

Acts 9:1-31

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[0 : 0 0] Christ. Lord, open our ears and our minds to hear from you this morning, we pray. Amen. Well, friends, this morning we're continuing our series in the book of Acts, and we are looking at Acts chapter 9, verses 1 through 31. So let me invite you to turn there with me. Acts chapter 9, verses 1 through 31.

Let me read this text for us. But Saul, still breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord, went to the high priest and asked him for letters to the synagogues of Damascus so that if he found any belonging to the way, men or women, he might bring them bound to Jerusalem. Now as he went on his way, he approached Damascus, and suddenly a light from heaven flashed around him. And falling to the ground, he heard a voice saying to him, Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me? And he said, who are you, Lord? And he said, I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting. But rise and enter the city, and you will be told what you are to do. The men who were traveling with him stood speechless, hearing the voice, but seeing no one. Saul rose from the ground, and although his eyes were opened, he saw nothing. So they led him by the hand and brought him into Damascus. And for three days he was without sight, and neither ate nor drank. Now there was a disciple at Damascus named Ananias.

The Lord said to him in a vision, Ananias. And he said, here I am, Lord. And the Lord said to him, rise and go to the street called Straight. And at the house of Judas, look for a man of Tarsus named Saul. And behold, he is praying, and he has seen in a vision a man named Ananias come in and lay his hands on him so that he might regain his sight. But Ananias answered, Lord, I have heard from many about this man, how much evil he has done to your saints at Jerusalem. And here he has authority from the chief priests to bind all who call on your name. But the Lord said to him, go, for he is a chosen instrument of mine to carry my name before the Gentiles and kings and the children of Israel.

For I will show him how much he must suffer for the sake of my name. So Ananias departed and entered the house. And 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 so that you may regain your sight and be filled with the Holy Spirit. And immediately something like scales fell from his eyes and he regained his sight.

Then he rose and was baptized. And taking food, he was strengthened. For some days he was with the disciples at Damascus, and immediately he proclaimed Jesus in the synagogue, saying, He is the Son of God. And all who heard him were amazed and said, Is not this the man who made havoc in Jerusalem of those who called upon his name? And has he not come here for this purpose, to bring them bound before the chief priests? But Saul increased all the more in strength and confounded the Jews who lived in Damascus by proving that Jesus was the Christ.

[3 : 14] When many days had passed, the Jews plotted to kill him. But their plot became known to Saul. They were watching the gates day and night in order to kill him, but his disciples took him by night and let him down through an opening in the wall, lowering him in a basket. And when he had come to Jerusalem, he attempted to join the disciples, and they were all afraid of him, for they did not believe that he was a disciple. But Barnabas took him and brought him to the apostles and declared to them how on the road he had seen the Lord, who spoke to him, and how at Damascus he had preached boldly in the name of Jesus. So he went in and out among them at Jerusalem, preaching boldly in the name of the Lord. And he spoke and disputed against the Hellenists. But they were seeking to kill him.

And when the brothers learned this, they brought him down to Caesarea and sent him off to Tarsus. So the church throughout all Judea and Galilee and Samaria had peace and was being built up. And walking in the fear of the Lord and in the comfort of the Holy Spirit, it multiplied.

Amazing grace, how sweet the sound that saved a wretch like me. I once was lost, but now am found. Was blind, but now I see. Those are some of the most familiar words in English hymnody, aren't they? And the writer, John Newton, the story of his conversion is also incredibly well known. He was an 18th century ship captain and slave trader. In his own words, he was an infidel and a libertine. And yet one day at sea, he met Jesus Christ and his life changed.

In time, he would leave the slave trade, become a minister of the Church of England, and end up becoming an active supporter of the abolition of slavery. His conversion to Christ made a complete change.

Of course, the radical and obvious 180 of John Newton's life doesn't initially seem to be the pattern of everyone who becomes a Christian, does it? Some grow up in the church and come to believe in Jesus at a young age. Some come to faith gradually over time. Experiences and stories radically differ.

