

"The Conversion of Paul"

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 28 April 2024

Preacher: Tom Schmidt

[0 : 00] Good morning, everyone. In all ages, Christians have found great encouragement in hearing the testimonies of how other Christians came to know Christ.

One testimony I frequently call to mind is that of an early theologian named Justin. He tells us that he was converted to Christ because he saw Christian after Christian being led away to die for the sake of Jesus, all while staying steadfast in their faith.

And Justin was so amazed, he became a Christian himself. I frequently remember, too, a certain testimony of a woman named Nino, a slave woman back in ancient Georgia.

And she converted the royal family of Georgia through her diligent prayers. Then there is the testimony of Frumentius.

He was a slave in the royal household of Ethiopia, but far from becoming embittered against his enslavers, he shared the gospel with the prince of Ethiopia.

[1 : 14] And the prince of Ethiopia believed in the prince of peace, our dear Jesus. And from there, the gospel spread to that African country. I recall, too, a man named Mar-Aba.

He was a zealous persecutor of Christians in ancient Persia. And one day, after persecuting a Christian, that Christian forgave him.

And Mar-Aba was stunned. And he soon became a Christian himself. Friends, these kinds of testimonies, they continue in modern times, as you well know.

Richard Wurmbrandt, one of the great heroes of the 20th century church, he was a Jewish atheist. He was highly educated. But one day, an uneducated farmer had the audacity to give him a Bible. Richard had read the Bible many times before, but this Bible was different, because as Richard says, this Bible was given to him in love.

[2 : 17] And Richard wept as he read of Jesus, and he was converted to Christ. I also often remember the testimony of a man named Watchman Nee of China.

His mother had recently become a Christian, and after administering to him an unjust punishment, she became convicted of her sin. She returned and apologized to him.

And Watchman Nee was so amazed at this Jesus who had transformed his mother that he became a Christian. And then he became a leader in the Chinese church.

Nowadays, as you know, you can often hear testimonies from people in their own words online. And unexpectedly, recently, I encountered one such testimony when I was listening to the sermons of Martin Lloyd-Jones, a famous preacher in the 1950s.

Evidently, a few years back, an organization had Lloyd-Jones' sermons digitized and put online. And when I was browsing through them, I heard the testimony of the man who was paid to digitize the sermons.

[3 : 30] He was not a Christian, but they hired him to digitize the sermons anyway, and a good thing, too, because by the time he had finished listening to Lloyd-Jones' sermons, Lloyd-Jones had led him to Christ.

Sometimes, the online testimonies that strike you to the heart are anonymous, and you don't even know who is sharing. I recall once reading a testimony online by a woman who said that she became a Christian in large part because she was working at a small company which was making job cuts, and the manager asked all the workers to vote on who would lose their job.

So they colluded together, and they all voted for the one Christian in the office, and the Christian was let go. But instead of lashing out, that Christian threw a goodbye party and invited all those who had voted against him and welcomed them joyfully into his home.

And she was amazed. Friends, there are many things about these testimonies that encourage us and that challenge us. They show the awesome power of the gospel where people are led to repent

of their sins, to forgive their enemies, to remain steadfast in the face of death, to love deeply their neighbors, to persist in prayer, and to preach with great conviction.

In fact, Martin Lloyd-Jones, that famous preacher I mentioned, after I listened to one of his sermons, he inspired me to preach this sermon and to draw material from it. All the testimonies I've mentioned, they give different beautiful reasons for why people convert to Christ.

[5 : 13] But in this diversity, there is one deeper theme threaded through them all, and motivating them all. Despite their differences, the ultimate reason why all these people convert to Jesus is the same.

And in fact, the same reason is not just present in these testimonies, but in all testimonies, including yours and mine. The ultimate reason for why we come to Christ is nothing less than God stepping into our lives, God intervening in our hearts to turn us from our sins and to welcome us into his kingdom.

