

## **“Saul: A Personal Encounter With Jesus”**

9 May 2021 - Led by Rev. Sam Mawhinney

### **Welcome & Call To Worship**

**Hymn of Preparation:** Come Thou Fount

### **Prayers of Adoration & Confession**

**Reading:** Acts 9:1-31

### **Sermon:**

*What is a Christian? Or What does it mean to be a Christian?* Often, those of us who have been brought up in the church will rightly say it means our sins are forgiven, our life has been changed, we have the Holy Spirit, we are going to heaven. We understand the results of our faith in Jesus, our theology is good, but maybe we have lost the true focus of what a Christian is!

A good reality check question would be to ask yourself, *“are you looking forward to heaven and why?”* Some of us might answer that we are disciples of Jesus, we follow him, we listen to His voice in the Scriptures, we seek to obey, we serve Him and His church. This is also good, but the difficulty is often that it can be dutiful, centred on doing the right thing.

Both the theological propositions about salvation, and listening to and following Jesus, are good and correct answers; they are aspects of what it means to be a Christian. However, they are not the essence of being a Christian. The essence of being a Christian is a personal relationship with Jesus. A Christian knows Jesus personally, follows and serves Jesus, and is engaged in a lifelong relationship that is truly transformative, because of the effect of the theological propositions of salvation and because we become disciples of Jesus. Being a Christian is a personal relationship with Jesus and we long for heaven, because in heaven there is no barrier to the relationship.

Today we are going to hear perhaps the most famous story of conversion that the world knows - the Damascus road experience of Saul. Not everyone is comfortable with the idea of conversion. Some think it means a conversion to Protestantism (or some other religion), some that it is forced, emotional manipulation of a person. However, in essence what happened to Saul was he met Jesus, he had a personal encounter with Jesus and the reality and effect of that encounter utterly and radically changed him and the course of his life for eternity. The Bible's view of conversion is not a religious change, or simply an emotional manipulation or coercion, but a personal encounter with Jesus.

Now to give the story some context, we have followed the growth of the church in Jerusalem as Jesus is proclaimed and the believers live for Him and others in worship and service. The Church then experienced intense persecution because of Jesus; many had to flee Jerusalem and were scattered to the surrounding areas including Samaria, where they continued to speak of Jesus and live for others. So, the gospel is going out through the Church and Luke now describes in detail the conversion of two significant men - Saul and Cornelius - as a prelude to the movement of the good news of Jesus and the church into the rest of the world.

Today we look at the text of Acts 9 and consider Saul's conversion.

### **I. The person he was (v.1-2)**

Saul was a highly respected, educated, and devout Jewish leader of the Sanhedrin. He was strongly opposed to the claims of Jesus Christ and His followers in the church. He was not passive in this but active, and showed his opposition and hatred by his actions.

1. He approved of the death of Stephen (8:1).
2. He tried to destroy the church systematically and ruthlessly (8:2).
3. He is still breathing out murderous threats (9:1).

In the other accounts of Saul's conversion in Acts, he says himself he was obsessed with the church, or had a raging fury against the church (Acts 26:11). He was on a mission to rid the world of all Christians. He was a fanatic and he had the approval of the Jewish authorities for his mission. He went from house to house dragging Christians to prison. He sought them out in far parts of the land, hence his journey to Damascus which was 150 miles from Jerusalem and would have taken 7 days to complete, and he did so with a ferocity and determination that frightened everyone (v.13-14). He was filled with hatred, intellectually opposed to Christianity, and committed to rid Palestine of all Christians and destroy the church.

If you want a picture to go with the facts, the word "destroy" used in 8:3 (and implied in 9:1 by the word *still*) is of a wild beast devastating a vineyard or ripping a body apart. Calvin called him, "a wild and ferocious beast." There was no-one more opposed to Jesus and the Christian faith and church than Saul.

### **II. The Person he met (v.3-9)**

The moment is dramatic and supernatural. He saw a bright light from heaven (not the midday sun); he saw the glory of Jesus. Ananias tells him he saw Jesus (v.17); Barnabas tells the church Saul saw the Lord (v.27). He also heard Jesus' speaking, "*Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?*" (v.4) "*Who are you Lord? I am Jesus whom you are persecuting.*" In another account (26:14), we are told Jesus spoke these words in Aramaic, His natural language. Saul is convinced, as are others, that he has met Jesus and the implications of that are enormous, of course. Jesus is not dead, but alive and in heaven and He appears in glory to Saul. His words also tell Saul Jesus is so connected with the church, that their pain is His pain. Everything Saul believed is disproved.

So how was Saul converted? He was converted when he met Jesus and believed in who He was and when he saw himself reflected in Jesus glory. He saw Jesus, he heard Jesus, and for everyone who becomes a Christian that is the event that must happen. I have heard wonderful stories of people who have no access to the Scriptures or other believers, yet have had a vision of Jesus and believed in Him. Like Saul that is unusual, but normally people meet Jesus through the reading and preaching of the Bible. As Jesus is proclaimed, men and women, boys and girls, hear of Jesus and, by faith, see and know Him.

This relationship comes about because of God's initiative - the light was from heaven. The relationship is also personal - Saul: 'Who are you, Lord?' 'I am Jesus.' Or "Hello Saul." 'Yes, Lord, who are you?' The relationship involves submitting to Jesus; theologically, it is death to our sinful self and surrendering to Jesus. Control of our lives is handed over and we walk in a different direction. He is looking at and speaking with Jesus - it is shocking for him, he fell

to the ground; it is humbling, he was led by the hand; and it is the beginning of the most dramatic and life-changing relationship!

