not longing for this Jesus to manifest Himself so that every single eye will see Him and everyone will know this is the Lord?

And this is the Lord who governs the whole of the universe. Isn't He magnificent? And it's that magnificence of Jesus, His beauty, His power, everything about this glory of Jesus that makes Him glorious as far as we can convey it in our witness in the Gospel.

That's what our life surely is about, isn't it? That's what our congregational life is about. To manifest in this town in which Jesus has set us something to do with His glory, further evidence of His own glory and His status as this Son of God, as this Savior, this glorious person.

[11 : 06] And the glory of Jesus is not just in the description of the light, but you can actually see it in the reaction of Paul and those who are with Him, where He says here, a light that shone about me and those who journeyed with me and when we had all fallen to the ground.

What's the right thing to do in the presence of Jesus? Well, it's precisely this. And not just to do it once in a lifetime, when you come first of all for the first time to bow your knee in His presence and to acknowledge that He is Lord.

This is the essence of the Christian life. This is the essence of what it means to live as a Christian. That you bow before Jesus and that means you give Him yourself.

You give Him your will. You give Him your heart. You give Him your time. You give Him your person. You give Him your present. You give Him your future.

You give Him your past. You bring all things before Him. And you fall to the ground in His presence because you know that that's the right thing to do and the only appropriate thing to do in the presence of such majesty and glory is to just bow yourself to the ground and say, Lord, You alone are God.

[12:30] And it is right for me to bow before Your majesty. And the reason many people fail to bow their knee to Jesus is precisely this fact.

They have never come to know anything of His glory. Because when you know His glory and you glimpse His glory, even if it doesn't go anything like to the extent that Paul and his companions here saw as they witnessed this bright light that shone around them, nevertheless, to actually taste something of the glory of Christ is to come to reckon that it's right to bow in His presence.

And isn't that what's wrong with us as sinners to begin with? We just don't appreciate the glory of Christ, the rights of Jesus, the majesty of Jesus.

And through this conversion, account of Saul's conversion, tonight you and I are coming to be confronted, just as He was in the light that shone from heaven, so we've been confronted in the light that comes from the Gospel, from the page of Scripture where Jesus is saying, this is who I am.

And this is the right thing to do in my presence. And to do it again and again as you come on a daily basis to serve Him, you come to do it obediently, willingly, gladly, thankful that He is your Lord.

[14:18] And we have to be careful because falling before Jesus and coming in the exact circumstances that changed Saul of Tarsus' life here could actually lead us to the conclusion that this is what every conversion should be like.

And sometimes it's difficult when you can't follow somebody's testimony, it's difficult sometimes perhaps to conclude that we are a Christian if we can't follow some of the major features of somebody's testimony in giving a testimony of their conversion.

Well, very, very few people will have the kind of conversion that Saul of Tarsus had. And it's not just in the dramatic, such as you find here in this incident on the way to Damascus, that people come to be converted.

Don't imagine from looking at this conversion that you need to be able to follow the steps of it and the features of it in your own experience before you can conclude that you too are a Christian.

Let me just remind you of something you find in the Old Testament in 1 Kings and in the account of Elijah as he fled at one time from Jezebel after the contest on Mount Carmel.

[15:38] He was exhausted and he fled into the wilderness and eventually made his way to Horeb, the mountain of God. And we read there that God, through the experience that he gave to his prophet, there revealed himself.

But we're told, first of all, a great wind came and tore up that mountain. If you think of a hurricane and the power of a hurricane, something like that or a tornado, that's the kind of thing that Elijah saw and experienced there in the first instance.

And then it says, but God was not in the wind. And after the wind an earthquake. Just imagine the upheaval of an earthquake, something that had actually happened on that mountain many years before when the law was given under Moses.

There was a wind and there was an earthquake and there was fire, which is the next element that's mentioned. First the wind, the Lord was not in the wind. And then the earthquake, the Lord was not in the earthquake.

And then the fire. Imagine how devastating a fire is when you look recently at what happened in Canada and how a fire out of control is such a fearsome thing. But the Lord was not in the fire.

[16:53] And after the fire, a thin, whisper-like voice. And when Elijah heard it, he covered his face with his cloak because the Lord was in that.

And that's a lesson to you and to me tonight. Don't just expect that conversion will come through the great upheaving waves of God's law striking terror into your heart.

It may come that way. It may come through a Damascus Road experience, but don't think that it has to come that way and that if it doesn't come that way, you cannot be a Christian, you cannot be converted.