And it is the same for everyone, friends. At the end of the day, the all-embracing foundational reason for why we come to Christ is that God rescued us, God washed us, God made us clean, God forgave us of all our wrongs.

And in his good providence and in his grace through his son Jesus, he restored us. The foundational reason why we came to Christ is not due to us, but due to God.

And what testimony can be more encouraging than that? Friends, with this in mind today, we read perhaps the greatest testimony ever given.

[6 : 37] We read the testimony of Saul of Tarsus. Saul was a murderer. He persecuted the early church. He assisted in executing Stephen, the first Christian martyr.

But then as the Bible says, Jesus intervened in Saul's life. He appeared to Saul. He transformed Saul. He turned him from Saul of Tarsus into Paul the apostle.

And Paul went on to preach the gospel for decades. And he went on to write many letters of the New Testament. And I want to encourage you this morning that what Jesus did for Saul, though he was the worst of sinners, he also does for you, though you be the worst of sinners.

In fact, Scripture tells us that Saul's conversion is an example for us to follow and to consider. Paul explains this himself in his own words that we heard earlier this service.

He says in his letter to Timothy, I received 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.

[8 : 03] Scripture itself declares that Paul's testimony is an example for all of us who believe. So this morning, we will take Paul's testimony as this very example as we look to Christ and as we walk with him and as we come to him.

Would you join me in prayer? Father in heaven, we come to you humbly and we ask that your Holy Spirit would be with us, would empower us to hear your words and to see your face, to be convicted of our sins, but to feel your loving embrace of mercy and forgiveness.

Lord, I pray that your Spirit would be heavy upon us with conviction and with joy. And we pray this in the mighty name of Jesus. Amen.

Paul's testimony is so important that it's repeated three times in the Bible. And this morning, we will focus on the third time Paul gives his testimony. And this is in the book of Acts, chapter 26, which can be found on page 879 of your pew Bible.

That's 879. Acts, chapter 26. We'll begin in verse 9. Paul is standing trial for his faith in Christ, and he makes his defense before King Agrippa in these words.

[9 : 32] He says, in verse 9, I myself was convinced that I ought to do many things in opposing the name of Jesus of Nazareth, and I did so in Jerusalem.

I not only locked up many of the saints in prison after receiving authority from the chief priests, but when they were put to death, I cast my vote against them. I punished them often in all the synagogues and tried to make them blaspheme.

And in raging fury against them, I persecuted them even to foreign cities. In this connection, 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.

And 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?

[10 : 36] It is hard for you to kick against the goads. And I said, who are you, Lord? And the Lord said, I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting.

But rise and stand upon your feet. For I have appeared to you for this purpose, to appoint you as a servant and a witness to the things in which you have seen me and to those in which I will appear to you, delivering you from your people and from the Gentiles to whom I am sending you, to open their eyes so that they may turn from darkness to light and from the power of Satan and to God that they may receive forgiveness of sins and a place among those who are sanctified by faith in me.

Therefore, O King Agrippa, I was not disobedient to the heavenly vision, but declared first to those in Damascus and then in Jerusalem and throughout all the region of Judea and also to the Gentiles that they should repent and turn to God, performing deeds in keeping with their repentance.

When reading this passage, most people are immediately struck by the extraordinary things that happened to Saul of Tarsus. But our goal this morning is not to focus on the miraculous elements of the story, the flash of light, the appearance of Jesus, the blinding, the healing.

Don't be distracted by these things. Because at bottom, this story is a story of the normal Christian conversion. As I said earlier, Saul became an example to us about how we all become Christians and how even after our conversion, God again and again intervenes in our lives to turn us from our sins, to welcome us into his kingdom, to wash us and to make us clean, and to forgive us of all our wrongs.

[12 : 45] This morning, using Saul as an example, we will walk through his testimony and we're going to see five points or stages, five moments that we all go through in our conversion to Christ.

