

A Surprising Conversion

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[0 : 0 0] Well, I wonder what you would regard as the most significant moment or the most significant event in your life. What thing or things have happened to you that have, in effect, had the biggest impact on you as a person?

Perhaps it's been getting married, or maybe it's been having a child. Maybe it's been the death of a loved one. Perhaps it's been success in education or success at work.

Maybe it's even been a big failure. Something has happened to you, and it has, as a result, caused a difference and impact on your life and your future.

Well, there are many different things that do make a huge impact on our lives, but there is nothing greater, nothing more significant that can impact a person than them becoming a Christian, a follower of Jesus Christ.

That is the most significant thing that can ever happen to us, because conversion to Jesus changes everything. And isn't that what happened to Saul in Acts chapter 9?

[1 : 0 6] His surprising conversion is probably the most famous conversion in church history, possibly even the most famous conversion in world history. Because even if you've never heard of Saul, you've probably heard of a Damascus Road experience, which we often use to describe something that is remarkable, a remarkable conversion, or a radical turnaround can be a Damascus Road experience.

Because it was on the Damascus Road, of course, that Jesus met Saul and transformed his life. It was so radical, in fact, that Luke records the conversion of Saul three times in his book, here in Acts chapter 9.

Then again, it's repeated in Acts chapter 22 and Acts chapter 26, when Paul himself recounts his conversion story. So Paul plays a significant role in the growth of Jesus' church.

And Jesus says that here in our chapter at verse 15, when he speaks to Ananias. He says, This man is my chosen instrument to proclaim my name to the Gentiles and their kings and to the people of Israel.

So Saul is crucial in the advance of the mission of Jesus Christ to the ends of the earth. And that's why the conversion of Saul is unique.

[2 : 3 1] And obviously, as we read this, his conversion isn't typical. Saul met the risen Lord Jesus. And to be an apostle, the apostles had to witness the resurrected Christ.

And so that's what happens here. Jesus encounters Saul in this unique and dramatic way. And so we're not to expect this is a normal kind of conversion experience, either for ourselves or for other people.

But while every other conversion will never be as dramatic as Saul's, what we see in this conversion is actually true in every conversion.

Because conversion to Jesus is always possible. And it's always personal. And it's always purposeful. And so those are the three headings we're going to use this afternoon.

So just as Jesus transformed Saul's life, so he can and he does transform our lives too. So let's see how conversion is always possible.

[3 : 37] Conversion is always personal. And conversion is always purposeful. First of all, conversion is always possible. Now, Saul was the most unlikely candidate to be a follower of Jesus because he was basically public enemy number one for the church.

We were introduced to him back at the end of Acts chapter 7 and into Acts chapter 8, where he gave approval to Stephen's death. And then he was on a mission to destroy the church, going from house to house and throwing believers in prison.

And that's when we pick up Saul's story here again in chapter 9. Verse 1 and 2 say, Meanwhile, Saul was still breathing out murderous threats against the Lord's disciples.

He went to the high priest and asked him for letters to the synagogues in Damascus, so that if he found any there who belonged to the way, whether men or women, he might take them as prisoners to Jerusalem.

So Saul is described basically as a beast because he is snorting out murderous threats against the Christians. And it's like he is on a jihad, a holy war, because he wants to wipe out all the disciples of Jesus.

[4 : 53] And he won't stop until he's wiped them out. And so he goes on this trip to Damascus, which was about 150 miles away. Such was his hatred for the followers of Jesus.

And he's got these official papers from the high priest that give him a reason to arrest Christians who he finds in synagogues and then chuck them in jail. Well, why was Saul like this?

Well, he was in opposition to what he thought was a blasphemous movement, full of people who followed a crucified and therefore a cursed man.

Now elsewhere, Saul tells us what he was like pre-conversion. Tells us that he was a strict Pharisee. In other words, he was a religious fundamentalist, absolutely fanatical about his religion.

And so here he is absolutely fanatical about trying to purge people who he sees in opposition to his religious beliefs. Because you see, his obsession with killing Christians was fueled by his desire to obey God.

[6 : 05] And while he thought he was serving God with his strict religious observance and all of his good works, he was actually fighting against God because of his rejection of Jesus.

In his religious fanaticism, he was attacking the one his whole religion was pointing to. And yet there was more to Saul. We said that his conversion stories repeated twice more in Acts.

And then when we read what he's got to say for himself, it's clear that this whole Jesus movement troubled Saul for a while. Because when he speaks to King Agrippa in Acts chapter 26, he tells Agrippa his conversion story.

And he says what Jesus said to him. He says he heard a voice saying, Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me? It is hard for you to kick against the goads.

Now, kicking against the goads is not something we often talk about, but it's a farming metaphor. A farmer would use a sharp stick to goad or to prick or prod an animal to force it to go in the right direction.