[5 : 33] John Newton's conversion happened at sea in the middle of a severe storm in a ship that nearly sunk. Compare that with C.S. Lewis. In 1929, in his room at Maudlin College, Oxford, after much intellectual and personal wrestling, he finally came to believe in God, calling himself the most reluctant convert in all England.

That was his coming to believe in God. His actual commitment to Christ came a couple years later, after a long night talking with friends, in the morning, headed to the zoo with his brother, riding in the sidecar of his motorcycle.

When we set out, I did not believe that Jesus is the Son of God, Lewis writes, and when we reached the zoo, I did. It's hard to imagine two pictures more different than that.

A slave trader, face down, in a sinking ship, and an Oxford Don pondering the Son of God in the sidecar of a motorcycle.

And yet for all the differences, is there something in common, something similar running through them all? What is the nature of genuine Christian conversion?

[6 : 58] And that's an important question. It's an important question if you're considering the claims of Christ and wondering what it actually means to become a Christian. But it's also an important question if you already are one.

Because the dynamics of becoming a Christian are actually the same ones that function throughout the Christian life for our growth. So it's a good exercise, even for believers, to go back to the beginning and consider again what conversion actually means.

Well, this morning we're considering one of the most famous conversions in all of religious history, right? The conversion of the man we now call the Apostle Paul.

And as we'll see, there's a lot of unique things about Paul's conversion, things that really can't and aren't going to be repeated today. But this passage also displays some of the most essential things about every conversion to Christ.

In this chapter in Acts, we're shown how Jesus Christ radically turns around Paul's life. In fact, that's what the word conversion actually means, to be turned around. And in so doing, it shows us what it means for Jesus to turn our lives around.

[8 : 19] Paul himself saw his conversion this way, as an example for other believers. We read earlier in 1 Timothy 1, but I receive mercy for this reason, that in me, as the foremost of sinners, Jesus Christ might display his perfect patience as an example to those who are to believe in him for eternal life.

There it is. Paul's conversion, an example of what Jesus does for those who believe. So let's follow the narrative of Acts 9, and let's look at the nature of Christian conversion this morning.

And we're going to take it in four parts. And the first part is right in verses 1 and 2. I haven't given the sort of points of my sermon very creative titles this morning, so there you go. I titled this one, Jesus, Paul before meeting Jesus.

Then the second one's going to be, Paul meets Jesus. The third point is, Paul after meeting Jesus. Jesus. And then the fourth point is, a summary. So there you go. There's my creative outline.

So first, verses 1 and 2, Paul before meeting Jesus. Now we met Paul at the end of chapter 7, do you remember? In the beginning of chapter 8. And in these chapters, Luke refers to Paul by his Hebrew name, Saul.

[9 : 36] It was a very common practice for Hebrews in the first century to have a Hebrew name and also to have a Roman name. So Saul had a Roman name, Paul, and that's what we typically know him by. And in fact, in Acts chapter 13, when Paul sort of launches out in the Gentile mission, Luke will begin referring to him as Paul pretty much for the rest of the narrative since he's there among the Gentiles.

And in fact, as we know, that's the name that Saul, Paul will use in all of his letter to the churches. But here, he's referred to as Saul. Back in chapter 7, what do we find?

We find Saul at the execution of Stephen, approvingly holding people's coats while they throw the stones. And after that, we see him ravaging the church in Jerusalem, going from house to house, dragging men and women off to prison.

In other words, he is the spearhead of the opposition to the gospel. He is the arch enemy of the church, Saul, the zealous young Pharisee from Tarsus, brought up in Jerusalem.

And now, Luke picks up the story in chapter 9. And what we find there is that he's doing everything he can to stop the church from spreading to other cities.

[10 : 46] You see, for Saul, the message of Jesus is like gangrene. It's like a deadly disease that's moving very quickly and has to be stopped as violently and as vigorously as he possibly can.