For many people, it's just like the quiet lapping of the waves on the sand on a nice, quiet summer evening.

A gentle ushering of us into the kingdom of God. And that's just as effective and just as much a conversion as on the road to Damascus.

[18:07] the glory of Jesus. A light from heaven, a falling down before this Christ.

Have we experienced this for ourselves to the extent I mean that we have come to know something of the glory of Christ, of his person, of his authority, of his rule?

And have we come indeed to bow our knee to him not in a passing reference type of way that acknowledges outwardly that this is who he is? But in a way such as Isaiah saw, when he saw the Lord and this was the Lord as John tells us in chapter 12 of his gospel that Isaiah saw this very person high and lifted up and an answer to the Lord's question here is Isaiah saying, Lord, here am I.

Send me. Use me. Let me be your servant. Let me do things for you. That's to bow the knee to Christ, to be ready to go forth and say, Lord, I want to be yours and your witness in whatever you want me to do.

The glory of Jesus. Secondly, the authority of Jesus. And you see the authority of Jesus in two things. Firstly, in his examination of Saul of Tarsus and then his instruction to him.

[19:47] Very briefly, his examination because he's saying here as you find there in verse 14, Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?

It is hard for you to kick against the goads. And the first thing that strikes you there is how Jesus is talking about Saul persecuting him. We read earlier that Paul's testimony was before Agrippa that he went about persecuting the church, persecuting these Christians and yet when Jesus came to meet him and when Jesus came to examine him, this is the question that he put to him, why are you persecuting me?

Right at the very outset of his Christian life, right here in his conversion, Saul of Tarsus who became Paul the apostle is actually being brought face to face with the unbreakable bond between Jesus and his people.

And nowhere do you find that more wonderfully spoken about and written about than when Paul then wrote his epistles. Because as you examine them you find so wonderfully there the emphasis that he gives to union with Christ, union on the part of his people with this Savior, with this very glorified Lord.

They are united to him and they are united to him even to the extent that the Lord himself says if his people are persecuting, he is being persecuted.

[21:18] he is united to them and as united to them the persecution is actually being aimed at him. Why are you persecuting me?

Now you could widen that out, we're not going to do it this evening, but there's so much as we said, especially in Paul's own letters that actually tell us of further matters of importance spiritually as we seek to understand what does it mean to be joined to Christ, to be united to this Christ.

And that really brings us right into the essence of what it is to be saved, what it is to relate properly to God, what it is to be made a child of God, what it is to be adopted into his family, what it is to have our sin forgiven, what it is to have the hope of eternal life.

all of that comes from being united to Christ. And here, the apostle is immediately face to face with that reality.

And what a great privilege that is, that the likes of you and I, who were rightly driven out of the Garden of Eden in our first parents, Adam and Eve, not gently, but as it were, pushed out by God very forcibly in his judgment.

[22:52] He drove them out, is how the Bible puts it. And you might expect looking at that, and the gravity of what they had done, that never again would they be friends with God.

And yet there you have the most wonderful reality, that lost sinners, through Christ and in Christ, are brought to be joined spiritually to God, joined savingly to the Saviour.

And there is no greater privilege, is there, than no longer to be separate from God, but to be joined savingly to him in Jesus Christ.

How important Christ then is even from that point of view, that coming to trust in him means that you're coming to be joined savingly to him and to God as your father.

But let's move on. He says, Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me? It is hard for you to kick against the goads. Now, why did he say that to him?

[24 : 03] And what is meant by that? Well, it's an image taken from ordinary life as it was then, and as you still find it in some parts of the world where oxen, the likes of oxen are used for various works, especially in working the ground.

If you were going to take a young ox that had never been yoked before, the practice would be very commonly to have a frame made out of wood with very sharp wooden prongs, if you like, in it, or goads.

Because when you put the yoke onto that young animal for the first time, it didn't want to be under the yoke, so it would kick out and try to actually get out from under that yoke and try to release itself from this new weight that it felt around its neck.

And by kicking out like that, the goads in that frame of wood around it would actually, if you like, tell it you just can't do that successfully.

The best thing for you to do is just yield to the yoke, get on with wearing the yoke and get used to the yoke because it is very painful to kick against the goads.

[25 : 15] That's the image that Paul is using, that the Lord used in coming to show Paul how difficult it was for him to continue to resist what he now knows in his heart are in fact the goads of Christ crucified and risen from the dead.