And I should give you fair warning that the first three of these can be hard to hear, but the last two are glorious beyond words.

Let's begin with stage one. Paul says in verse nine, I myself was convinced that I ought to do many things in opposing the name of Jesus of Nazareth, and I did so in Jerusalem.

I not only locked up many of the saints in prison after receiving authority from the chief priests, but then when they were put to death, I cast my vote against them, and I punished them often in all the synagogues and tried to make them blaspheme, and in raging fury against them, I persecuted them even to foreign cities.

This passage describes what Paul was like before his conversion. Paul puts it this way. He says that before Jesus met him, he was trying to do many things that were in opposition to the name of Jesus of Nazareth, and he was trying to do many things.

[13 : 59] Now, I know many of you have never tried to persecute Christians and murder them like Saul of Tarsus was doing, but what is important here is not precisely what Saul was doing, but why he was doing it.

He says in verse nine, I was convinced that I ought to do many things in opposing the name of Jesus. A more literal translation is, I thought to myself myself that I had to do many things hostile to the name of Jesus of Nazareth.

Why was Paul doing these wicked things in unbelief? He says he was simply doing what he thought was best. He was conducting himself according to his own estimate and according to what was good in his own eyes.

And this is a problem because it means that before Saul's conversion, he was the subject of all things. God was merely an object to be manipulated.

Just look at what this quote reveals. I thought to myself, I was convinced, Saul says. Did Saul ask God what was good?

[15 : 13] Was Saul submitting himself to the will of the Almighty? No. I thought to myself, he says. He came to his own conclusion about what was good and what was evil, what was right and what was wrong.

He took his course of action according to what he wanted to do, not according to what God wanted him to do. This is our first point to consider this morning.

Before we become a disciple of Christ, we are all just like Saul was. We are all self-centered and self-possessed. When we are in a state of unbelief, the world revolves around us.

We are the center of attention. We do what is right in our own eyes. This is how we all were before Christ. And this is also the same struggle we have when we are backsliding in our walk with Christ, when we turn our attention away from God and to ourselves.

Then we do not trust in God. Instead, we trust in ourselves. We do not look to God for what we should do. And instead, we delight in our own eyes. For this reason, friends, we must always ask ourselves, am I trusting in myself or am I trusting in God?

[16 : 29] And so I ask you, who is directing your path today? Are you entrusting yourself to God? Or are you doing what is right in your own eyes?

Now, you might say that you try hard to do good, that you're very spiritual, you follow a higher power, you try to be unselfish, you follow a particular teaching, you put your whole life into this, you do good works.

Yes, perhaps you make mistakes here and there, but you're doing your best. And God can't possibly blame you for falling short, especially given how devotedly spiritual you are.

But Saul of Tarsus, when he was in a state of unbelief and self-worship, he was just as devoted to spirituality and to doing what he considered to be good as any of you.

He tells us, in his letter to the Galatians, he says, you've heard of my former life in Judaism, how I persecuted the church of God violently and tried to destroy it, how I was advancing in Judaism beyond many my own age among my people.

[17 : 40] So extremely zealous was I for the traditions of my fathers. But when he who had set me apart before I was born and who called me by his grace was pleased to reveal his son in me so that I might preach him among the Gentiles.

Saul was zealous for doing what he thought was good. He was zealous for what he thought was true spirituality. But in all this, Saul wasn't trusting in God.

Instead, he was doing what was right in his own eyes. And his beliefs and his traditions, they might have had elements of truth in them. In fact, we know that the Judaism of his day had profound truth, divinely inspired truth.

But Saul was using these things to further his own purposes instead of furthering God's purposes. And today, the very same thing happens with us when we walk in unbelief.

The very same thing happens when we abandon God and trust in ourselves. It happens when we trust in what we think is good in our own eyes and we trust in worldly teachings.