[7 : 17] And so the implication is here that Jesus had been pursuing Saul. He'd been prodding him. He'd been after him. But Saul had been kicking back against Jesus.

And so Jesus was calling out to Saul to say, why are you kicking back against me, Saul? Because remember, Stephen, when he was stoned, the coats of all those stoning Stephen were laid at the feet of Saul.

So Saul was witness to Stephen being killed. And Saul presumably had heard Stephen's sermon when he pointed people to Jesus. And yet Saul continued to fight against Jesus and resist him.

And so Saul basically was an unlikely convert. And yet he was converted. And so before we move on, we need to know that conversion is always possible.

No matter how hardened or resistant somebody is to Jesus Christ, it is always possible for any person to be converted to Jesus.

[8 : 25] And not because of the individual, but because of Jesus. There's some great stories of people in history who have been converted. I was reading C.S. Lewis's book, *Surprised by Joy*, where he speaks of his conversion.

And tells of how he sensed that God was pursuing him. And so he describes it like a great angler playing his fish and getting a hook in his tongue.

And then he describes it as like a cat chasing a mouse, like a pack of hounds closing in on a fox, and like a divine chess player putting him into checkmate.

That's how C.S. Lewis described his conversion. Or maybe you've heard of Rosaria Butterfield. She's written a book called *The Secret Thoughts of an Unlikely Convert*, in which she tells her story.

And it's a remarkable story. She says this, And then she goes on and she describes her conversion.

[9 : 47] And she says, I devoured the Bible, but I did not want this. I did not ask for this. Then one day I came to Jesus. Jesus triumphed and I was a broken mess.

My conversion was a train wreck. Her conversion was a train wreck. This morning I was preaching at Govan Free Church. And there are people in the congregation, people I was speaking to, who I know personally, how their life and their conversion was basically a train wreck.

Where they were as far away from Jesus as they could possibly be, with no chance of ever getting themselves to Jesus. And yet Jesus took a hold of them and turned their life the right way up.

And now they're following Jesus. Not because they had the strength or the willpower themselves, but because of Jesus. And so some people may seem very unlikely candidates to become Christians and their lives might seem very messy.

And yet what this story tells us is that conversion is always possible. And Saul is the classic example of this. The most unlikely convert to Christianity.

[11 : 08] And yet Jesus had other plans for his life. And so if this man, thirsty for the blood of Christians, became one, then anyone can become a Christian.

And perhaps you're here today and you're aware that you are still resisting Jesus and you're thinking that you can never actually be converted. Or maybe you're thinking that God can never accept you because of your past life or because of how you're living in the present.

Or maybe as a Christian, you're thinking that there are some people, perhaps in your family or friends, and you just think there is no way that person will ever come to trust in Jesus Christ.

That is never going to happen. Well, don't be so sure. Just look at Saul. I guess some of us may have hardened family members.

Well, Jesus can reach them, stop them in their tracks, and transform their lives. Some of us may have wayward children who've turned away.

[12 : 17] Well, Jesus can find them, he can call them by name, and he can bring them back. Because if Jesus can turn Saul's life around, he can do it to you, he can do it to me, he can do it to anyone.

Conversion is always possible because it is a supernatural work of God. So that's our first point. The second point, conversion is always possible, but secondly, conversion is always personal.

Every conversion is unique and personal. Jesus personally met Saul on the Damascus road. Let's see that in verse 3 to 5.

As he neared Damascus on his journey, suddenly a light from heaven flashed around him. He fell to the ground and heard a voice say to him, Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?

Who are you, Lord? Saul asked. Saul encountered the risen Lord Jesus Christ. And it wasn't a comfortable experience because Jesus knocked Paul off his feet to the ground and blinded him.

[13 : 25] And then came these challenging words of Jesus. Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me? And what a shock to the system this must have been for Saul because Saul thought he was persecuting a bunch of heretics.

But Jesus confronts Saul and he says, Saul, mate, this is personal. This is about you and me. This is not about you trying to go off on some mission mission to kill all of these Christians.

These are my people. So Saul's got to do business with the Lord and he knows it. And that's why he says, who are you, Lord? And Lord is the key word here.

Saul is forced to acknowledge that Jesus is Lord. The person who's been opposing is Lord over all. In fact, if you look down at chapter 9, the word Lord is repeatedly emphasized in all of these verses to refer to Jesus.

In the psalm we had at the start, the Lord God is Lord, but Jesus is Lord. Look at verse 10, then verse 11, verse 13, verse 15, verse 17, verse 27, verse 28, verse 31.

[14 : 46] Jesus is Lord. And that is essentially what conversion is. It is a personal confession of Jesus as Lord. Because Jesus is not merely a man who lived and died and you can take him or leave him and decide what you want about him.

He is Lord. He is Lord of all who lived and died and rose again and before whom one day we all must bow and confess that he is Lord.