### **III. The person he became (v.10-25)**

Does a leopard change its spots? Conventional wisdom would say NO. Can a wild beast of a man, a religious zealot and fanatic, change? Is it possible that in Christ we become new creations (2<sup>nd</sup> Corinthians 5:17)? Yes that is possible and we see this change in Saul.

#### **A. A new relationship with God**

Saul is praying (v.11) and fasting (v.9), he is filled with the Holy Spirit (v.17). He is in a new relationship with God, engaged in communication. He is most likely concerned about his blindness (v.12). Luke tells us Saul already had a vision from God of a man coming to him to place hands on him and restore his sight. Was he asking for forgiveness and trying to get to know and understand Jesus and the call on his life?

Saul has a new relationship with God. He has met Jesus, His Son, and is filled with God's Holy Spirit. He is now able to call God 'Father (Abba)'. *"You received the spirit of sonship. And by Him we cry 'Abba, Father.' The Spirit Himself testifies that we are God's children"* (Romans 8:15-16). Saul is now, by God's gracious initiative through his encounter with the glorious risen Lord Jesus and by the presence of God in his life through the gift of the Holy Spirit, born again, born of the Spirit, changed, converted, saved, and now called a child of God, adopted into the family of God, a Christian.

#### **B. A new relationship to the church**

Ananias, a disciple, is instructed by God through a vision to go to Saul and lay hands on him. He is naturally worried by his reputation and afraid. It would be like handing himself into the religious police and was no easy ask. God reasserts the order to go and tells him more of the details of Saul's new ministry and the suffering such a ministry involved (v.15-16). Thankfully, Ananias obeyed and went.

The words Ananias speaks to Saul are beautiful; the man who hated Christians is now addressed as family - *"Brother Saul"*. For Saul to hear those words of welcome, of belonging and of place, must have been liberating. His sins were forgiven, his welcome assured because he is adopted by Jesus into the family of God on earth. *"Brother Saul"*. The laying on of hands was a spiritually significant moment, a sign of receiving the Holy Spirit, being commissioned, of healing, but as well it was an act of personal love and acceptance from one believer to another. Saul is then baptised as a sign of his confession of his faith in Jesus Christ. Note as well the welcome is also practical; it was most likely Ananias who prepared a meal for Saul (v.19) so he might regain his strength, and the two of them must have had plenty to chat and discuss during their time together.

Then, Saul serves the church (v.19b-22) by using his considerable gifting in a preaching and apologetic ministry, proving from the Old Testament that Jesus was the Christ, the Messiah. In exercising his gift for the church, he grew in spiritual power and effect. Saul is also trained (v.23a). *"After many days"* needs to be tied in with a passage in Galatians 1:15ff, where Paul speaks of being three years in Arabia. Then, he returned to Damascus, but the Jews were totally opposed to him and

wanted to kill him, so he was forced to escape the city by being lowered in a basket from a hole (window) in the city wall. He came to Jerusalem and met the apostles (Peter and James) and was accepted only because of the advocacy of Barnabas. He was allowed to stay in Jerusalem, but his speaking upset the Grecian Jews and he was safely escorted to Caesarea and put on a ship to his hometown of Tarsus.

The new believer is welcomed to the church as family through confession of faith and baptism, his needs are met within the fellowship of the church, he is served within the church family. He uses his gifts for the glory of Jesus and the building up of himself and the church and undergoes a period of training and reflection before his ministry as God's chosen instrument to carry His name before the Gentiles, their kings, and before the people of Israel (v.15). He has a new relationship to the church.

#### **IV. Application**

Some of you listening will not know Jesus personally. You haven't met with Him or been introduced. Any desire you have for such a meeting is a prompting of the Holy Spirit; it is His way of calling your name. I encourage you to respond by asking Him in prayer, 'who are you Lord?' And then finding a Bible and start reading in Mark's gospel or find a church near you that teaches the Bible and worships Jesus. Let me encourage you, go start a conversation.

Some of you are Christians -you have met Jesus and know him. But perhaps you have lost connection with the church. Any sense within you that belonging to a church would be good is natural because of the Holy Spirit's presence and what you are in Christ, a child of God. This is His desire that you belong to His visible family, the church. Decide today that you will go, don't stay away a moment longer, re-engage and commit yourself to God's family. There is no such thing as a Christian without a family, and you have heard of how when Saul was converted his story is all about engagement with fellow Christians, the church.

For those of us who are in the church and Christians, there are wonderful reminders in the story of Saul's conversion of how we came to faith at God's initiative, how we heard and saw Jesus in His resurrection glory and how in being part of His family we can serve one another and grow in our faith. Be encouraged in your personal devotion to the Lord Jesus and His church. Seek ways to serve. Develop, like Saul, a reverence for God, in Jesus, a serving heart, a deep desire to fellowship and grow and follow His call to be disciple makers in the world.

**Praise:** All I Have Is Christ

**Prayers for Others**

**Announcements**

**Closing Hymn:** Hear The Call Of The Kingdom

**Benediction:** "Now may the God of peace, who through the blood of the eternal covenant brought back from the dead our Lord Jesus, that great Shepherd of the sheep, equip you with everything good for doing His will, and may He work in us what is pleasing to Him, through Jesus Christ, to whom be glory for ever and ever. Amen." (Hebrews 13:20-21)

**Discussion & Application:**

*'What is a Christian?'* What answers to this question do you see in the story of Saul's conversion?

How does your identity as an adopted child of God encourage you to develop and invest in your relationship with Him? How does it encourage you to develop and invest in your relationship with your local church?

How can the story of Saul's conversion encourage us when those we know seem resistant to the gospel?