[18 : 53] And it can even happen when we claim to follow the commands of Christ. But in reality, are merely manipulating Christ for our own ends and doing what we think is best on our own terms and not God's.

This is the first stage when we are apart from Christ. We find ourselves to be worshiping the self. We're inwardly focused. We're manipulating God. And then the second stage in coming to Christ, it happens like this.

Paul tells us, in this connection, I journeyed to Damascus with the authority and commission of the chief priests. And 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.

And 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?

Friends, the next step in becoming a disciple of Jesus has very little to do with you and your effort. Saul is on the way to Damascus.

[20 : 09] He's journeying there to do something terrible. He's plotted this beforehand. He's already murdered. He has no problem murdering again. In that previous passage, we read, Saul already told us what was going on in his mind.

I thought to myself I had to do many things against Jesus of Nazareth. He was doing everything on his own terms. He was the subject and God was just the decoration of his world.

And then due to no effort of his own, a flash of light was around him. He falls to the ground and a voice cries out, Saul, Saul.

And all of a sudden in this second stage, Saul of Tarsus begins to realize something. He begins to realize that he is not the subject of all things.

God is the subject. God is the center of all things. Saul is no longer the focus. Saul is no longer doing the talking. God is addressing him.

[21 : 15] The one who created all the world is speaking directly to him. Saul, Saul. And the very same thing happens to us, friends.

When God intervenes in our lives, the very same thing must happen if we are to become a disciple of Jesus. The outward events, they may not be so miraculous, but at root they are exactly the

same.

You have your thoughts, your beliefs, your practices, you do what is right in your own eyes, and then suddenly it might be a certain hour, a day, a week, it might be over many months or even many years, but the light of Jesus appears to you.

The light from his face is blinding. The power of his presence forces you to the ground and he cries out your name, Saul, Saul.

And suddenly you find that you are now no longer the one who is talking, you are listening. God is intervening in your life.

[22 : 21] Something is being done to you. Becoming a disciple of Jesus Christ is not about reforming yourself, but about God reforming you. Now you are the object, God is the subject, and you start to realize that most profound and precious truth that what really matters is not what you think of God, but what God thinks of you.

and he doesn't think very highly about what you have been doing. Has Jesus called your name? Have you been humbled before him?

Or are you still waiting for his power to come into your life? If you are waiting, Scripture declares that you are waiting because you still aren't really listening.

For God speaks to all people. In fact, Scripture declares the gospel has already been proclaimed in many ways to all of us. He has already spoken to you directly.

He's already come into your life. In many ways, he's already appeared to you. And in this stage, you realize that you missed it because at bottom, you really didn't want to see it.

[23 : 46] The same thing, in fact, happened to Saul of Tarsus. This was not the first time Jesus had appeared to Saul. In fact, this is not the first time Jesus had appeared to Saul in the book of Acts.

We see all this clearly displayed several chapters earlier in chapter 7 of the book of Acts during the story of the stoning of Stephen. If we turn there in verse 54, Luke says this.

He says, When they had heard Stephen say these things, they were enraged and they ground their teeth at Stephen. But he, full of the Holy Spirit, he gazed into heaven and he saw the glory of God.

And he saw Jesus standing at the right hand of God. And he said, Behold, I see the heavens opened and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God.

But they cried out with a loud voice. They stopped their ears and they rushed together at him. And then they cast him out of the city and they stoned him.

[24 : 50] And the witnesses laid down their garments at the feet of a young man named Saul. And as they were stoning Stephen, he called out, Lord Jesus, receive my spirit.

And falling to his knees, he cried out again, Lord, do not hold this sin against them. And when he had said this, he fell asleep. Well, there it is.

Jesus appeared to Stephen and Saul was right there. And Saul didn't see Jesus because Saul was too busy thinking about all the things that he should do against Jesus.

Saul didn't hear Jesus because Scripture says he stopped his ears. Saul was too caught up in his sin to notice. He was too full of himself.