And you know, that takes us to something very interesting. This was not the first time that Saul of Tarsus thought positively about Jesus. It's a mistake to think that Saul of Tarsus had out of his mind closed every thought of Jesus being in any way significant until Jesus met him on the way to Damascus.

Because in fact, if you go to some of the other references, chapter 22 for example, in the book of Acts, you can find in chapter 22 and verse 20, Paul again speaking and there also giving an account of his life and his defense, chapter 22 and at verse 20 he says the following when he's saying there amongst other things, when the blood of Stephen, your witness, this is him actually praying to God, was being shed, I myself was standing by and approving and watching over the garments of those who killed him.

Now you see, that gives you an insight into something very precious. When Stephen was being stoned to death, the practice would be for those who were the chief witnesses against him, even if they were false witnesses, they would actually begin the stoning and they would have to lay their garments down as a testament to the fact that they were the witnesses who began the process of the stoning.

And we read specifically in that account of Stephen's death in the book of Acts, that they laid down their garments at the feet of a young man named Saul.

[27 : 15] And immediately in the following chapter, it begins with Saul continuing to persecute the church. In other words, the death of Stephen as he bore testimony to Jesus, and the Jesus that was clear in Stephen's testimony, actually got to Saul's conscience.

It made a mark in the heart of this man. And although it didn't seem like it at the time, Saul of Tarsus at the time of Stephen's death had begun to think about Jesus in a way that he had never thought of before.

Something of Christ's glory, something of the greatness of this person, something that had come through this faithful testimony of Stephen even unto death, really got to Saul of Tarsus.

And it was brought further, obviously, when Jesus himself met him. The goads began at the death of Stephen, we understand.

Paul began to kick out against Jesus then, and it was already hurting him by the time Jesus met with him. God and that reminds us of something very important.

[28 : 30] Sometimes an outward hostility can actually be just a mask for some very serious thinking inwardly about the Lord on the part of any person, even an avowed atheist.

In her book that came out many years ago now, *Out of the Salt Shaker into the World*, Evangelism as a Way of Life, the author of that book, Rebecca Manley Piper, tells about a person called Mary, whom she met as a student, and when she met this Mary, Mary was a confessed atheist.

She confessed outwardly and openly and quite pointedly to being an atheist. And then Rebecca actually invited Mary to a Bible study, and Mary's reaction was that actually that very same day, she had persuaded two people out of becoming Christians.

She had managed to persuade them out of the idea of becoming Christians. And then as you read the book, Rebecca tells us that Mary was actually fighting an inward struggle in which God was convicting her of sin, and in fact, she had wanted to know God all her life.

Don't assume that an atheist, confessedly an atheist, has no positive thoughts about Jesus. You may come across many people who very skillfully hide the fact that they are actually thinking about God, and really deep down want to know God, and are envious at those Christians they see who know God, and to testify to him.

[30 : 22] Don't give up on the most zealous atheist in this town tonight, or wherever you're placed. Because if God got through to the heart and conscience of Saul of Tarsus, there is simply nobody in this town beyond his reach.

And beyond the reach of your testimony as a Christian, to the glory of Christ, and to authority and claim of Christ over every life, continue to bear your testimony to that Jesus, and pray that even as you meet with those who resisted, that nevertheless God will work his work of grace in their hearts. His examination then of Saul brought all of that about to Saul's own consciousness. The one other thing to mention is in the authority of Jesus, not just examination, but instruction.

And he says, I said, Lord, who are you? And the Lord said, I am Jesus whom you are persecuting, but rise up and stand on your feet. For I have appeared to you for this purpose, to appoint you as a servant and witness to the things in which you have seen me, and to those in which I will appear to you, and so on through to the end of our passage.

Now I'm not going to go into every single detail of that, but just notice the main points of it, and then think about it afterwards and just enlarge it out for yourselves. First of all, Saul is given an instruction that says to him, get on your feet.

[31 : 59] He has rightly bowed before the authority of Jesus, but when we do that, we don't stay there. The Lord will not have us to remain in that position without saying to us, get on your feet, I want you to do things for me.

I'm putting you on your feet, and you know, that's really a description of what Jesus does anyway in our conversion. He's placing us on our feet. He's putting us on a right standing between ourselves and God.

And he says, he said to him, I am appointing you, I have appeared to you for this purpose, to appoint you as a servant and witness to the things in which you have seen me.

Not a servant or witness, but both, because they are both inseparably connected. Every servant of Jesus is a witness to Jesus.