So he's using whatever means he might find to cut it off. And Damascus, this very ancient city in the Middle East, with a large Jewish population and with multiple synagogues, was, of course, a reasonable target for Saul's attack.

Now, perhaps the most striking thing about Luke's description of Paul here are the overtones of the language that he uses. Even that initial phrase, breathing threats and murder, it actually conveys the picture of a wild beast stalking and tearing at its prey.

It's almost as if Paul's hatred of Christianity, of the way, as Luke calls it, had begun to steal his humanity. His hatred of Christ was turning him into a wild animal of violence and rage.

Now we see why years later Paul would look back on this part of his life, his persecution of the church, and say, I am the chief of sinners.

[12 : 11] Of course, if there was anyone that the early church thought would never have become a follower of Jesus, it was Saul. We see from verse 13 that he was notorious.

Everyone in Damascus, before he even got there, had heard that he was killing Christians, and they knew that he was coming to round them up. If there was anyone who was too far gone, it was surely this guy.

If there was anyone that was beyond the pale, it was him. There was no way that he was going to believe the gospel and follow Jesus. And yet, that's exactly what happens.

even though he hated everything to do with Christianity, even though he used every ounce of his strength to stomp it out, even though his heart had become twisted and cruel, none of that was a match for the grace of Jesus Christ.

Don't you see, friends, Paul was the chief of sinners, and yet, Christ loves him and rescues him. Isn't that amazing?

[13 : 26] And don't you see what that means? If Christ can save someone like Saul, friends, he can save anyone. No matter how dark the sins, no matter how twisted and beastly the hearts.

So when you think about and pray for that friend or neighbor who seems so unlikely to believe, friend, in that moment, remember Paul, the chief of sinners, the persecutor of Christians, the most unlikely convert of all time.

You see, no barrier of belief is so thick that the grace of God can't break through. So friends, don't lose your hope. For your friends, your neighbors, your co-workers. Instead, expect that God can work even in what seems to be the hardest of hearts.

After all, we know our own hearts, don't we? Isn't that part of the reason why Paul can say, I'm the chief of sinners? Because he looks at his own heart. And friends, we do the same thing, don't we?

And if we know our own hearts, if we see the darkness there, and if God can save us, then surely he can save anyone.

[14 : 47] But I think we should go even a step further and apply what we see of Paul here in these verses to our own hearts even deeper. Friends, today, I wonder if you're battling with guilt.

I wonder if past sins keep haunting you. If your soul is burdened with regrets and shame over things that you've said or left unsaid or things that you've done or left undone.

If so, look at Paul. Look at all that he had done against the name of Christ. Look at this chief of sinners and now see the grace of Jesus Christ covering it all like a great wave covering the shore.

Like Paul, no sin of yours is too great to withstand his mercy. So what does this picture of Paul before meeting Jesus in verses 1 and 2 tell us about Christian conversion?

Well, it tells us quite a lot actually but centrally it tells us this that conversion is by no means about cleaning up your own act and then trying to come to God.

[16 : 03] Real conversion isn't about trying harder to be a better person or making earnest resolutions to change. No, in fact, at first conversion is just the opposite.

It's about admitting that we're worse even than we think we are. And from that place, not to work but to receive.

to receive something that's given to us or to be actually more accurate to receive someone who's given to us.

And that actually brings us to the second section of Acts 9 which is in verses 3-9. Paul meets Jesus. Now briefly, first and foremost, we have to realize that as we look again at verses 3-9 there's a lot here that's going on that is completely unique in the history of salvation.

You see, what happens to Paul on the road to Damascus isn't sort of a mere spiritual vision. No, it's actually a genuine bodily appearance of the risen Jesus. Later in the chapter, both Ananias in chapter 17 and Barnabas in verse 17 and Barnabas in verse 27 they're going to confirm this.

[17 : 18] You saw Jesus, Paul. And Paul will say the same thing in his letters. 1 Corinthians 9-1 Have I not seen the Lord? It's interesting that in 1 Corinthians 15 where Paul's again talking about meeting the risen Jesus he says that he was like one untimely born.