He was not really listening and he was not really looking. My brothers and sisters, all these points I'm making about Saul of Tarsus and his conversion may be interesting from a historical point of view, but they won't help you at all unless you answer this question.

[26 : 01] Are you listening for the voice of Jesus? Are you looking for his face? How many times has he appeared to you already and you missed him?

How often has he called your name and you did not hear because you were not listening because you were so focused on yourself and your sins? He stands at the door and knocks.

Will you let him in? Friends, we've seen two stages thus far when we are converted to Christ. First, we're in unbelief and self-worship.

And secondly, God begins to intervene in our lives and we begin to realize that he is what matters, not us. And then if you're ready, the third stage in coming to Christ proceeds like this.

When Jesus appeared and he cried out, Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me? Then in verse 15 of Acts chapter 26, Saul replies, who are you, Lord?

[27 : 13] And the Lord said, I am Jesus whom you are persecuting. In this third stage, Saul begins to realize that what he has been doing is very wrong.

The third step in our conversion is the conviction of our sins. we see that all we've done in our lives have been tainted, have been self-centered and self-absorbed.

It's been wicked and evil. And more than that, we begin to realize that all of these sins we had committed, we did not just do against someone else. We did them against God. Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?

Jesus explains this in the Gospel of Matthew. He says, truly I say to you as you did it to one of the least of these my brothers, you did it to me.

The one thing we hate above all others, friends, is to think of our sins and to think of our sins not as mistakes, but as what they truly are, sinful sins.

[28 : 27] Because God knows what you do behind those closed doors or in that dark room. He knows all about what happened years ago to that person. He knows all these things and He knows that whatever you did against those people, you really did against Him.

In this third stage, we come to realize that God knows all about our sins. We cannot hide from God. We cannot hide our sins from the Almighty who is all-seeing and all-knowing. Everything will be proclaimed from the rooftops. Nothing is hidden from God. And in this stage, we feel the full force of His gaze upon us and it cuts us to the heart.

This is no better exemplified than on that night when Jesus was betrayed. Jesus told Peter, the apostle, that he would deny Jesus three times.

And the gospel tells us that when Peter was in the courtyard of the high priest observing the trial of Jesus, that he did indeed deny Jesus three times. And immediately, after the third denial, Luke writes, and the Lord turned and looked at Peter.

[29 : 44] And Peter remembered the saying of the Lord, how he said to him before the rooster crows, today you will deny me three times. And he went out and wept bitterly. Friends, the Lord looked at Peter and Peter was convicted of his sins and he wept bitterly.

And Jesus looks at all of us while we are sinning because all of us when we sin are actually sinning against God. Peter experienced this gaze of Jesus.

Saul of Tarsus knew it too and it blinded him. And you, Jesus looks at you also. Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?

But there is much hope, friends. When we feel this conviction, when we feel the full weight of our sins, then thanks be to God.

We move on to that fourth stage in coming to Christ. And what happens in this stage is shocking. What does God do?

[30 : 53] Does he condemn? No, friends. He forgives and he commissions. This is what Jesus says to Saul of Tarsus in verse 16.

Rise. Stand on your feet. 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, delivering you from your people and from the Gentiles to whom I am sending you, 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 in me. Jesus Christ came to earth to save sinners and to commission them as ambassadors of his kingdom. Jesus forgave Peter and commissioned Peter.

Now he forgives Saul and commissions Saul. And I tell you, he desires to forgive you and commission you for his kingdom. He wants to show you all that has been appointed for you to do. Friends, we serve a God who delights in mercy. He looked upon us walking in darkness as slaves to sin and though we had wronged him deeply, he came down in the person of Jesus, the healer, the savior, to bind and restore and renew and reconcile, to pay for our sins and to give us new life.

[32 : 40] Jesus is a gentle master. We have wronged him much. We know we have done wrong, but he loves and he longs to forgive and commission us in his kingdom to spread his gospel of the forgiveness of sins to all nations.