Every witness to Jesus is a serving witness. Our service and our testifying or our witness to him go together. And that's what he's saying here to Saul as he says to him, get on your feet because this is what I've now made you.

[33 : 07] This is the purpose why I appear to you. Isn't that amazing? This incredible appearance, this unspeakable event, this thing that you can't just put into words and yet the Lord is saying this is why it's happened so that you, Saul, would become a servant and witness to me.

Is that not what we are tonight? Are we not tonight as we leave this building with our whole heart saying, Lord, make me your servant and witness to the things in which you have shown yourself to me and my experience of you in my life.

And I'm going to send you, he said, I am sending you to the Gentiles to open their eyes so that they may turn from darkness to light and from the power of Satan to God that they may receive forgiveness of sins and a place among those who are sanctified by faith or through faith in me.

There's a whole lot there we don't have time to go into. It's worthy of a study or two on its own. But notice what he's saying. I'm sending you as a servant and a witness so that in sending you to the Gentiles you would open their eyes.

That's the first thing. That's the great need that our eyes will be opened because they're not opened until we're converted. We're not opened until the Lord opens them and shows us the reality of ourselves and of himself.

[34 : 51] As we saw with the thief last week, he came to know himself on the cross and as he came to know himself, he came to know this Jesus and his need of this Jesus and the suitability of this Jesus. And he's talking here about our turning from darkness to light by their eyes being opened so that they may turn from darkness to light from the power of Satan to God that they may receive forgiveness of sins and a place among those who are sanctified.

there is nothing more important than that our sins are forgiven. The Bible repeats it so often just to point us to the importance of this great fact that he is the one, this Jesus, who forgives our sin, that we are the people who need our sins forgiven.

Nothing's going to be right for us and between ourselves and God until our sin is forgiven and our sin comes to be forgiven by our turning from sin to God, from darkness to light, from the power of Satan to God.

And through that we come to have this unspeakable privilege of having a place among those who are sanctified by faith in Christ.

A place among those who are sanctified. What a great way to end this speech of the Lord to his servant, Saul of Tarsus.

[36 : 40] The glory of Jesus, we've touched briefly on that. the authority of Jesus in his examination of us and his instructions to us.

Now it's your turn and mine to bow in his presence, to say, Lord, I'm here. Please send me. Please use me. or please change me if you have not yet come to know that change that conversion is and brings.

And please give me a place among those who are sanctified, amongst your holy people, in other words.

Please give me a place and make me one of those blessed ones. Let's pray. Lord, you bring many blessings to us through the gospel.

[37 : 44] We thank you that amongst them we have that great blessing of forgiveness, the forgiveness of our sins, for you are the God who abundantly pardons, the one who wipes our record clean and replaces it with the record of righteousness, which you are pleased to grant to us as the righteousness of Jesus imputed to us.

Oh, we pray, Lord, tonight that each of us here this evening who have heard your voice in the gospel, who have heard your voice speaking of your glory and your authority over us, who have felt your examination of our lives as through your word you looked into our hearts, who have come to hear your instruction of what we must do.

Lord, we plead with you that you would grant to us too a place amongst those who are sanctified and all we ask is for Jesus' sake.

Amen. Let's now conclude our service singing this time from, I can't find it there, Psalm 119 again, that's Psalm 119 and this time it's from the older version, from the Scottish Psalter version, at page 57, sorry, at verse 57, page 404.

Psalm 119 verses 57 through to verse 60, these four stanzas, thou my sure portion art alone, which I did choose, O Lord. Let's stand to sing these verses.

[39 : 25] Amen. I would keep thy holy word.

With my whole heart I did entreat thy fits and favor free.

According to thy gracious word, be merciful to thee.

I fought upon my former ways, and did thy life well try.

Unto thy testimonies pure, my feet then turned behind.

[41 : 11] I did not sing your ringer long, as those that slothful are, but history I lost to keep, myself I did reveal.

Amen. I'll go to the main door this evening, and we'll also give thanks now for the food we're receiving at the fellowship. We give thanks, O Lord, our God, for every remembrance of us, and especially now for those things that you provide for us, for our bodily needs.

We give thanks for them, we pray for those who have to go without them in many parts of the world, and even in our own land. And Lord, we ask that you would continue with us now to bless us as we meet in fellowship shortly, and we ask in all of these things that you would make us conscious of our need to depend upon you always.

And now may the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God the Father, and the communion of the Holy Spirit be with you now and always. Amen.