And so the sign that somebody is truly converted is that they bow to the Lordship of Jesus. Because if Jesus is Lord, then I'm not.

He has the ultimate authority over my life. And so when Saul was hunting down these Christians, what he was doing was actually picking a fight with Jesus.

Which is a crazy and stupid thing to do when Jesus is Lord. Because Jesus says to Saul, I am Jesus whom you are persecuting.

[15 : 52] Which tells us just how closely Jesus is connected with his people. And yet this woke Saul up to the shocking reality that he had got it all completely wrong.

Because despite his religious fundamentalism, he'd made a fundamental mistake by rejecting Jesus Christ. And now the risen Lord Jesus confronts him and Saul can no longer avoid him.

And it must have been a terrifying experience. I know if I had enemies and they were trying to kill my family, I wouldn't be too pleased.

But see what Jesus does here for Saul. He shows him nothing but grace and mercy. And so imagine the relief. As Saul listens to Jesus' words in verse 6.

Now get up and go into the city and you will be told what you must do. Saul gets far better than he deserves. Jesus doesn't take his life because he's an enemy.

[16 : 52] Jesus turns his life around and gives him new and everlasting life. And what's interesting is that when you read this narrative about Saul's conversion, he discovered it's actually got less of a focus on Saul's conversion and it's got more of a focus on Saul's mission.

So it's only the first few verses of Acts chapter 9 that speak of his conversion. And yet what Jesus does is convert him because he has a mission for him which we'll come to.

So Saul goes from being this persecutor of Jesus to being the promoter of Jesus. But his personal encounter with Jesus transforms his life because that's how conversion works.

Saul wasn't converted because he just changed his mind on a few things. It wasn't because he had decided he would turn over a new leaf. No, he was converted because he had this personal encounter with the risen Lord Jesus.

And that's why Saul's companions are mentioned in verse 7 to 9. The men traveling with Saul stood there speechless. They heard the sound but did not see anyone. Saul got up from the ground but when he opened his eyes he could see nothing.

[18 : 12] So they led him by the hand into Damascus. For three days he was blind and did not eat or drink anything. It's interesting how Saul's companions are mentioned in every account of his conversion.

It's because they are witnesses to the risen Lord Jesus. They heard the sound but they didn't see anyone and yet they saw the effect that Jesus meeting Saul had on him because they were the ones who had to lead Saul by the hand into Damascus.

And isn't that a picture of utter weakness? That here is Saul never having been led by anyone because he was the leader himself needing to be led by the hand because he's blind.

So the man who thought he could march into Damascus and take out Christians ends up being floored and blinded by Jesus and taken by the hand like a little child.

He wanted to take Jesus' people captive but now he is captive to Jesus. Jesus came after him seized him humbled him and changed his life forever.

[19 : 25] And so the question is well how do you know if you are truly converted? I'll put it this way you know if you are married don't you? It's kind of obvious you know if you're married and you know if you aren't married and if you're not sure then really you're in more help in need of more help than we can offer you here this afternoon.

And so you know if you have a personal relationship with Jesus Christ. And so while every other relationship sorry every other conversion will be less dramatic than this one it is never going to be less personal because God deals with every individual in a personal way.

And so as we read of Saul's conversion we should never confuse the essence of conversion with the drama of conversion because there's plenty drama in this conversion but sometimes there won't be any drama in someone's conversion and yet the essence of conversion will always be someone comes into a personal relationship with Jesus.

He knows them and they know him and they confess Jesus as Lord. And so in that sense Saul's conversion is like any conversion and that's good to remember especially if you feel that your conversion is pretty boring.

And that may be the case for some younger people who maybe can't pinpoint when they became a Christian or how they became a Christian.

[21 : 02] But then it's not about when or how you became a Christian it is about the fact that you are a Christian that you are converted to Jesus Christ that you know right now that you belong to him and he is your Lord.

So if you call Jesus your Lord and submit to him then you are a Christian. What happened to Saul on the Damascus road has also happened to you because conversion is always personal.

Okay conversion is always possible it is always personal and thirdly conversion is always purposeful. The purpose of Saul's conversion is outlined here in verses 10 to 31 and while we see how Jesus converted him for a specific purpose that was unique to him we can also apply this to ourselves and see the purpose of our conversion too because it involves three things that come from these verses service and suffering for the Lord Jesus belonging to the church and witnessing in the world.

So first of all service and suffering for the Lord Jesus because Jesus outlines his purpose for Saul's life. Do you see that? Verse 15 and 16 this man is my chosen instrument to proclaim my name to the Gentiles and their kings and to the people of Israel.

I will show him how much he must suffer for my name. So Saul would be the chosen instrument of Jesus to carry out the mission of Jesus and so this persecuting murderer of Christians would become the pioneering missionary of the church from now on his life would be involved with serving and suffering for Jesus.