It's a very interesting phrase. In other words, he's acknowledging on the one hand that the timing of Jesus appearing to him was very unlike the rest of the apostles. It was much later untimely born.

And yet, nonetheless, just like them, he had seen Jesus with his own eyes. And as he goes on to say in 1 Corinthians 15, Paul was the last one to have done so.

So clearly, this seeing the risen Jesus is a very unique element of Paul's conversion. If you're considering the claims of Christ this morning, don't expect that. I'm just going to throw that out there. Okay, good.

Unique also is this call to apostleship, isn't it? Jesus comes to Paul, radically changes his life, and immediately gives him a commission. A commission to be one of his apostles. And apostles, of course, were unique figures in the early church.

[18 : 32] They were first and foremost eyewitnesses of the risen Jesus. And moreover, they were the ones the risen Jesus himself commissioned in person to be his authoritative representatives to teach and to lead the church.

Paul says again in 1 Corinthians 15 that he was the last to be chosen and commissioned by the resurrection Jesus. So that, too, is unique about his conversion. And even on top of all that, we shouldn't expect there to be the same kind of spectacular, visible manifestations that we see here, right?

The blinding light, the audible voice, everyone falling to the ground. Those things don't even happen again in the book of Acts, so we shouldn't necessarily expect them to be happening today. which is all to say that there's a lot here that is gloriously and beautifully unique.

What we have here is the risen Lord himself stopping Paul in his tracks, taking this wolf who is trying to devour the church, taking this wolf and turning him in not just to a sheep, but turning him into a shepherd.

An incredible transformation. But even if all that is specific and not repeated today, at the same time, the core and the essence of what's going on in Paul's conversion is still true today of every conversion.

[20 : 01] And that is, it is a personal trust and submission to Jesus as the living Lord.

turning from whatever was once the center of our lives and taking hold of him. And you see what that means.

That means that Christianity is not at its core an ethical code. Christianity at its core is not a sort of brilliant philosophical worldview.

Christianity is not even a sort of moving set of religious practices. No. What it is is a vital relationship with Jesus Christ, the living one.

All those other things are important, of course, the ethics, the worldview, the practices. But they're not the center. They're not really what it comes down to.

[21 : 07] No, friends, it's all about him, who he is, what he's done, and responding personally to him. After his conversion, Paul gets this.

Look again at verse 20. What did Paul proclaim in the synagogues of Damascus? Not even a what, but a who. He proclaimed Jesus. The one who had spent his whole life proclaiming Torah and obedience to the law now proclaims Jesus.

You see, what Paul experienced on the Damascus road functionally ripped his world apart and put it back together again. Imagine, if you will, this young, zealous, highly religious man walking down the road and suddenly being drenched in light.

A light so bright, a light so heavy that it probably made his quick, intelligent, scripture-saturated mind jump right to passages about the light of God's glory in the temple or the light of Ezekiel's vision of God's chariot.

And then, out of this heavenly vision of light, suddenly, a voice speaks, Saul, Saul, Saul, his name being repeated, just like in the Old Testament when God would address human beings.

[22 : 29] You can hear Saul's heart start beating with excitement and then the message comes and it doesn't make any sense. Why are you persecuting me, the voice says.

And Saul replies, who are you, Lord? And then, out of the glorious light, comes the same voice saying, I'm Jesus.

Imagine the shock and the confusion of that moment. Paul staring into the very light of God.

Hears the voice and sees the face of Jesus. the same Jesus who was crucified. The same Jesus whose followers he had been persecuting as a plague.

In that moment, Paul must have realized that despite all of his raging, Jesus was exactly who they had said he was. Alive and risen.

[23 : 38] The Messiah. The Lord of all. The one whose shameful death on a cross was not a defeat, but in fact the perfect sacrifice for his, for Saul's own sins.

And the one to whom he owed total allegiance and trust. That's what genuine conversion is, friends. Entrusting oneself to the person of Jesus.