The plain truth of the matter is this. While we were enemies of God, Christ died for us. What then can separate us from the love of Christ?

Nothing, friends. Nothing. Hallelujah. So then we've gone through four stages. The first is being self-centered, focused on the self, self-worship.

The second, you realize that God is the subject and what really matters is not what you think of God, but what God thinks of you. And the third is conviction of sins and the fourth is forgiveness of sins and being commissioned and appointed into God's kingdom.

And now, we come to that final stage. After the Lord steps into our lives, after he forgives and wipes away your sins, then this happens.

[33 : 56] in verse 19, Paul says, therefore, O King Agrippa, I was not disobedient to the heavenly vision, but I declared first to those in Damascus and then in Jerusalem and throughout all the region of Judea and also to the Gentiles that they should repent and turn to God, performing deeds in keeping with their repentance.

Paul says in his words, I was not disobedient to the heavenly vision. He accepted his commission. He accepted his appointment from Jesus. He traveled throughout the Roman world preaching that all should repent, preaching that they should turn to the living God and perform deeds in keeping with that repentance.

This is very different than what Saul of Tarsus was doing before. Remember what he had been saying. I thought to myself that I had to do many things hostile to the name of Jesus of Nazareth. But now, he's looking to God for direction. He's repenting. He's submitting to his Lord. He is saying, here I am, O God. I am here to do your will, not mine.

[35 : 22] And this friend is the same with you. God is appointing you to his service and to his kingdom. He is commissioning you. Will you accept it?

He didn't care that Peter was only an uneducated fisherman. He knew that Saul of Tarsus had committed murder. He knows you may be unskilled. You may be afraid.

You may be young. You may be old. He knows you may be in school. You may be retired. You may be in poor health. You may struggle with addiction. You may be disabled. You may have weak faith. You may be the worst of sinners. He knows all these things. But God's purpose for you is to convict you of your sins, to forgive you, to restore you, to renew you, and then to make you his special instrument to shine his loving and glorious light to others and to spread the gospel of mercy and peace, the forgiveness of sins, and the reconciliation of sinners with God.

Will you accept this commission of Jesus? I tell you, there's nothing better. I remember 23 years ago when Jesus intervened in my life, when I was in college, walking in darkness, absorbed in my sins, and then Jesus Christ stepped into my life and convicted me of my sins and then forgave me of my sins and appointed me to his service.

[36 : 54] And I tell you, friends, this world is not worthy to be compared to the kingdom of God and to the service of Christ. Lastly, friends, when you are appointed to the service of Christ, you will make the same confession that Saul of Tarsus made in his first letter to Timothy that we heard earlier.

where he said this, I thank him who has given me strength, Christ Jesus our Lord, because he judged me faithful, appointing me to his service, though formerly I was a blasphemer, a persecutor, and an insolent opponent.

But I received mercy because I had acted ignorantly in unbelief. And the grace of our Lord overflowed for me with the love and faith that are in Christ Jesus.

The saying is trustworthy and deserving of full acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners of whom I am foremost. but I received mercy for this reason, that in me, as the foremost, Jesus Christ might display his perfect patience as an example to those who are to believe in him for eternal life.

Hallelujah, friends. Let's pray together. Oh, Lord Jesus, thank you that you love us enough to convict us of our sins.

[38 : 44] Thank you that in your love you came to wash and renew and rescue. Father, I pray for those of us here today who do not know you.

We ask that you would illuminate them and turn them to you and to your kingdom. Father, we also pray for those who do know you.

Lord, we pray that you would help them, urge them on in their walk with Christ. Help those of us who are backsliding and encourage us in the faith to not grow weary. Lord, we pray also that you would help us to share your gospel of peace and forgiveness with this world.

We pray that you would give us a special anointing of your Holy Spirit to do that this week. And we pray this in the mighty, mighty name of Jesus.

Amen.