[23 : 02] Service because he was Jesus' chosen instrument he would proclaim the name of Jesus to the Gentiles and their rulers and that's what unfolds in the rest of the book of Acts but also suffering because Paul would suffer much for the sake of the name of Jesus.

Suffering for the Lord Jesus would be integral to Paul's ministry and so Jesus commissioned him to a life of service and of suffering because he was going to take the mission plan of Jesus to the ends of the earth to take it on to the next stage as it were and actually the suffering happened just straight after Saul's conversion when Saul started to proclaim the name of Jesus guess what happened people wanted to kill him straight away he was learning that he must suffer if he proclaims the message of a suffering saviour and so of course the purpose of Saul's conversion was unique but when we are converted it is also to serve Jesus and even to suffer for Jesus because that's what involved that's what's involved when Jesus calls us into his mission we're to serve him by proclaiming the message about him and when we represent Jesus in this world it is going to involve suffering and you'll know this whether you've been a Christian for a long time or just a short time you will have suffered in one way or another you may even be suffering right now it might be at school amongst classmates it might be at work amongst colleagues because living for Jesus and speaking for Jesus will always bring suffering for Jesus and so we shouldn't be surprised when it happens and if it is happening then there's one thing to remember it is to remember that

Jesus is Lord and that we belong to him and so it's by his grace that he has opened up our eyes and helped us to see him for who he is and so Jesus has a purpose for our lives just like he had a purpose for Saul's life and even if that includes what we are facing right now so suffering and service and suffering for the Lord Jesus second belonging to the church Saul was now part of the church he had tried to destroy it's amazing because he now belongs and was welcomed into this group of people he was trying to kill so look at verse 17 when Ananias went to the house and entered it placing his hands on Saul he said brother Saul the Lord Jesus who appeared to you on the road as you were coming here has sent me so that you may see again and be filled with the Holy Spirit

Ananias obeys Jesus he goes straight to straight street to see Saul and what are the first words that Saul hears from another Christian they're the words brother Saul the very first words are words of acceptance Ananias didn't treat Saul as an enemy but as a brother in Christ he's saying to him Saul you're part of the family now and of course people were still afraid of Saul and doubted his conversion but here is Ananias and then later Barnabas they treat him as a true Christian brother they don't keep him at arm's length they're not suspicious of him but they welcome him in just as the Lord Jesus extended grace towards Saul so do his people and that is what conversion does it instantly gives every believer a place of belonging in the church so in the church we are united despite being diverse and different because we are brothers and sisters in Christ and so despite social or economic or class or age differences we're united because of our faith in Jesus because God's grace reaches out to all kinds of people and not all people are like you or me and God's grace reaches people like

Saul and people like us and because it does then who are we to think that we are more worthy to belong to the church of Jesus Christ than anyone else's which means everybody needs to experience a welcome and a place of belonging in Christ's church and it will be felt and it will be seen in how we treat one another and in the way that we speak to one another we'll know that sense of belonging so the purpose Saul our purpose service and suffering for the Lord Jesus belonging to the church and witnessing in the world Saul's life was completely repurposed by Jesus and the contrast between the man who wanted to persecute people for speaking about Jesus to the man who went to proclaim that Jesus is the son of God could not be any greater but not only did the persecutor of

[28 : 44] Jesus become the proclaimer of Jesus he also was the persecuted for Jesus the Jews wanted to kill him in Damascus the Jews wanted to kill him again in Jerusalem but Saul knew that the Lord Jesus he had met on the road to Damascus was the Jesus he had now been sent out into the world to proclaim and our purpose as believers is really no different it is essentially the same because our conversion is the story of Jesus meeting us personally and then giving our lives a new purpose so Jesus calls us into his church in order to send us out into the world as his witnesses that's why Paul was converted and it's why we are two and so let's remember that this week because our conversion to Jesus isn't just some individual thing of course it is that we must be saved but we are saved for a purpose and it's not simply to go and live out our days in some kind of

Jesus and me way our relationship with Jesus brings us into relationship with Jesus as people so that together as his church we go out into the world with Jesus to live for Jesus and to speak for Jesus and there is no greater purpose in life there is no higher calling there is no better investment of yourself your time your treasures your talents than in this great cause because conversion changes everything now and forever life can never be the same for you or for me when we meet Jesus Christ and so conversion is always possible for anyone conversion is always personal and so no less of a miracle took place in Saul than has taken place in you if you know Jesus as your Lord and Savior and conversion is always purposeful

Jesus repurposes our lives for him and that's why we're Christ Church Glasgow we're here to serve and to suffer for Jesus because Jesus is the Lord who willingly served us by coming into this world and humbling himself and suffering and dying on a cross to take away our sins so we can be accepted by God and so it's in his name that we go to love and serve him and one another and this world what God he thou what are thee he calling him