The crucified, risen, ascended Lord who lives and sits at the Father's right hand. Of course, for many of us, this won't happen in a flash of light, in an instant.

Getting to the point of believing that Jesus is the Son of God, of trusting Him with your whole life, for most people, that's a process of months, even of years.

But you know, regardless of the time frame, the heart of it all is actually the same. Listen to what Paul would write later in 2 Corinthians 4, 6.

[24 : 53] For God, who said, let light shine out of darkness, has shown in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ.

You have to wonder whether Paul had his experience on the Damascus road in mind when he wrote those words, don't you? Because even more impressive than the light that shone into Paul's eyes and made him blind for days was the light that God had shone into his heart.

What is that light? It's a light of knowledge, he says. That is, it's a new way of seeing. In other words, God put a new understanding, not just in his mind, but in his heart.

God put a new heart knowledge in Paul that the very glory of God, the very sum of all that the Creator and Redeemer is, the very thing that Saul as a young, zealous Pharisee had been trying to attain with all of his effort, the glory of God is found in none other than in the face of Jesus Christ.

You know, if you've grown up in the church, you might feel like your own testimony isn't much to write home about. You think there's no great sin or ruin from which God has rescued you, and you can often sort of feel like your story is a bit boring, a bit bland.

[26 : 30] Who would want to hear my story? I grew up in the church. I trusted in Jesus. The end. The end. No one's exactly making movies out of that.

And yet, don't you see what Paul's saying here? What is as true of you now, Christian, is as true of Paul himself then, that God who said, let light shine out of darkness, has shown into your heart to give you the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ.

So, see, what happens in every genuine conversion is the most amazing supernatural event of all, regardless of the outward circumstances.

Paul says, it's like a new creation. when God created the world with his speech, that's what's going on. God shines his light into the dark of our dead hearts, and we come alive with a love and trust in Jesus that knows him to be the very display of God's radiance.

Now, what does that mean, that we come to know the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ? Well, friends, over time, it means that there's no aspect of who God is, his mercy, his majesty, his wisdom, his power, his beauty.

[28 : 22] There is no aspect of who God is that you don't come to increasingly see, summarized, epitomized, fulfilled, displayed in its fullest extent in the person and work of Jesus Christ.

It all centers in him. He becomes the very lens through which we can see the glory of God.

And that's what this second section of Acts 9 shows us about conversion. conversion. It's not primarily a conversion to some rules to live by, to a new sort of set of ideas about understanding the world, or a new collection of spiritual practices.

Certainly it entails all that, right? But at its heart, conversion is being turned around by and to a person, the person of Jesus Christ.

Friends, I wonder if you've let that slip in your life. I wonder if your walk with the Lord has grown cold relationally.

[29 : 38] The rules are good. The ideas are great. The practices are wonderful. But don't lose sight of the person who's at the center of them all.

Then in verses 10 through 30 we have the third section of Paul's conversion. And in these verses we see what happens to Paul after meeting Jesus.

And here what we see in Paul's life are things that are increasingly true of those who have experienced genuine conversion. Here are some of the effects, some of the results that come flowing out of genuinely meeting and believing in Jesus.

And we're going to just run through them very quickly. First, what we see is fellowship. Do you notice that? Both in Damascus and later in Jerusalem, Paul seeks out and stays with the disciples.

This is something that characterizes everyone who's come to genuinely believe in Christ, that they want to be with the people of Christ. And Paul, you know, not only seeks out this fellowship nearly from the start, but he also experiences its power, through Ananias and later in Barnabas.

[30 : 51] When everyone else is suspicious or afraid, when Paul literally doesn't have a friend in the world, these two men become friends to Saul, but no one else is.

And the scene with Ananias is particularly poignant. Did you catch the first words that Ananias speaks to him? Brother, Saul. Brother.

Ananias, even though Saul was just days before the church's enemy, Ananias now receives him as family in Christ. How comforting, how powerful that must have been for Saul.

Knowing that he deserved to be cast out because of what he had done to hear in the word of his brother Ananias that he had indeed been welcomed because of what Christ had done.

Friends, this is one of the main reasons why we need one another in Christian community. Dietrich Bonhoeffer says in *Life Together* that the word of Christ in the mouth of my brother is stronger than the word of Christ in my heart.

[32 : 02] And I need you to tell me the truth of the gospel so that I believe it. And you need me to tell you. Now the implications of all this are pretty straightforward, aren't they?

Genuine conversion and healthy discipleship will naturally lead to publicly joining up with a local church, a local fellowship of the body believers. And the first step is baptism.

Verse 18. That's what Paul does. So friends, if you've recently come to faith in Christ, you should be considering baptism. It's a way to make public, to make a public profession of your faith in Christ.

Jesus himself commanded the disciples to do this. But even after baptism, it's important to be known by a local church. After Paul goes to a new city in verse 26, after he has to leave Damascus and go back to Jerusalem, what's his very first move?

To join up with the disciples. We know from Galatians 1 that Paul's actually in the Damascus area for three years. So when Luke says in verse 23 that many days had passed, he really means it.

[33 : 07] Many days had passed. But the pattern here I think is very relevant to our context where people are always coming and going about every three to four years.

And the healthy pattern is this. You come to a new city, you find a fellowship of believers, a church, and you join in. That's what formal church membership is all about.

Being known by a body of disciples who can help you along in your walk with Christ and who you can help in turn. So genuine conversion results in fellowship, a new relationship to other believers.

But it also results, second, in ministry. This is the pattern you see. Paul goes, he finds the fellowship, and then he starts ministering. In other words, Paul has a completely new responsibility to the world.

We see in verse 20 that immediately after his conversion, Saul's proclaiming Jesus in the synagogues, bearing witness to Christ. It's interesting in verse 25 that Luke, even at this early point in Paul's ministry, can speak of his disciples.

[34 : 09] Paul is busy making disciples of Jesus, just like Jesus told the apostles, go into all the world and make disciples of all nations.

That's exactly what Paul is doing. He's making disciples. Now, of course, not all of us post-conversion are going to take up full-time ministry like Paul. But coming to know Jesus will give us this new sense of vision and responsibility for the world that we live in.

We continue to do our jobs well as a way to love our neighbors and glorify God, but we also want to see our neighbors flourish spiritually. So we long for them to become disciples of Jesus as well.

And what's more, we want to see our fellow believers grow in the faith. So we'll begin to want to find ways of doing good to them spiritually as well. We'll want to be in discipling relationships.

We'll want to seek them out and look for them in small groups and on Sundays. We want to be open to people speaking into our lives and walking along with us. And we want to be open to finding others that we can do that with.

- [35 : 24] Who can I meet with to do this? Who can I encourage in their walk in Christ? Christ. So conversion produces not just a desire to take part in the fellowship of the church, but also a desire to see that fellowship grow through your personal active discipling ministry.

So fellowship, ministry, and then the last thing we see, third, is cost. Jesus makes it clear to Paul that Paul's going to suffer for his sake.

And in both Damascus and Jerusalem, after Paul finds the fellowship and begins ministry, people end up wanting to kill him and he has to escape. He's forced to leave the people he's come to love in Damascus and he's forced to flee from the city he loves, Jerusalem.

He's got to leave it all behind. You see, genuine conversion will lead to doing costly things for the sake of Christ.

Of course, few people will literally want to kill us, would be my guess. But being a follower of Christ will still be costly. Our reputation in the world may suffer.

- [36 : 44] Our job success may be hindered. Some of our relationships may be strained or even end altogether. There will come points when faithfulness to Jesus will try us with a very hard path to tread.

And so we have to ask, what made Paul so willing to bear the costly weight of discipleship?

What enabled him to leave so much that he loved? What enabled him to leave all that behind and head out to begin ministering among Gentiles people that just a few years before he couldn't care anything about?

Well, friends, it comes back to his conversion, doesn't it? That the Jesus who was himself and is the glory of God is the one who took up the greatest cost for Paul.

Later, Paul will write, the life I now live, I live by faith in the Son of God who loved me and gave himself for me.

- [38 : 01] You see, friends, when Jesus died on the cross, he was dying the death of a persecutor and a blasphemer and an enemy of God, God, even though he had done nothing wrong.

And what Paul came to see in that blinding vision was that the death of Christ was something that Jesus had done in Paul's own place, bearing the cost that his sins deserved, bearing the cost that our sins deserved.

Paul knew that his infinite debt had been paid on the cross so that any cost he might now bear was nothing compared to the love that he had received in Jesus, the Son of God who loved me and gave himself for me.

And friends, it's the same for us. When we come to know the one who loved us and gave himself for us, no cost will deter us.

No cost will compare to knowing him, the one who took hold of us. Well, in Acts 31, 9-31, Luke ends his account of Paul's conversion with a summary.

- [39 : 30] He says this in verse 31, So the church throughout all Judea and Galilee and Samaria had peace and was being built up, and walking in the fear of the Lord and the comfort of the Holy Spirit, it multiplied.

It's a fitting summary, you know. Paul, of course, is a hero of the faith, no doubt. God used Paul in simply incomparable ways to spread the gospel.

You and I functionally are sitting here this morning because of what the apostle, because what God did through the apostle Paul. He was the one that God used to take the gospel in its most sort of poignant and powerful ways to the Gentiles.

That's most of us. And yet, doesn't verse 31 remind us that Jesus loves the whole church, and that what he did in Paul and through Paul was for the church, the church that he loves?

Did you guess what Jesus said back in verse 4 when he arrests Saul on the road to Damascus? He says, Saul, Saul, why are you, not why are you persecuting them, but why are you persecuting me?

[40 : 54] Isn't that astounding? Jesus doesn't say, why are you persecuting those Christians over there? Why are you persecuting me?

And doesn't that tell us the kind of vital, intimate union that Jesus has with the whole church? That he so identifies with us, and so completely, and so intimately, that any harm done to the church is as if it's harm done to him.

That he has connected himself with his body in an unbreakable way. Martin Luther, in his short work, *The Freedom of a Christian*, describes what happens when someone puts their trust in Christ.

And he describes it like a marriage. He says, faith unites us to Christ in such a binding and intimate way.

It's like the same way that a husband and wife are united to one another and become one flesh. And then he goes on and he says, and just like a marriage, so it is with our marriage to Christ that what's true of the one becomes true of the other.

[42 : 11] In other words, Jesus takes what's rightfully mine, my sin and my death and my condemnation, and I get what's rightfully his.

His righteousness, his life, and his intimacy with the Father. This is the union that the church has with Jesus.

This is the union and the kind of relationship that everyone who believes has with the risen Lord. From heaven he came and sought her, the song says, to be his holy bride.

And with his own blood he bought her. And for her life he died. Friends, the same way in which Jesus pursued Saul and turned his life around and took him to himself, that is what he desires to do with every one of us.

In a minute we're going to go to the Lord's table where we actually remember those twin truths. That Jesus' body was broken for us and his blood was shed for us to forgive our sins.

[43 : 26] And then we do something that's kind of weird. Lord, we take that bread and we take that cup and we eat it. What could be more intimate and close than eating with someone, than sharing a meal together?

Jesus says, that's the kind of closeness that I actually have with you. So friends, let's pray and let's prepare our hearts.

Lord Jesus, we pray that now as we come to the table, Lord, you would stir our hearts once again to see how beautiful you are and how much you love us.

Lord, I pray for those who are here this morning who are wrestling with the claims that you make, Jesus. Lord, those who are perhaps wrestling with believing in you, trusting in you, Lord, I ask that your great grace would break through their hearts and draw them to yourself.

And Lord, for those of us whom you have taken hold of, Lord, would you feed us and strengthen us and help us to remember the great love that you have for us.

[45 : 02] Lord, we pray this in your name. Amen.